The Ink Cabinet

by MistressMistrust

Summary

To everyone else, Selene seemed to have it all. Owner of a successful tattoo studio, loyal and trustworthy friends, an active social life and a father that would literally kill for her. She was attractive, funny and smart and despite her obvious, fearless need to stand out from the crowd, men wanted to be with her and women wanted to be her. But when the loner from high school steps back into her life, a distant memory she had almost forgotten, she is forced to re-evaluate the things she holds dear.

Is blood thicker than water? Can betrayal ever be forgiven? Is love really the conqueror of all?

Notes

Welcome to my most self-indulgent FanFic. This is a shameless plethora of all the things I love in life. Tattoos, Piercings, Metal Music, Horror Movies, Motorcycles and Daryl Dixon. You’ll see a lot of similarities here and there with my other Fic’s if you’ve read them. I’m not afraid of a bit of repetition if something works. My OC’s are all strong women in some way shape or form. I have gone from straight up ‘Mary Sue’ with Mia in Crossbows and Lockpicks, to vulnerable but capable Lexie in Echoes and Reflexions. This latest OC, is a delightful representation of the fearless women out there that dare to be different.

English is not my first language so my grammar is not the greatest. Please feel free to leave comments and tell me what you want to happen, I always try to reply to everyone. Never be afraid to comment, even if it’s just a ‘<3’. Most FanFic authors find it very motivating and
we share our stuff for free, so it’s always nice to interact with readers.

In this AU Fic our Daryl is younger, in his late twenties and as always, I try to write him as true to character as I can. While it’s pretty obvious that younger, pre-apocalypse Daryl would have been reasonably volatile and unapproachable, he has always had a very sensitive side to him with certain people which I try to draw on in my stories.

All of my other Original Characters in this Fic are based in some way, shape or form on people I know. From Selene’s gay best friend, to the tattooists to Selene’s father. All key locations described in the (completely fictional) town they live are also based on real places.

Thanks for getting through this most lengthy of introductions! I hope you enjoy what’s to come!
Chapter 1

The Velvet Rabbit was the busiest and most notoriously criminal strip club for miles around. Or so people said, but Selene had never seen any solid evidence of the underhand and illegitimate accusations that were frequently thrown around the business that her father had owned for almost twenty years. Still, she hardly ever visited, showing up only to drop by and check her father was still alive and still making an effort not to eat and smoke himself to an early grave. Selene found the women that worked at the club to be pleasant enough and made polite chit chat with them during her visits. She hardly took any notice of the patrons, most of them choosing to remain in the shadows clutching a fist full of cash in one hand and rubbing a thigh with the other.

She knew she stuck out like a beacon in such an establishment. She had long, straight, inky black hair that reached almost to the base of her back, a body covered in intricate tattoo’s, snakebite lip rings, amongst other facial piercings and eyes so blackened with perfectly applied winged eyeliner she frequently drew compliments from the strippers for her steady hand. Her clothes were a myriad of fishnet, PVC, leather, corsets and buckled, knee-high boots and she had no desire change a single thing. Selene was comfortable in her inked skin, much to her father’s disgust.

Charging through the club and slamming the office door behind her, she made for the side exit, her palms striking the metal bar on the door loudly and releasing the locking mechanism. The cold night air hit her face as she stormed outside into the dim light, lit only by a single light above the door. Turning to the main street at the end of the alley, she walked with purpose, determined not to let her father’s tyrannical tendencies overshadow her previously good mood. She was going to get herself a damn drink.

Daryl leaned back against the brick wall in the shadows, just out of the light above the door. He inhaled from his cigarette and expelled smoke in a plume in front of him, followed by a few smoke rings that he could barely see before they dissipated. His brother, Merle had dragged him to the club for the second time that week, giving him a hard time if he protested. Daryl sometimes wondered why he would want to spend so much time around his boss, but never dared to question him. Merle was volatile and unpredictable in contrast to Daryl’s quiet and sensitive nature that he had to keep well hidden in order to keep living a life as uneventful and jail-free as possible.

He flinched when the exit door flung open and shuddered on its hinges. Then he saw her. Selene. He remembered her from high school on the rare occasion that he’d attended. The daughter of the owner of the club and Merle’s boss, she was generally out of bounds. Not that Daryl would have tried anyway, not knowing the first thing about women usually meant that he was completely intoxicated by the time he ever got anywhere with any of them and even that was an extremely rare occurrence. He had admired Selene from afar since he was a teenager and he was sure she didn’t even know he existed.

A shadow darted out from a gate at the side of the dark walkway and grabbed her. Daryl instantly stood up straight, throwing his smoke away and squinting in an attempt to see what was going on with more clarity. Boots scuffed the floor and he could just make out the sound of someone struggling. Slight, feminine grunts and muffled attempts at screams. As he drew closer, he heard a loud grunt and a figure buckle over before surging forwards. As his eyes adjusted to the light, she could see a man with his hand clamped over her mouth, attempting to twist her arm behind her back, her fishnet top skewed and dragged to one side, exposing her art adorned stomach as she stamped a heavy boot down on his foot.
Without a second thought, Daryl shot forwards, grabbing the man’s shoulders and throwing him off to one side with a strength that seemed to come out of nowhere. The man crashed into a large trash can and stared up at Daryl with wild and terrified eyes. He could hear Selene behind him, panting and cursing under her breath. He lunged forwards and wondered for a split second why there was no pain while his fist pummelled over and over into the mans face, into his eye socket, smashing his teeth, breaking his nose. Over and over. Adrenaline masking the agony. Crack, crack, crack. Over and over again. When he finally stopped, the man was immobile, slumped on the floor with his back to the trash can and his clothing sprayed with blood. Daryl snatched a bandana from his back pocket and rubbed at his fist, trying to remove the crimson stains from his flesh. The pain was staring to creep in the longer he stood there. Helooked at the beaten assailant and his face eventually crumpled with pain causing him to wince. Selene stepped out of the shadows and he whirled around.

“You alright?” He asked breathlessly

“Yeah. You knocked him out” She stated, gawping at her bloodied attacker on the floor.

“Asshole.” He hissed, looking over his shoulder briefly.

Selene stepped over the man’s legs and backed up towards the main street, her hands clasped in front of her. Without a word, he dutifully walked with her, gaining the odd peek at her in the couple of minutes it took for them to reach the light. He noticed her shamelessly staring at him, her eyebrows knitted together.

“I know you. It’s Daryl, right? You’re Merle’s little brother.” She enquired.

“Yeah.” He nodded as he tried to hide how shocked he was that she knew his name.

“We went to the same school.” She mentioned.

“Was in your Biology class.” He mumbled.

“Yeah, like twice. You were never there.” She smiled thinly.

Daryl was stunned that she even recognised him, let alone took any notice of the fact that he had only attended two biology lessons. The revelation that he had been wrong all along about her knowledge of his existence was a strange concept to him.

“Hm. You’re Bills daughter.” He muttered quickly.

“That’s me. Selene” She confirmed.

“My brother knows your ol’man.” Daryl told her.

She rolled her eyes and Daryl knew exactly why. She knew Merle and as a result, knew what he was like.

“Look… thanks. For helping me out back there. I can usually handle myself. But he was a lot stronger than me.” She explained.

“No problem.” He shrugged, moving his sore hand behind his back and hoping the split skin wasn’t dripping. He noticed how white her teeth appeared behind her velvety red lips and saw that the man that had jumped her managed to clip her in the face. A bright red split on her lip did nothing to ruin her otherwise flawless appearance. He nodded towards a small cut on her lip.
“Ya hurt.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m fine.” She assured him, dabbing at the pooled blood. Pain seared through the wound but she was careful not to flinch in front of him. “I’m gonna… go.” She gestured with her thumb over her shoulder.

“Yeah sure. Uh… ya want me to walk ya or somethin?” He offered.

Selene was astonished that the unapproachable loner from high school had leapt out of the shadows to her defence and was now offering to walk her home.

“I’m good, thanks.” She assured him.

“Alright. See ya” He said as he backed up, gingerly holding his uninjured hand up.

“Bye.” She called out. “Thanks again”

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Selene had owned The Ink Cabinet Tattoo Parlour for five years and had built it up from nothing. Despite its small size and limited staff, The Ink Cabinet was one of the most reputable and highly regarded Body Modification and Tattoo locations outside of Atlanta and Selene was proud to boast award winning artists and a fun workplace to go along with it all.

The three-storey building was situated on the end of a row of other stores which came with the added advantage of being able to play music as loudly as they wanted and having full use of a parking lot which they had adapted into an outside seating and smoking area for those slow, hot summer days.

Selene handed Ray a lighter and leaned forward on the bench, sliding her hands over the wooden surface of the table in front of her. She sighed loudly and let her head rest on one of her arms as Ray lit his smoke and dropped the lighter on the table next to her. As her Assistant Manager and most loyal and lifelong friend, Ray noticed every small change in her and the bruises on her neck and her split lip hadn’t been lost on him. He examined her marks as he sat beside her and took a long drag of his cigarette.

“You get some action you’re not telling us about last night?” He asked

“What?” She mumbled, sitting up slowly and placing her smoke between her lips.

“The bruises on your neck and the bust lip.” He mentioned.

“Oh, actually I was jumped in the alley at the side of the Velvet Rabbit.” She said casually, inhaling a lungful of smoke.

“Oh my god, are you fucking serious?!” Ray exclaimed, clamping a hand over her arm.

“It’s nothing, I’m fine. It was good thing Daryl was there. He pulled the guy off of me and knocked him out.” She dismissed, waving him off. He sat back and regarded her with confusion as his cigarette burned away, poised between his tattooed fingers.

“Daryl as in Daryl Dixon? Merles brother?” He questioned.

“Yep.”
“Oh my, your very own greasy, redneck saviour. I remember him from high school, when he was there. I had the biggest crush on him.” He said, casting his mind back to their high school days when they would often see Daryl walking right back out of the main doors when everyone else was heading to their first classes. “I would have ridden him into the middle of next week.” He added.

“You have a crush on everybody.” Selene pointed out, glancing to her side and seeing his perfectly styled, light brunette hair shining in the sun. Upon first impression, it would be hard to guess Ray was gay, with his completely inked, rippled and toned body, tall stature and chiselled jawline. That was until he moved and opened his mouth and out came the softest and most feminine of voices. Selene thought he was the straightest looking, gayest, hot model type she had ever seen.

“I don’t have a crush on you.” He shot at her.

“That’s because I don’t have a penis.” She retorted.

“True. Anyway, he say anything to you?” He wanted to know.

Selene curled her lip as she considered if it was wise to disclose everything that had been said or if she could trim it all down and instead offer the shortened version.

“Asked if I was OK, offered to walk me home. That’s pretty much it.” She told him.

Ray tapped his cigarette ash into the ashtray and took another drag at the same time as Selene. Their synchronised smoking always being a source of great amusement in their teenage years when they would sit on the wall outside Ray’s parent’s house and find that they matched each other’s movements without even trying. To Ray it had been some kind of Psychic connection. To Selene, he was just trying too hard to copy her.

“Wait, he offered to walk you home?! Damn. Dixon’s chivalrous. Makes him even hotter.” He quipped.

“Oh, shut up. You’re like a fuckin dog in heat.” She said, rolling her eyes.

“Always, honey. Always.” He agreed.

Inside, Selene’s older brother Brad had just finished up with a customer and was bidding them farewell at the front door when he turned and lay his eyes on Selene’s neck and lip as she re-entered the studio. Barrelling through the front to the back of the building and knocking over a stack of paperwork full of tattoo designs from a shelf, his eyes were determined and he ignored the floating bits of paper all around him that everyone else was now scrabbling to pick up. Everyone except Shorty, who cared little for order and tidiness. He simply watched from his Tattoo chair as he stuffed potato chips into his mouth.

“Who did that to you?!” Brad demanded.

Standing at the towering height of 198cm, his voice was like a foghorn and his spacial awareness was next to none.

“It’s nothing, Bear. I was drunk and I fell.” Selene huffed.

Brad had earned his fitting nickname, ‘Bear’ during a growth spurt at high school when he seemed to shoot up like he’d been stretched by some kind of medieval torture device. It had served him well in his football days, earning him a spot on the team and meaning that anyone that even looked
at Selene the wrong way was likely to get an earth shattering, knockout punch. His tattooing abilities had been discovered when Selene had accidentally found a folder full of drawings in his room when they were teenagers and he had admitted his love for drawing over football.

“On your own?!” Shorty called out with a mouth full of food.

“Yes, on my fucking own. Nosey sons of bitches.” She snapped.

“If anyone hurt you I’m gonna-“

“-stop it, Bear! I’m not a kid!” Selene scolded.

He grunted in disapproval and set to work tidying up his work area while Selene headed to the front desk to check on the appointments for the day.

“Axel, your next appointment is in 30 minutes and I know you haven’t drawn up that damn design yet. Get to it please. Ritchie? Where is Ritchie? Someone call him down please.”

Bear wandered over to the door that hid the staircase and bellowed at the top of his voice. Selene was sure she could feel the walls shake in a rattled response. Ray rolled his eyes and exchanged a glance with Selene. A few seconds later, Ritchie emerged from the stairs, sniffing wildly and coughing into his sleeve.

Ritchie was a skinny, heavily pierced stoner with a penchant for the kinky and weird and an unbearable crush on Selene that he had never disclosed to another living soul. His otherwise honest and shameless attitude had cemented his place as the guy that bore the brunt of the jokes. Regardless of his personal preferences, Ritchie was an expert at his craft as The Ink Cabinets resident body piercer.

“Are you sick?!” Selene exclaimed as she gasped at him in shock.

“N-no” Ritchie stammered as he tugged at his slouchy, woollen hat that hid his messy, dirty blonde dreadlocks.

“You are! You can’t pierce people if you’re sick, Ritchie.” She fumed.

“It’s all those Panties he’s been sniffing.” Shorty jested, slapping a loud high five in the air with Axel

“Go home, Ritchie.” Selene ordered.

“Oh, c’mon Selene I can’t afford to not be here.” Ritchie protested.

“He needs the money to buy more used panties on the internet.” Shorty quipped, earning him another loud roar of laughter from both Bear and Axel this time.

“No. The safety of my clients is more important. Go home.” She said firmly.

“Fuck” Ritchie cussed under his breath as he thudded angrily back up the steps.

Selene wasn’t one to suffer fools and while she ran her studio with the intention of giving her staff and customers the best experience, she still managed to rule with an iron fist and everyone understood that her decisions were final.

Shorty was the messiest and least interested in order. He had worked for Selene from the start after she had headhunted him from another studio. What he lacked in height, he made up for in quick
retorts and bags of artistic flair. On his first day at the studio, Axel had wandered in, asking about the job vacancy advertised in the window. Shorty had initially figured that Axel was far too young to be considered, but Selene begged to differ after seeing his short but exceptionally creative and detailed portfolio. At 22 years of age, he was the youngest of the workforce and while the other guys were never short of female attention, Axel was the one that garnered most of it due to his bright blue eyes, tall height, gym goers’ body and charming personality. Although she was their boss, Selene was also a friend to each member of staff and enjoyed being able to spend a large chunk of her life watching over their personal achievements and shrugging off their playful jokes.

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After a long day in the studio, Ray had managed to convince a tired and reluctant Selene to join him at a rock gig he had bought tickets for on a whim when he was drunk. He had pestered her all day to agree to accompany him after being brushed off by everyone else, earning him many a noncommittal shrug and disinterested reaction when he had asked. Selene and Ray shared the same taste in music, as did most of the others, but this particular night was bad timing after a day where everything seemed to go wrong. Nevertheless, she had accepted for Ray’s sake and made him promise to buy her several alcoholic drinks to make them even.

Daryl stood next to his older brother, a cold beer gripped in his hand and his head subtly nodding along to the band. This night was no different to any other for Merle, who jeered and clapped loudly after every song and had thrown himself into the middle of the pit twice just for the pure violence of it. Daryl stayed on the side lines, not wanting to stray too far from the bar but still in a good enough place to be able to run in and haul Merle out of there when he took things too far. He hadn’t seen his brother all week. When he wasn’t working for Bill at the club and no doubt taking on a variety of underhand jobs that Daryl had little desire to know the details of, he was passed out drunk on the couch.

Daryl let his eyes cast across the venue, the black walls, the beer stained floor and ceiling that was only illuminated by the stage lighting as it flashed, highlighting the sticky marks against the matt backdrop. The place was full of people dressed in band T-shirts and black clothing, a sea of shaved off and drawn on again eyebrows, inked skin and faces with metal hoops and bars shoved through them. The alternative scene wasn’t exactly something he considered himself to be a part of, but he always seemed to gravitate towards it with the disaffected misfits of society that drew stares from people in the street and never went to Church on Sundays. Along with Merle, his preference for loud guitars and drums had led him here along with to the two other Rock bars in the town and in these places, he found invisibility. The ability to slink into the crowds and not have to involve himself in too much conversation.

Shiny black hair shimmered in the flashing lights, cloaked over a fishnet top and PVC corset. Knee-high boots boasting buckles from ankle to knee and dark red, velvety lipstick. It was a sight that had grabbed his attention, silenced the sound of the music in his mind and made him freeze to the spot. Because it was her. The girl from the alley. Selene. Even in the dark room, lit only by intermittent, coloured flashes, her eyes were bright as they swept from the band, across the room and over to where he stood at the bar. He quickly looked down into his drink, not wanting to meet her eye. He couldn’t let her see him looking at her. He knocked back a large gulp of beer, turning his attention back to the band before hazarding a brief peek at Merle, who surprisingly was looking straight back at him.

“Check yaself, little brother.” Merle warned, his jaw pulled tight and his eyes fixed on him.
“What?” Daryl responded.

“I seen ya, makin’ eyes at Morticia Addams over there.” He disclosed as he gestured in Selene's direction with his beer bottle.

“Shut up. Aint makin’ eyes at nobody.” Daryl denied, his grip on his drink becoming tighter and he wished in that moment it was something a little stronger.

“She’s Bill’s kid.” Merle pointed out.

“I know that” Daryl confirmed, seeing his brother take an obvious and shameless glance over his shoulder at her. He dragged his eyes from her head to her toes and back again and Daryl shuddered with the thought of him leering at her like he did with the strippers at the Velvet Rabbit. She was pointing at something on the stage and saying something into the ear of her tattooed companion.

“She’s grown into a fine piece of ass but she ain’t gonna bring ya nothin’ but trouble.” Merle told him. Daryl’s back prickled with irritation and his face crumpled with anger.

“You deaf or somethin’? Said I ain’t makin’ eyes at her.” He snapped.

Merle shot him a mocking grin and shook his head in disbelief, as if he could see straight through him and had just caught him telling a bare-faced lie. Daryl refused to be the one to break eye contact out of pure defiance and when Merle eventually looked away, Daryl backed up and moved further back into the crowd.

After Merle had left with a woman that Daryl thought was wearing barely enough clothing to prevent her from being arrested for indecency, he decided to hang around for a bit longer in the hope that any noise they planned to make back at the house would be over by the time he returned home. He remained at the bar, leaned back against the countertop and was able to steal the odd glance at Selene as she joked and laughed. Even at his distance away, her smile was striking to him. Her male friend was now familiar to Daryl and he recognised him from High School after initially thinking that he could be her boyfriend. He knew that wasn’t the case after remembering the guys name, and that he was gay.

Ray grabbed Selene’s hand and dragged her closer to him. Levelling his lips to her ear so she could hear him over the bass, he cupped a hand around his mouth as he spoke.

“Dixon’s here. He’s watching you.” He told her as loudly as he can over the music.

“What?” She demanded, motioning to her ear and rotating her hand in the air to signify the noise was too great for her to hear.

“I said, Daryl Dixon is here, he’s been watching you. From the bar.” Ray tried again. Seeing her eyebrows raise slightly, he stepped back and allowed her to perform a subtle, sweeping observation of the room. She clocked him facing her and looking right at her and she quickly averted her eyes. She noted that he was dressed in the same leather vest and cut off sleeves that she’d seen him in the previous week and when she thought back, she couldn’t recall ever seeing him in much else.

Daryl had seen her notice him and turned his body and attention the other way, to the band.

“Maybe he’s looking at you.” Selene grinned at Ray
“Oh, honey.” He cried. “I fucking wish.”

“You really think he’s hot?” She yelled as she leaned close to him.

“Oh, let me check those pretty eyes of yours because I think you’re goin’ blind! Look at those shoulders! But not right now, he’ll see you and you don’t want to look like a desperate hoe. Be cool, be cool.” Ray informed her.

She threw her head back slightly and laughed as Daryl took one more glance and thought his heart might stop at the sight of her wide smile and the animated but truly stunning way her face lit up when she laughed. He had always considered her to be beautiful, but never stopped to really look at her. What would be the point, after all?

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Her boot tapped on the wall under her as she hummed to herself and drummed a beat with one hand on her bent leg. She was leaning against the outside wall of the Tattoo parlour in the main street. The sun was full of energy that she needed after two days of near chaos in her workplace. Customers had been crammed into the waiting room at one point, all desiring walk in appointments that had left the guys asking if there was some kind of Tattoo convention coming to town that they didn’t know about. Ritchie was still sick which meant that Selene had to take over his appointments. Piercing was not her chosen profession but she was still qualified and ready to step in none the less. In the past two days, she’d had a young girl faint at the prospect of having her ear lobes pierced and a guy that had lied about being intoxicated, meaning that when she got close enough to pierce his septum, she almost died from the whiskey fumes and had to kick him out. She longed for the quieter days, but knew she had to make money and so did her staff. Breaks had been scarce, but in the five minutes she had taken to slink outside and smoke in the sun, she had found a much-needed tranquillity. Leaning her head back on the brickwork, she closed her eyes and allowed the sun to heat the skin of her face as she took a long drag of her smoke.

Daryl ambled along the street slowly while he threaded a key onto a keyring between his fingers. When he looked up, Selene was the first thing he saw. He noticed her open her eyes and spot him as he approached and his mind scrambled desperately to find an excuse to avoid her, eventually concluding that he would only look strange if he suddenly doubled back or switched direction.

“Shit” He muttered under his breath.

Selene offered him a polite smile when he came to a stop in front of her. He had been the last person she’d expected to see, but it seemed ever since her brush with the wannabe kidnapper in the alley that Daryl was everywhere she looked.

“Hi” She beamed.

“Hey” He replied, not knowing whether to step out further into the street and just skirt around her or stay and somehow drag himself through some small talk. Her lip caught his attention and he figured he couldn’t go wrong with checking up on that.

“Um, looks better.” He asked, motioning to her face with a tilt upwards of his head.

“Yes. Healed pretty quick. Lucky he didn’t fuck up my piercings.” She huffed.

“Yeah”
“Saw you at the gig. Didn’t know you liked that kind of music.” She stated.

“Yeah, anythin’ loud n’ angry. Y’know.” He shrugged.

His eyes kept darting up to her bright blue eyes, they were like crystals and against the backdrop of her pale skin, dark eyeliner and black hair, they illuminated her face and proved to be extremely distracting to him due to one of them boasting a brown patch that covered a quarter of her iris. He had heard of people having different coloured eyes after reading it in a magazine while he was waiting to pick merle up from Jail one day. Sectoral Heterochromia. He impressed even himself with his recollection of the scientific term.

“Me too.” She agreed. “You should let me buy you a drink sometime. Say thank you for kicking that guys ass in the alley that night.” She suggested casually as if it were nothing.

“Ya aint gotta do that.” He assured her.

“I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.” She mentioned. “But I always make sure I pay my dues.”

“Uh…” He stammered, looking down at the floor briefly before squinting up at her in the sun. He couldn’t say he had never been asked out by a woman before, he had always managed quite well with attention from the strippers where Merle worked but had rarely accepted any invitations. A woman like Selene asking him to go for a drink was a new concept altogether and even though the thought instilled an unfamiliar fear in his mind, it was also one he was not stupid enough to pass up.

“Alright” he agreed

“Cool. Busy tonight?”

“No.”

“Meet me at the bar at Marty’s.” she instructed confidently.

“Um, OK.”

She flicked her smoke away, straightened up and pushed the door open.

“See you later.” She said, giving him only a slight smile and leaving him reeling from disbelief and shock.
Lovely to see I have some readers of my other works leaving Kudos and comments on this. Hello to all of you and thank you so much for your input!

Thank you to any new readers too, I hope you enjoy what's to come!

Ray, who had now settled into tattooing his next client, stuck his tongue from the corner of his mouth in concentration as he began with the fine outline of the massive back piece he had designed. The gun buzzed it's deliciously addictive sound in his ears and he was looking forward to seeing the final result of this one. His client, a large trucker type, had liaised with Ray on numerous occasions for re-deigns and tweaks to the tattoo here and there. He sat backwards on the adjustable tattoo bed, a vintage car magazine clasped in his hands while Ray set to work.

When Selene re-entered the studio after talking to Daryl, Ray caught a vague smile on her face as she passed and kept her head low.

“Well?” He called out.

“Well what?” She replied as she sat down at the desk and began scrolling through the next appointments.

“I saw you talking to Daryl! What did he say?” Ray asked as he tried to focus on the tedious outline he was tattooing.

“Not much. Meeting him at Marty's tonight.” She sighed.

Ray sprang up and thoughtlessly slapped his clients back causing him to cry out and cuss in searing pain, his face crumpling and his hands gripping onto the arm rests.

“Shit. Sorry, man. Take a break.” Ray told him, lightly tapping his arm.

“And I’m tired already. Take a break.” He shot back before getting up and heading over to Selene’s desk. He placed his hands flat on the surface in front of her and leaned over her.

“Bitch, WHAT?! How are you so fucking casual?!” He exclaimed.

“Pipe down, drama queen. I owe him a drink for what he did in that alley that day.” She explained, twirling a pen around in her fingers of one hand as she reclined back in her chair.

“But this is a date, right?” Ray probed.

“No, it’s not.” She confirmed.

He stood up and glared down at her with disappointment.

“Fuckin’ fun police” he huffed. He turned on his heels and walked back to his client, who by now
was gearing up to file an official complaint.

“Screw you, I’m not the fun police.” Selene called out.

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Daryl lived in the mountains with his brother. The house was more akin to a ramshackle cabin in the woods with its wooden walls, unwashed windows and uneven, treacherous road that lead to the front porch. It had been the family home, left to the brothers upon the deaths of their parents and had been rebuilt once after a house fire. Neither of them had gone to the trouble of maintaining it unless a repair here or there really couldn’t be ignored. Merle mainly used the place to sleep or as somewhere to spend time with whatever stripper had agreed to sleep with him on a given night. Daryl was the tidier of the two, but was still choosy over how much energy he wasted on household chores. The ripped drapes in the living room were rarely open and the last time the carpet had seen a vacuum cleaner had to be sometime in the 90’s. The kitchen was small, but well equipped with enough utensils to make a mean stew after the hunt and there was enough room in the fridge freezer for beer and ice but neither Daryl or his brother were keen on grocery shopping.

Daryl stared at himself in the mirror in his room. Posters still hung on the walls from his teenage years, images of scantily clad women, rock bands and gig tickets. The chair in the corner was full of discarded shirts that were both too clean for the wash and too dirty to wear. He wondered what the hell he thought he was doing, surely this could never end well. He had been so bowled over when she’d invited him out that he’d almost said no in a panic. But he had agreed and now he had to see it through, be the best version of himself and refrain from staring at her in disbelief. He took a deep breath and flicked his hand through the front of his hair, arranging a few strands. He shrugged his leather vest on and plucked the collar of his sleeveless black shirt out from under it before leaving the room.

Merle was slumped in his armchair in a stained white vest with a bottle of whiskey halfway up to his mouth when he paused to observe Daryl race down the stairs and grab the bike keys from the coffee table. The TV was on low in the background, on some kind of sitcom with canned laughter that he was no doubt using to lull him into a drunken stupor.

“Where in the hell you goin’ smellin’ like some kinda fancy boy?” He spat.

“None of ya business.” Daryl told him while he checked his wallet for money.

“Like hell it aint. Im’ma follow ya around like a damn shadow ‘less ya fess up.” Merle announces as he got to his feet and swayed blearily from side to side.

“Goin’ for a drink with somebody.” Daryl mumbled. He turned and headed for the door. Merle’s husky cackle rang out from behind him and he tried his best not to retaliate and switch on his brothers aggressive side.

“Well shut my mouth, little brothers got a date.” Merle jested.

Stopping by the door, Daryl glanced over his shoulder, anger simmering under the surface. He couldn’t just let him go about his life without questioning everything, could he? He wasn’t allowed to do what he wanted, when he wanted and with whom without Merle having a say and trying to mosey on into everything good.
“Aint a date.” Daryl snapped.

“Oh, I see. Ya little friend female by any chance?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s a date, dumbass. I know it ain’t one of the girls from the club, so do I know her?” Merle continued.

“No and it aint no date. Shut up and finish ya damn drink.” He shot at him on his way out of the door. It slammed behind him and did little to hide the muffled sound of Merle laughing at the top of his lungs from inside the house.

****

Marty’s bar had been around as far back as Daryl could remember. It was one of two rock bars in the town, along with a gig venue and it was his preferred drinking establishment out of them all, even though his time spent there was minimal. The inside was painted a dark red with black lamps and frames on the walls and the bar it’s self boasted an impressive array of spirits and hard liquors from around the world. The jukebox was popular, streamed from the internet which allowed access to even the most obscure artists and songs. On the shelves above some of the booths were framed flyers for events such as open mic nights, karaoke and poetry slams. It’s clientele were the oddballs, the lovers of all things alternative and even the occasional person that to look at them meant no one could ever guess they liked heavy metal.

Having arrived first, Daryl took up a seat at the end of the bar, climbing onto the bar stool he surveyed the area, pleased with his vantage point which meant he could see Selene as soon as she turned up. The bar was quiet as it usually was on a weeknight but there were enough customers to have created a queue of music on the jukebox which played in the background. The bartender seemed to recognise Daryl from seeing him a couple of times and received a polite nod when Daryl ordered a whiskey, knowing he would need the Dutch courage.

When Selene appeared in the doorway, Daryl completely froze with his hand clamped around his glass and his eyes narrowed at her although his head was dipped. She was like nothing he’d ever seen before. He usually considered his taste in women to be directed towards those that were the opposite of the strippers from the rabbit, not coated in make-up and a little plain. But when he looked at Selene, all that seemed irrelevant as she was his one, major exception. She did wear make-up and on that particular night she was wearing tight, black jeans, knee-high buckled boots and a black tank top with black, leather wristbands and a plain velvet choker. Her lips were their usual dark red and aside from trying his hardest not to stare at her so much, he thought would have to pick his jaw up from the floor at some point. Next, he noticed how she commanded the room instantly. People at tables stopped what they were doing and looked up while she strutted confidently to the bar. She grinned at the bartender and leaned over, slapping a high five in the air with him. Daryl averted his gaze, not wanting to be caught gawping at her.

“Hey Marty” she chuckled. “Long time no see!”

“Hey Selene. Yeah, yesterday was a long time ago. You good?” He replied

“Yeah, fine and dandy, thanks. Can I get whatever Daryl is having?” Make it two each. I’m paying
up on a debt.”

“Sure thing, coming right up.” He smiled.

She met his eye and instantly picked up on how nervous he looked. Sat statue still, eyes flitting everywhere and never staying on one thing for more than a few seconds. She dragged a bar stool closer to him and sat down, releasing a loud and contented sigh.

“Hi” She smiled.

“Hey.” He replied.

“So, you didn’t stand me up.” She mentioned.

“What?”

“Didn’t think you’d show.” she clarified.

“Why not?” He questioned, interested by her insistence of her belief that he would ever not show up. “Because you look at me like I’m holding a shotgun to your head.” She smiled.

He felt like he should just get up and leave. Having any semblance of a friendship with a woman like her was likely to never happen and he’d only end up showing himself up and giving Merle a perfect reason to mercilessly torment him for years. She was right, he did look at her that way because he didn’t know any other way to be around someone like her.

“Sorry.” He mumbled, looking down into his drink.

She dipped her head and caught his eye again as the drinks were slammed onto the countertop in front of her.

“Hey” She whispered, encouraging him to glance back up at her. When he did, she picked up a glass and tilted it towards him.

“Don’t be” She whispered, flickering her eyes down to the glass in his hand. Realising what she was gesturing to, he held up his drink and their glasses clinked on contact.

“Thank you, my knight in shining armour.” She declared.

He huffed shyly and nibbled on his lip again after he took a sip.

“Hardly.”

“Kicked the guys ass. No ‘hardly’ about it. I’m serious, I dread to think how far he would have got if it wasn’t for you.”

“S’no problem.” He dismissed.

Not knowing what he should be doing or saying, Daryl merely sat there, whiskey in hand and hoped with everything he had that the alcohol might instil some kind of confidence in him. Not only was Selene well known in their town for being wildly attractive despite her alternative appearance, she was also notoriously difficult to gain the attention of. Daryl had never sat with a woman in a bar before that wasn’t one of his brothers’ regular whores or someone he didn’t even remember the next day due to being horribly drunk. This situation was both terrifying and illuminating as he spotted a few other patrons of the bar looking over at them.
“So, what do you do?” She asked.

“What do I do?”

The question had caught him off guard, snapping him from his thoughts and yanking at his attention so suddenly he struggled to understand her meaning.

“Yeah…with your life. What do you do?” She clarified.

“Um…Not much. I’m a mechanic.”

“Cars?”

“Motorcycles.”

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows shot up in a display of genuine surprise and interest.

“That’s pretty fucking cool.” She expressed.

“Wouldn’t say that.” He mumbled

“I would. I just did. That’s awesome. I love bikes.”

“You ride?” He queried, testing the water with another question.

“I can, saving up for a bike at the moment. Hopefully the end of year takings at the tattoo parlour will allow it.” She explained.

“You run that place?” Another question. It seemed to be serving him well.

“I own it.” She replied.

“Nice.”

“Thanks. It’s my baby. Because I hate real babies.” She said, leaning closer to him and smirking.

They both chuckled quietly and Daryl considered it to be a small triumph. A wave of confidence washed through him and it used it to his advantage, managing to converse with her a little easier as time went on and more drinks were consumed. The curious looks of others in the bar were still not going unnoticed by him but instead of feeling as though he were under a microscope, he actually began to experience a sense of mild pride.

When a guy in a Metallica T-shirt approached her from behind and slid his arms around her waist, she glanced down and sighed with irritation. If it wasn’t for the relatively unfazed looked on her face, Daryl would have been halfway out of his seat by now with his hands around the guys throat. It didn’t sit well with him, the prospect that someone thought it was OK to just touch her like that, without her permission and out of nowhere.

“Princess.” The guy growled in her ear.

“Joe.” She spat angrily.

“How ya doin’, sweet thing?”

Her eyes raised to Daryl, who was glowering at him. His vision moving between the arms around her waist and what he considered to be Joe’s shit eating grin. His expression was stony and she
considered that he may as well have had a neon sign above his head that said ‘take your hands off of her.’ His expression at that moment and his intervention during her attack outside the club told her that Daryl was the kind of person that had his own code, one that meant he wasn’t afraid to step in if he saw something he deemed to be wrong. She didn’t want Joe’s arms around her, nor did she want his face so close to her neck, but she decided to proceed in a manner that was as nonchalant as possible in order to quell Daryl’s obvious annoyance.

“Oh, y’know. Strolling along in life. If you don’t mind, I have company here. This is my friend, Daryl.” she told him.

Joe was big guy, broader than he was tall with long, dark wavy hair tied into a pony tail that trailed down his back. Daryl has seen him around before and knew he was extremely loud and boisterous and right from the moment he’d first seen him, he hadn’t liked him one little bit.

“Hey dude” Joe offered along with a thin smile.

“Hey man” Daryl replied as politely as he could muster.

“Joe?” Selene asks

“Yes, pretty girl?” he hummed, nuzzling his face into her hair. She grit her teeth and narrowed her eyes and Daryl’s back pricked with rage.

Who does this dude think he is?!

“The answer is still no. Sorry.” She confirmed as she peeled his hands away from her stomach.

“Thought as much.” He sighed, noticing Daryl’s slightly confused face. “Look at her, can’t blame a guy for trying, right?” He laughed.

“Yeah.” Daryl huffed, quickly taking a large gulp of his drink and ignoring the urge to tell him that he should keep his damn hands to himself before someone cuts them off. Selene felt a rush of shyness at Daryl’s agreement of Joe’s statement and quickly pushed it aside.

“Go on, beat it.” She told him, waving him off as if he were an irritating fly. “Leave us to our evening.”

Alright. Good luck, Daryl. She’s a firecracker.” He grinned, receiving only an awkward glance in response.

Touch her again and I’ll snap your fuckin’ neck, buddy.

“Dick” Selene grumbled under her breath once Joe had wandered off.

‘He bother you a lot?” Daryl wanted to know.

‘Every damn time I’m in here. He’s harmless though. I’m sure he’s only so persistent because he knows it annoys the fuck out of me.”

“That’s dumb if it’s true.” He commented.

“What is?”

‘Pissin’ off the girl he likes.”

‘I think it’s his tactic. Might have worked on other women but it’s likely my brother will kick
seven bales out of him one day. You remember my brother from school? Brad? We call him Bear.” She asked.

“I remember him. Ain’t surprised, guys huge.”

“Yeah, he’s built like a grizzly bear. Looks like one too.” She laughed. “He works at my shop. He’s a pretty amazing tattooist if you’re ever looking to get work done. Dumb as a box of rocks but talented all the same.” She chuckled.

“Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.” He said sincerely.

“I also have Ray, he’s manages the place in my absence. Camper than a row of pink tents.”

“I remember him too.” Daryl admitted. He remembered Ray well as the kind of person who literally had no shame or ability to become embarrassed about anything. He had been caught in many a compromising position by teachers, had risqué photos leaked online and was always up front if he found someone attractive, all without the bat of an eyelid. He had once bumped into Daryl in an empty hallway in High School and shamelessly looked him up and down as he passed, bringing his hand up and biting on to his clenched fist in a deliberate show of approval. Daryl didn’t share his brother’s homophobic views and tended not to have an opinion on other people’s sex lives. As a result, Ray’s gesture had resulted in nothing more than a confused head shake and a continuation of his journey to the main doors.

“He’s hard to forget.” Selene stated “So, how's your brother? He used to come in here a lot, haven’t seen him in a while.”

Daryl recoiled at the mention of Merle, not wanting him to have any part in his night, even if it was just in conversation and so he kept his response short.

“He’s alright. Still an asshole. Usually up at the Rabbit.” He shrugged.

She tapped a finger on the bar, her silver adorned hands boasting large silver rings on every finger. He could see three skull rings of different sizes and components. One with a bottom jaw and two without. An eagle wrapped one of her index fingers and her thumbs held two thick, plain bands.

“Ugh. I never go there much. The other night was a one off. My dad owns it.” She huffed.

“I know.” He informed her.

She had realised straight away that Daryl was not great with conversation and probably never had been judging by his deliberate absence from school and mysterious inclination to be somewhat of a loner. While she wasn’t annoyed that she was leading everything, she wished he would give her a little bit more of his personality as it was one which fascinated and intrigued her.

“I’m going to the jukebox. Any requests?” She suddenly announced.

He reached into his pocket and slapped a few coins on the surface.

“Slayer. Other than that, whatever ya like”

“Ohh” She purred, pursing her full lips at him “That just won you some points.”

She slipped each coin from the top by sliding them off the side and catching them in her hand. She winked at him as she turned and made her way to the other side of the bar. He tried not to look at her, still reeling from the subtle yet unquestionably sexy wink she had given him.
For the next two hours, Selene did most of the talking and Daryl just listened and watched her as she spoke. She admitted to him that as a creature of habit, she was always in Marty’s bar every night after work. She’d order a beer or a diet soda but usually couldn’t resist the hotdogs and as a result had got to know the bar staff and the regulars very well. She would always know someone if she turned up alone but aside from Ray, never really had somebody to sit at the bar with her. She usually spent her time at the jukebox or chit chatting with various different groups of people. She had openly admitted without even a hint of awkwardness that sitting with him on her own and not having to move much had been nice.

When she headed off to the bathroom. Marty, the bartender and owner glanced over at him as he polished a glass with a cloth. He was a skinny, long haired man with a crooked smile.

“How’s the date goin’, man?” He enquired.

Daryl looked up in surprise.

“Oh, it ain’t a date.” He corrected.

“Sure looks like it to me. Never seen her sit here with a guy that wasn’t gay before. Joe over there, he tries every day but she just shoots his ugly ass down” he chuckled.

“Ain’t no date” Daryl repeated “hardly know her.”

“That’s the point. This is getting to know her, right? Selene, she’s a handful, but she’s cool. Popular in here. The guys like to look at her and the girls wanna be her.”

“OK?” Daryl shrugged, wondering why he was being told this. It wasn’t as if he was unaware of Selene’s wide fan base and popularity.

“Just sayin’, man. She’s a catch. I know I would.” He shrugged.

He flinched at the comment and wondered why men like Merle, among others, had to measure a woman’s worth by if they would have sex with her or not. Daryl had always seen women as people, not as objects to be picked up and used like his brother did constantly. He had garnered himself quite a reputation among the strippers at the Velvet Rabbit for being shy and withdrawn, but also polite and respectful when he had taken one or two home. The women of the club knew Daryl to be completely different from his rowdy brother but he would act up from time to time, if anything to save face in front of Merle and allow himself an easier life. But behind closed doors and out of Merle’s sight, he was quiet and as decent as the alcohol levels in his blood would allow him to be. More often than not, he found that when the women of the Rabbit weren’t on stage or performing private dances, they preferred to sit with him at the bar over Merle which did little for his relationship with his brother.

When Selene returned, the bartender gave Daryl a knowing smile and sauntered off to the other end of the bar. She had clocked the badly disguised move and looked to her side at Daryl.

“Let me guess. He asked you how our date was progressing.” She assumed.

Daryl rolled his eyes and gulped down the last of the whiskey in his glass. Slamming it on the bar, he dragged a full one in front of him “Yeah. Told him it ain’t no date.”
“You ever been on a date?” She asked, catching him off guard. He assumed and correctly so, that if Selene wanted to know something, she would go right ahead and ask.

“No” He answered honestly. There was no point in him lying, he knew she could see how nervous he’d been.

“Me neither.” She replied.

He looked at her in shock, not even attempting to disguise it. She had never been on a date? Had she understood the subject matter of their conversation properly? But she had asked him the question first, so surely, she did.

“Oh, don’t looked so surprised. Only dates I ever go on are with Ray.” She said casually. “I don’t do dates. Men are…more trouble than they’re worth. Most of them. Only guys I need in my life are my boys at the studio.” She told him.

Unsure how to respond and still trying to get over the surprise of her admission. Daryl simply nodded and she accepted it.

For the rest of the evening, they slowly worked their way through whiskey after whiskey, both of them fuzzy headed when the bell rang behind the bar. Daryl had paid the tab, much to Selene's dismay, her idea of buying him a thank you drink now scuppered. But she was grateful regardless and thought it was a nice gesture and one she wasn't likely to forget. Daryl blinked rapidly and shook his head slightly, trying to clear his vision through hazy eyes while Selene hopped off her bar stool and grabbed his wrist, failing to notice him flinch as she made contact.

“C’mon, before they lock us in. Not that it would be a bad thing.” She chirped.

He thudded along behind her, his wrist almost burning from her touch as she led him to the door. Finally reaching the cold, night air, Daryl’s mind seemed to clear of its fog and he took a deep breath, willing the fresh air to sober him up a bit.

“Well, I’m heading home.” Selene announced under the beam of a street light.

“I’ll walk ya.” He said automatically.

She smiled at him and tilted her head to the side.

“Again with the Knight in shining armour.” She giggled. “You don’t have to do that. I’m a big girl, I can look after myself and it’s not far”

“I’mma walk ya anyways.” He pressed.

She stepped back and observed the seriousness of his expression. He really wasn’t about to let her go anywhere alone that late at night.

“Why?” She probed.

“S’the right thing to do.” He said casually.

She hesitated again, studying his features as he chewed nervously on his bottom lip. He wished he’d said no to that last drink, it maybe would have meant that he would feel more empowered and less like a drunken bum at that moment in time.
Selene was struck by the gentlemanly and respectful side he seemed to harbour and decided she wouldn’t be averse to seeing more of it. Doing something because it was ‘the right thing to do’ was the last thing she had expected from Merle Dixon's little brother.

“Alright.” She agreed, “It’s this way.”

The walk was quiet after Selene had ran out of things to say and had just taken to looking over at him every now and then through the black veil of her hair. He wasn’t at all what she had expected, there was a gentleness to him, a vulnerability that he suppressed under a gruff and unapproachable exterior. He could see her from his peripheral vision but wasn’t about to question her curiosity about him or look back at her, no matter how much he wanted to. He was sure by that point that over the space of one evening he had developed a sizeable and reasonably intense crush on her. A crush that had always been there but had been encouraged and exacerbated by her vivacious personality and witty charm. It was so powerful in fact, that he felt like she could see it every time she looked at him.

After crossing the street and taking a swift left, the journey had taken all of five minutes and he realised that she hadn’t been exaggerating, it really wasn’t that far. She stopped outside the tattoo parlour and spun around, smiling at him with her hands clasped in front of her.

“This is me.” She grinned.

“Your studio?” He asked

“Yep. Live and work here.” she nodded.

“Oh, cool.”

“Well, thank you for walking me home and for the company. I hope you had a good time.”

He shifted his weight on the spot and pushed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Dipping his head, he willed himself to say something that would make her want to see him again, despite everything in his mind telling him not to get too attached, that no matter how well they got along, she was still out of bounds and Merle was right, she was likely to bring him nothing but trouble.

“I did. Thanks for the invite.” Was all he could manage.

“See ya around.” She said as she turned and began to unlock the door.


“Selene” Daryl blurted out.

She looked over her shoulder with her key poised in the doors lock.

"Um… if ya ever want company, y’know, after work, at the bar. Just let me know.” He stammered.

She smiled widely and let out a small exhalation of amusement and a slight hint of bashfulness and Daryl almost forgot to breathe at the sight again. She shoved her hand in her jeans pocket and pulled out a card.

“How about, if you ever want company at the bar, you call me?” She hands him the card and he
stared down at it for a minute, before realising she meant for him to take it. He slid it from her grasp and tucked it inside his leather vest.

“Um…OK.” He agreed.

“As friends. I don’t date, as tempting as it is.” She commented, raising one eyebrow.

_Tempting? She’s tempted?_

“Sure.” He nodded.

“Goodnight, Daryl.” She beamed.

“Night.”

*****

Her pencil drummed nosily against her pad as she perched on the arm of the dark chesterfield couch in the waiting area of the studio. Ritchie, Shorty, Axel and Ray all lay around on the opposite couch and bean bags in front of her, looking thoroughly bored as they waited for Bear to show up. Never one for timekeeping, Bear was late for everything and was never able to give an acceptable reason why. Whenever Selene asked why he was late, his default response was always “I just am.”

Morning meetings were a regular thing at the Ink Cabinet and Selene conducted them to ensure her team were prepared for the day ahead and were ready to take as much money as possible. All the tattooists at the parlour paid Selene a percentage of their earnings for each tattoo, so driving footfall and producing quality work that generated word of mouth as well as online reviews was crucial to the survival of the business. Bear being late every morning hindered the working hours and backed up appointments and it was beginning to wear thin on everyone.

When he finally arrived, coffee in hand and wandering into the building via the back door as if he’d just got out of bed, Selene ripped off a piece of paper from her pad, crumpled it up in her hand and threw it at him.

“You’re fucking late again, Bear.” She snapped. The paper bounced from his chest and landed on the floor under her desk.

“Sorry” was all he said as he fell into an armchair next to Axel on the beanbag beside him.


Needing to push forwards with her day, Selene made a mental note to speak to her brother later on and focus on the meeting for the time being.

“OK guys, so I want you all to check your schedules for the day, some of you are terrible at diary management. Y’all need to mark your clients as completed at the end of each session so I know if you’re free for walk-ins. If you don’t do this you won’t pick up any extra cash and that means I don’t either and I’ll be forced to fire your asses.”

“I always do mine.” Bear grumbles.

“Yes, Bear, you’re the only one that does. But it doesn’t mean you’re exempt from having to be
here on time” she reminded him.

“Pity you aint so hot at parkin’ that heap of junk on wheels you’ve got. Got your own damn spot and you gotta use mine too. Your car aint as big as your ass, Bear, move it the hell over.” Axel commented.

Axel and Bear, being such polar opposite personalities, regularly clashed over small things that Axel could never seem to let go. Playful jokes were always exchanged between the two and there was rarely animosity, but Axel never missed an opportunity to complain about Bear’s tardiness and lack of consideration for others.

“That shit is between you guys, I’m not here to discuss trivial matters like that” Selene confirmed “OK, next is heating. It’s getting pretty fucking cold even though the sun’s still shining and as much as it pains me to spend money on heating, the clients are complaining about how cold it gets in here. So, I’ll be setting the timer each day so it kicks in for half an hour, every two hours to take the bite out of the air. Also, holiday season is fast approaching so we’re going to have to decide what we’re doing about a Christmas party.”

“Go get drunk at Marty’s!” Bear roared, followed by a booming but childish giggle.

“Go huntin’ wabbits at your daddy’s club.” Ritchie grinned.

A rumble of approval swept through the men sat before her and she rolled her eyes.

“So you can pay some broad to let you sniff her feet again?” Shorty giggled at Ritchie, who mulled over the prospect for a moment before shrugging and nodding.

“They don’t charge much for that y’know.” He mused.

“We get drunk at Marty’s a lot and while I’m happy to be ‘one of the guys’, need I remind you all that I am female, I don’t want to see other females fire ping pong balls from their vagina’s, or Ritchie smelling anyone’s feet, especially not in my dad’s club. We should do something different. So, I emptied the dead cactus from the skull plant pot and put it on the front desk. Write your suggestions down, put them in there and Ray and I will decide what the best options are. Does anybody have anything they want to bring up? Any questions?”

“Me!” Shorty cried. Selene nodded at him.

“I was wondering how one becomes a judge? Y’know, on the annual round of auditions for the ping pong vagina trick?” He smiled.

Selene just blinked at him while everyone else rocked back and forth in their seats, chuckling loudly. Even Bear, who quite obviously didn’t understand the joke, looked back and forth at the guys in front of him before laughing along anyway.

“I have a question” Ray announced, raising his hand after being unusually quiet so far.

“Shoot.” Selene said, waving her pencil in the air.

“How was your date last night?”

Out of the Five men, four carried on laughing loudly and jeering. Axel high-fived Ray while Bear sat and scowled at Selene.

“You had a date?” he shot at her, his voice cutting through the jubilation of the others.
“Thank you, Ray. You’re cleaning the toilets today. No, Bear. I didn’t have a date. Remember the bust lip I had? It wasn’t because I was drunk. I was attacked last week leaving daddy’s club and a guy that I know from school helped me get out of there. I was just buying a thank you drink.”

“I know him?” Bear demanded.

“Yes. Daryl Dixon.”

His eyes narrowed and he balled his fists up on his legs.

“Dixon’s are scum.” He scowled.

“Relax, Bear. It was just a few drinks. And its Merle Dixon that is scum. His little brother is a gentleman. Everybody, your first appointments will be here soon, get to work. Please remember your manners, farting in front of clients is not professional or polite and please try not to swear so much. Make lots of money.” She cheered before taking hold of Ray’s arm and dragging him over to her desk.

“Are you trying to ruin my life?” She hissed. “It wasn’t a fucking date and you’re telling my brother it is!”

“Come on, are you seriously telling me that you went out with the mysterious hottie from high school and he didn’t make your lady parts flutter like a butterfly?”

She blinked at him in disbelief.

“Just when I think you can’t get any crasser.”

“You gonna tell me about it?” He pressed.

She exhaled slowly and thought for a moment, regarding Ray with suspicion before finally giving in.

“Buy me a hotdog and a pitcher of beer in Marty’s tonight and I’ll tell you every uneventful detail.”

“Done.”

*****

Ray sat and waited as patiently as was possible for him for Selene to start speaking. The rest of Marty’s bar was quiet, with only a handful of people dotted along the bar. He sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his neon pink, oversized, Jack Daniels vest. Selene was too immersed in her hot dog and beer to even notice Ray’s mounting anticipation. It took three changes of position and numerous loud sighs before he gave up and gave her the shove she needed.

“So?” He eventually cried, flailing his hands in the air.

“So, what?” Selene replied with a mouthful of French fries.

“Honey, I’m not spending money on you for the good of my health. That hog dog bought me information. Let’s be havin’ it.” He demanded, clicking his fingers in her face.
She shrugged one shoulder up as she picked through the remaining fries on the plate, not even bothering to look up.

“There’s nothing to tell. He seems like a nice guy. At least not like Merle.” She contemplated.

“Ugh. Merle” Ray scoffed as he shuddered dramatically.

“I know, right? I don’t think Daryl is even that keen on him and they’re related. There are like… no similarities.”

“Really? There’s that much of a difference?” He asked.

“Oh yeah. Merle is rude, intimidating and unpredictable. Not much between his ears and acts on impulse, or so my dad says. Daryl is…well, I guess you were right, he’s chivalrous. He actually listens when I talk instead of staring at my chest. He paid for my jukebox selections and refused to let me walk home alone. Oh, and Joe tried it with me again, right in front of him and I swear to god, Ray I thought Daryl was going to kill him. I could see it all over his face, he didn’t like that Joe touched me.” She explained.

“I don’t like that Joe touches you. Dude needs a fuckin’ reality check. So, I’m with Daryl on this. Kind of hot that he reacted that way. You like him?”

Selene looked up and flashed him a stern and serious look while tracing her finger around the rim of her glass.

“Ray.” She warned.

“It’s a simple question!” he cried.

She dropped her gaze again and remembered the highlights of the night, thinking over their conversations, the way he had spotted her and quickly looked away when she walked in, thinking she hadn’t noticed, how he had agreed with Joe when he had alluded to her being desirable and then the end of the night, when she’d arrived back from the bathroom to find that he had paid the entire tab and refused to let her reimburse him, ignoring the fact that she’d invited him to buy him a thank you drink. She had enjoyed being around him and would most likely jump at the chance to see him again. But if it was anything more than two people that got along well, she was ignoring it.

“Yes, we had a nice evening. I’m pretty sure he finds me absolutely terrifying but his company was nice” She offered.

“Of course he finds you terrifying.” Ray shrugged casually. He reached out and plucked a cold French fry from her plate and devoured it in seconds, choosing to repeat the action until she slapped his hand away.

“What? What are you talking about? I’m not terrifying!” She complained.

He leaned towards her, holding eye contact and placed his hand on top of hers.

“Selene, I would sell my own mother for an ass like yours. I mean, mine gets attention but… damn. Then, there’s the fact that you’re Countess Bathory beautiful.”

Selene blinked at him and withdrew her hand. “Elizabeth Bathory? Are you kidding me?! Ray, she murdered hundreds of women and bathed in their blood!” she argued.

Ray wagged a finger at her “Yeah, but I bet she was a hottie in her day with skin like porcelain
after all those blood baths.”

She gaped at him, her mouth hung open in shock. “Remind me again why I am friends with you”

“Because I’m a delight. Did he ask to see you again?” He questioned.

“He just said to let him know if I wanted some company for drink after work one day. I gave him my card. Told him to call me if he was around” She said.

He slammed both hands on the table, making her jump and she held her hands up slightly in surrender. In all the years she’d known Ray, there were still times when he would surprise her with his melodrama and exaggerated responses to just about everything, let alone his crass nature and inability to be embarrassed about anything.

“You turned it around on him? You are a difficult woman to pin down!” He told her.

“Doesn’t matter. He won’t call me.” She stated.

“Why do you think that?”

“He’s too shy”


“Because he’s shy?” Selene questioned, confused.

“Um, yes!”

“Ray, you have more of a crush on him than I do and you have about as much chance of seeing a pig fly than sleeping with him. So, let’s just leave this alone.” She suggested, receiving a pout from him before he finished his drink and slid her plate closer to him so he could finish up her fries.

“I can still window shop.” He said between bites “Wait a minute…You have a crush on him?!”

Selene huffed and ran a hand through her hair, brushing it all to one side so she could comb through it with her fingers.

“I...I don’t know… I mean, I agree with you, he’s pretty hot. But I work with four seriously hot tattoo artists and I don’t have crushes on them. We’re all friends.” She reasoned.

It was true, Selene’s workforce consisted of five, highly attractive men all in their own different ways. It was a fact that had not gone amiss upon her hiring them and she figured it could only bring in more custom which was never a bad thing. She also had the pleasure of being able to giggle at the crowd of school girls that took a very deliberate route past the parlour every day so they could catch a glimpse of one of them

“Four? Hey! There are five of us! You excluded me?!” Ray suddenly snapped.

“Dude, I excluded my brother! You’re all up in there looking like a snack. I’ve told you a thousand times I’d so do you if you were straight.” She assured him, tapping his hand.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me. But stop digressing! Girl, I am not going to sit back and watch this opportunity pass you by.” He confirmed.

“I’m only going to be his friend.” She stated firmly.
“Selene! No! C’mon! What the hell?! I know your daddy runs off every delicious guy you like but you have to give this a chance. Do you want to die alone?!” He said, raising an eyebrow at her.

Selene recoiled and turned her body in her seat as if to deflect his comment.

“Jesus, Ray. That’s a little dramatic.” She muttered.

“It’s true. You deserve a nice guy. One with tight buns and a huge-”

“-Ray! That is enough!” She cut in, just in time to stop him from saying something else crude as Marty breezed past and collected the plate. Ray had the decency to wait for him to be out of earshot before continuing his interrogation.

“When was the last time you got laid?” he whispered.

“I’m not telling you that shit.” Selene dismissed immediately.

“I’ll buy you another beer.” He bargained.


“Who was it?” Ray persisted.

“Angelo. Now you owe me two beers.”

“Oh fuck off. You screwed Angelo?! He’s a guest artist, Selene. Have you been screwing all the guest artists I book?! He’s a total asshole!” Ray exclaimed, his voice now loud enough to attract the attention of Marty and two others at the bar.

Selene turned away from their gazes in horror. Sometimes, she could slap Ray for not considering that unlike him, she did get embarrassed.

“Keep your voice down, fog horn. Angelo is very Italian and persuasive. He’s the only one. Please, keep this to yourself of he’ll end up hanging from an overpass if my father finds out.” She pleaded, hazarding a look up at Marty who was still looking at her. She motioned to her empty glass and held up two fingers, signalling that she wanted, and needed another round. Marty nodded and set about pouring the drinks.

“Sure, sure. But you have to promise not to go there again. I am not visually impaired, I know he’s like a fine wine n’ all, but I also am not a dumbass, the dude is a fuckin’ douchebag.” Ray scolded.

“Girls got needs, Ray.” She muttered.

He reached out and took her hand, holding it firmly in his own and forcing her to meet his eye. When Ray was serious, there was still always a hint of sass and humour to everything he said and it was one of the things Selene liked about him most. His unwavering devotion to her meant that she could always rely on him to be honest and no matter how brutally he delivered it, he somehow managed to soften the blow.

“Honey, we all got needs. But we gotta have standards too. Let us just analyse Daryl here for a second. The guy saved you from god knows what in that alley and you had a great time with him last night because he actually listened when you spoke, not to mention the fact that he is absolutely be-au-ti-ful. He’s got this broken, ‘please come save me’ thing going on. I’m willing to bet that even though he’s shy, he could unleash some serious shit in the bedroom and then want to walk you home afterwards. Daryl is your standard, Missy. Not Mr. ‘I became a tattoo artist to fuck girls’
Angelo. Kapeesh?”

She smiled at him and gipped his hand in response. She knew he had a point, she shouldn’t be offering any of her attention to the likes of the Italian guest tattooist with a reputation as a player. But she wasn’t about to put Daryl in a position where he could be driven away by her father. It was something she already knew he didn’t deserve.

“Yes, alright, I get it. But Daryl is just a friend.” She said.

“God, you’re so fuckin’ boring!” Ray cried just as their drinks arrived.

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Daryl turned her business card over and over in his fingers on one hand. He had looked over the numbers a million times and toyed with the idea of calling her, but the niggling voice in the back of his head told him there was no point, that he was playing with fire and that she wouldn’t be interested anyway.

He was careful to make sure Merle didn’t spot him with the card or he would have it out of his hand in the blink of an eye and he would be forced to admit that he had been out with Bill’s daughter and done the exact opposite to Merle’s previous warning about her.

He knew he was treading on thin ice. Merle worked closely with Bill, who pretty much ran the town with his drug empire disguised as a collection of legitimate businesses. It would have been logical to turn Selene’s offer down, to not get to know her at all. But she had proved too intriguing to ignore and he had decided to take his chances, provided he could keep it from Merle.

He looked over the number again and picked up the phone on the dusty corner table in the dimly lit living from of the house he shared with Merle. Up there in the mountains, they had no neighbours but that was the way Daryl liked it. Away from everyone and everything else, with just the peace of the woods. That was when Merle wasn’t around, drunk as a skunk or high on meth and causing a ruckus. It wasn’t that Daryl was a saint, he was far from it, but the level of damage he caused when drunk or high was a drop in the ocean when compared to that of Merle.

He was surprised the phone was even connected after the bill had gone unpaid last month. Red letters came through the door on a regular basis and they all went unread, used as coasters or a flat surface to carve lines in cocaine.

He tapped his index finger on the corner of the card, thoughtfully chewing his lower lip with the phones receiver clamped between his ear and his shoulder, the dial tone rang through his head.

No. He thought. I don't even know what to say.

Dropping the receiver back into the cradle, he exhaled loudly and stuffed the business card back into the inside pocket of his leather vest.
At the top of the first staircase in The Ink Cabinet, was Ritchie’s piercing studio. As he gradually worked around the room, unpacking a delivery and tidying all the packaging away, he didn’t hear Selene reach the top of the stairs due to the loud, stoner metal he was blasting from a speaker in the corner of the room. She crossed the room behind him, his back to her and turned the volume down on the music. He did a double take over his shoulder and stopped what he was doing. Selene sat on the leather tattoo chair and clasped her hands in front of her.

Ritchie’s eyes nervously swept over her and he knew she was about to make him have a serious conversation which he never seemed to be able to manage too well when all he could think about was how beautiful she was. She wore a black and white, horizontally striped top with cut off shoulders, a fitted pencil skirt, fishnets and heels and to Ritchie, she was exquisite and he had hidden his crush on her since the day he was first hired at the parlour.

“You OK, Ritchie?” Selene asked.

“What? Oh…Oh Yeah, I’m good.” He replied with an uneasy half smile. In his hand he held packets of piercing needles and he began to pass them from one hand to another, one by one.

“You look exhausted.” She observed.

“I’m fine. Just not been sleeping much.” He told her.

She wasn’t a stranger to Ritchie’s anxious fiddling when they were alone, but she had simply put it down to his social skills not being the best and his apparent lack of knowledge about how to talk to women. She had observed him tiptoeing around some of his female clients on the odd occasion and had watched from the stairs, musing over how cute she thought he was around pretty women.

“Something bothering you?” She continued.

“No. I’m good. Honestly.” He assured her.

She took a deep breath and slowly rubbed her hands together, her rings raking against one another.

“OK, look, I’ve overheard some of the guys talking and I’m a little worried about you. I know you hit the weed pretty heavily, you always have, but the hard stuff…you gotta stop that shit, man. It impairs you and I can’t have you shoving metal through peoples body parts if you’re lit.” She warned him.

His defences instantly went up and he quickly deposited the needles into a drawer beside him before stepping closer to her.

“I aint lit. I never come to work on that shit. I promise.” He pleaded.

“I can’t say I have any proof that you have, this is just a warning. A warning and me telling you
that as your friend, please look after yourself.” She told him.

He nodded and fidgeted on the spot, tugging at the hem of his black sweater. Selene stood up and walked back to the stairs.

“Selene?” He mumbled quietly, his back turned to her.

“Mmhmm?” She hummed as she looked over her shoulder.

When he turned to face her, she noted how his whole demeanour had changed, he was suddenly dejected and his shoulders had slumped.

“You uh…you seein’ Daryl Dixon?” He queried hesitantly

“You know him?” She probed.

“Yeah. From the Rabbit.” He nodded.

“Oh. Um, No. I’m not seeing him. Not like that. Why?” She said.

Ritchie’s eye dropped to the floor and he shoved his hands into the pockets on the front of his sweater. He had an almost ‘surfer’ look to him with his blonde and light brown dreadlocks, lip and nose piercings and plugs in both earlobes. Selene knew he wasn’t short of female interest and she had even been asked at the desk by an attractive former client of his if she could be given his number. Selene had to politely decline and explain that it was against their policy to disclose the personal details of staff. Since she had known him, she had never seen him go on a date or even attempt to flirt with anyone and his sometimes-painful shyness around the female species only served to make him all the more endearing. She had a soft spot in her heart for Ritchie and had tried to open him up and make him talk to her so many times, only for him to retreat into his own world of weed and loud music.

“Think you can do better than him. Woman like you.” He admitted.

She froze to the spot and failed to mask the shocked look on her face. He had never said anything so revealing and related to her personal life before. She wondered where this had come from.

“Woman like me?” She managed to ask.


Now, Selene smiled and could see for herself exactly what was going on. Ritchie had a crush on her.

“That’s very sweet of you, Rich. But Daryl isn’t as bad as everyone thinks he is. Besides, we’re just friends. But thank you, for the compliments.”

He nodded again, quickly withdrawing a hand from a pocket and swiping it across his nose, sniffing loudly before rubbing at his chin. His body was swaying from side to side in some kind of nervous dance.

“OK. Well. You know anyone that dates you has gotta get the seal of approval, right? From all of us.” He shrugged.

“Yes, I am well aware of that.” She beamed. She knew in her heart that they had become such a family that if anyone were to come along and steal Selene’s heart, she would have not just one, but
Selene had tried seven times to quit smoking. She had clung to the fact that she only smoked when drinking, stressed or socially since before she had left school. But her days usually consisted of stress, socialising or drinking and so resulted in her finishing a pack a week. She hated her seven failed attempts to quit with a passion and was determined that one day, she would be able to run up stairs without coughing.

The side of the Tattoo Parlour boasted a parking lot which contained benches and various potted plants that Selene had positioned around the place to give it a sense of splendour. Her plan would have worked had she remembered to water them and they hadn't ended up resembling pots of brown, paper bags. Now, she sat on a bench with Ray in the chilly air but basking in the sun as they both enjoyed their third cigarette of the day.

“You see that cover up I did this morning?” Ray asked.

“No?”

“Guy had it done at that run down, cheap ass place across town. Supposed to be a rose on his arm, looked more like a cabbage. Had to cover his whole upper arm to get rid of that monster. Surprised he didn’t have rabies or some shit. That place needs to be shut down.” he tutted.

“Huh. A cabbage.” She mused, chuckling to herself.

“Or like…a giant cat’s asshole.” He added as he moulded the shape with his hands in the air. The sight caused Selene to laugh loudly and shake her head.

Ray took a long drag of his smoke and began to cough as he slapped Selene’s arm over and over. Her head snapped to the side at him and she saw him pointing at the liquor store across the road.

Daryl was standing just outside the door, his head bowed and his concentration on lighting the cigarette in his mouth. He wore a sleeveless checked shirt and his leather vest, with a pair of black jeans.

Ray finally stopped coughing and they both watched him silently.

“Go talk to him.” Ray finally instructed.

“No” she shot back straight away.

“It’s been like a week since you guys went out, right?” He asked.

“Uh huh”

Ray didn't respond to her answer, instead squinting his eyes and pursing his lips.

“Hells fuckin’ bells, look at those arms. I’d have acrylics put on just so I could rake ‘em across those biceps. Go talk to him.” Ray repeated.

“No” Selene protested again. “And don’t you fucking dare, you’re not a drag queen. We discussed this. I’m not having you wearing better eyeliner than me.”

Ray cleared his throat, cupped his hand around his mouth and stood up.
“DARYL!” He called out, ducking behind the fence just before he could be seen.

Selene sat there, wide eyed like a rabbit in some headlights and she thought that must be what it was like to have one of those dreams where you're walking through school completely naked.

“Thank you, you asshole.” She hissed through her teeth as she gingerly raised a hand and waved at Daryl, who had now seen her.

“You’re welcome” Ray whispered back, discarding his smoke and running back into the building. She could tell he was spying on her through the window of the back door and made a mental note to find a way to get payback for his little stunt.

Daryl observed her through the floppy front of his dusty coloured hair. He quickly looked around, no signs of anyone he knew. Taking a deep breath, he headed across the road towards her, wracking his brain as he went for something smart and interesting to say.

As he approached her, he noticed her uneasy expression which was a world apart from her confident and carefree demeanour when he’d last seen her. He saw her inhale deeply and force a smile onto her face.

“Hey” She said breezily.

“Hi.”

“How are you?”

“Good. I’m good. You?”

“Yeah, fine. Working hard.”

“Right, how's business?”

*Great. He thought* Small talk. *Not my strong point.*

“Its steady." She told him " Ray covered up a rose on a guy that looked like a cat’s asshole this morning. Highlight of the day.” She said sarcastically as she wondered what the hell she was rambling on about.

“Sure it’ll get better.” He mumbled, taking a drag on his smoke and exhaling into the breeze.

Selene finished hers up and stubbed it out in a pot of sand under the bench next to her foot.

“So, it’s been like seven days. You going to call me or not?” She asked, squinting up at him in the rays of the sun and drawing her black, hooded jacket around her. He instantly looked twice as uncomfortable as he had before she asked the direct question and she saw his eyebrow raise slightly in surprise.

“Uh… thought it wasn’t a date.” He said suspiciously.

She just shrugged at him, deliberately not bothering to confirm or deny how she saw their evening at the bar.

“Going to be a shitty friend and make me drink alone?” She smirked.
“Not if ya don’t want to.” He replied.

She caught his eye and even in the bright light of the sun, she could detect a hint of a shy kind of satisfaction on his face. She tried to hide a smile, not wanting to seem bashful at all but failed when an involuntary but quiet chuckle escaped her.

“I get off work at 6” she told him.

He nodded a couple of times and shifted about on the gravelly ground of the parking lot, taking a quick pull on his cigarette.

“Meet ya here” He rasped, smoke escaping through his nose and mouth.

She got to her feet and dusted down her black pants, her black, leather harness clanking against the studs of her belt. As her eyes swept around to the door, she spied Ray just before he ducked out of sight.

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The rest of the day seemed to drag at an unbelievably slow pace and Selene couldn’t apply herself to anything. Having to order supplies was a job that usually took around an hour, but it had taken her three due to her mind constantly wandering and lulling her into a daydream. When closing time eventually arrived, she opened the back door to see Daryl standing in the shade against the wall, right on time.

“I’m just finishing up, come in.” She told him.

He followed her inside and halted when she stopped at a sink. She held out a mug to him and motioned to the cupboard next to him.

“Make yourself useful.” She grinned.

He took the mug and opened the cupboard, placing it inside in time for her to hand him another. They repeated the process for the entire countertop full of mugs and plates.

“They’re good guys, my staff. But they’re animals when it comes to cleaning up. I dread to think how they live.” She sighed.

“Should charge ‘em. For the trouble.” He suggested.

“Believe me, I’ve considered it. But they make me a lot of money and they’re loyal, so I figure doing some dishes is a small price to pay. Thanks, for the help.” She said breezily as she pushed the cupboard shut beside him. “You hungry?”

“Could eat.” He shrugged.

“Good. I need a burger.”

In Marty’s bar, she ordered the biggest burger on offer and had no qualms about eating such a large meal in front of Daryl or anyone else. As she tucked in, constant noises of approval emanated from her and she finished everything on the plate while Daryl watched in thinly veiled surprise and awe as she licked her fingers and wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist. He liked that she seemed to have little to no table manners and wasn’t afraid to just be comfortable despite what other people
thought. Intermittently, she slurped her beer and stopped only to glare at Ray as he sauntered in. He scanned the room and spotted her, acting shocked to see her while he waved enthusiastically. She raised a hand and flipped him the bird.

“For the record, I didn’t invite him. Hopefully he’ll just say hi and then disappear.” She said to Daryl, who had been watching her the whole time.

“S’fine.” He uttered.

When he’d been served his drink, Ray strutted over to the table like a peacock, showing off its feathers, clutching a cocktail between his fingers and raising his glass as he approached.

“Fancy seeing you here!” He cried.

“Yeah, fancy that.” She shot at him as she whipped a lipstick from her pocket and re-applied her typical dark red hue, using the back of a knife as a mirror.

Ray shifted his weight to one side, placing his free hand on his hip and blinked rapidly at Selene, his long eyelashes fluttering. She eventually realised what he wanted.

“Ray, this is Daryl. Daryl, this is Ray. Think you guys know each other from school.” She said, unable to disguise her unimpressed and grumpy tone.

“I surely do, how you doin’, Daryl?” Ray beamed as he held his hand out.

Daryl reached over and offered him a firm handshake and a polite nod. He noticed his heavily inked arms, hands and neck and was impressed by some of the work. Selene had her own art etched onto her skin, but unlike Ray, who was covered in bright colours. Selene’s were all black, one of her arms completely covered in an intricate sleeve.

“Hey man. I’m good. You?” Daryl said to Ray.

“Fabulous, thanking you. You gonna stop by the studio, Daryl? Let me draw a little somethin’ somethin’ on those there biceps? I like me a decent sized canvas.” he purred.

“Ray” Selene scolded.

“What?! I’m drummin’ up business!” He exclaimed.

“Uh, ain’t got not plans for that just yet.” Daryl responded.

“Well you just holler my name when ya do.” Ray winked at him. Daryl merely nodded once and picked up his beer, turning his attention to the liquid in the glass.

“Something else we can help you with Ray?” Selene asked.

“Oh! No! I’ll take my ass someplace else. I don’t want to fuck up y’alls date. Have a good one, kids! Oh, and Selene?” He hummed, leaning down to her but still speaking loud enough for Daryl to hear “Remember that the back passage means no babies.” He winked dramatically at her before hurrying away and finding a place at the bar next to a group of girls he knew.

Selene was mortified and sat completely still for a few seconds, a disgusted and horrified look on her face. She stared down into her basket of French fries and wondered how the hell she was supposed to look Daryl in the eye now. But she was braver than that and she knew it in her heart, so she slowly took a deep breath and flickered her eyes up at him. He was smirking at her from
behind his finger, which was curled up in front of his mouth, his chin propped up in his thumb.

“T’m so sorry about him.” She sighed

“Don’t be. He’s alright.” He replied.

“She’s really not. He doesn’t have an ounce of class and he’s going to pay for that one.” She assured him.

She deliberately skirted around the fact that Ray had referred to their burger and drinks meet up as a date. She looked down at his hand on the table. Dots tattooed on his knuckles with a skull outline by his thumb.

“Anyway. Seen your tattoos on your hand. Got any more?”

“Couple, Yeah.”

“Personal to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. I mean most of mine are large enough to be noticed but I don’t like it when people want to know what else I have and why. It’s like they assume they have a right to know my personal reasons. I don’t ask about who’s got warts and moles and where.”

“I get that.” Daryl agreed.

He was struggling to find some way to seem as interested in her as he actually was. She was full of mystery and a quiet confidence that both fascinated and terrified him. He wanted to know things about her, but wasn’t used to being in a situation where he could actually ask. Instead, he decided to step out of his comfort zone temporarily and attempt to compose a compliment. His desire to see her reaction pushing him to it.

“Those lip rings. They look good.” He said

Her black lined eyes slowly worked up from the table to his face and she gave him a small smile. “Thank you.” She whispered with dark red, velvety lips, the words silent but the look on her face was enough to turn him inside out. “They’re called snakebites”.

Good. He thought. That was a good reaction.

Selene ran her tongue over the inside of the two rings on either side of her lower lip. Her father had raged when she had them done, along with every single time she had gone home with another or a Tattoo. But she simply ignored him, her interest in looking like one of his clones from his strip club next to zero.

Daryl rubbed his chin briefly with his fingers and wondered what the hell he should say next. Off the back of his success with the compliment, he was considering some kind of question that would allow him to gain some insight into who she was as a person.

“Ya live alone? In the shop?” He asked.

Selene had already noticed the change in him and was looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

This dude is genuinely interested in me.
“Above the shop. Yeah. Five years now”

“You a tattoo artist too?” He continued.

“I mainly just boss the guys around. My style of tattooing is kind of unusual, so I only tend to get interest from the quirky folk.”

He smiled and nodded down into his drink while Selene looked up to see Ray mocking her from the bar cupping the side of his face with his hand and sighing in an exaggerated manner. She quickly dragged a long, black fingernail across her throat and looked back over the table at Daryl.

“You got a girl, Daryl?” She asked boldly.

Seeing his shoulders tense, she dipped her head in an attempt to read his expression but his gaze was cast too low for her to see. When he eventually looked up, she saw him take a deep breath.

“No.” He said, shaking his head.

“Right, you wouldn’t be here if you did.” She said, mostly to herself.

“Why? Ain’t no date.” He corrected. He regretted the comment as soon as it left his lips, cursing himself for potentially coming across as cocky and repeating the one phrase that everyone seemed to be obsessed with.

“Well…someone’s got some sass.” She grinned. Her brilliantly white teeth flashing at him.

“You’re right, we’re just two people having a burger and drink. No reason for a girlfriend to have a problem with that.”

“Yeah.” He agreed.

He wanted to tell her that to him, this was very much a date. He wanted to tell her that he thought she was stunning and interesting. He wanted to tell her that he was interested, that it was the reason he was sat across the table from her. That he probably shouldn’t be sat with her for the second time because of who her father was but he had been drawn to her. But he said nothing. His eyes studying her as she swished the last of her beer around in the glass.

“You got a Motorcycle?” She asked.

“Usually borrow Merle’s. He’s always too drunk or high to use it.”

“Yeah? Tell me about your ride.” She enquired.

“Um, Yamaha SX650 frame, 1965-1970 Triumph Bonneville engine. S’a chopper.” He explained.

“Nice. Gonna take me for a ride sometime?” She enquired.

A rush of excitement surged through him at the thought that she actually wanted to spend more time with him.

“That mean I’m gonna be seein’ you again?” He blurted out, realising instantly that he’d made it sound like he wanted it to mean exactly that.

“Do you want to?” She pressed, her expression now one of surprise.

His mouth tugged up into a crooked smile and he shyly chanced eye contact with her.
“Sure” He answered.

“Then you're going to have to call me, aren’t you?” She grinned.

Selene realised that their situation was now sounding more and more like a date by the second and had to pull herself back to the logical reality that no matter what she thought of him, their relationship had to remain platonic, for his sake more than anything else. The urge to flirt with him was strong and she knew she was going to have to be disciplined.

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Another week passed and Selene was just about done with moping around after hearing a whole lot of nothing from Daryl, so she dragged Ray to another gig at the same venue as before. The band were not exactly her taste but the guitars were still loud and the venue still sold beer so that was good enough for her. Choosing a simple jeans and T-shirt ensemble showed how disinterested she was but her need to get out was greater than her desire to look flawless all the time. Ray bounced around next to her, his interest in punk inspired music was much greater than hers and he was in his element.

Daryl didn’t much care for punk either, it was more Merle’s bag and he had tagged along for the sake of it, being unwilling to endure Merle’s incessant complaining if he didn’t show up. He nodded a polite hello to a young girl his brother had introduced to him and focused on the band as Merle began to sweet talk her and ply her with alcohol the usual way he did with most women. As Daryl glanced around the room quickly, he spotted Selene. Panic shot through him. He couldn’t be seen talking to her by Merle. He shrank back into the crowd and moved off to the edge, telling Merle he was going to the bar.

As he reached the counter, he caught the eye of a bartender over the heads of a sea of people. Lifting his arm, he began to sign what he wanted, only to find that Ray had stepped in front of him and was blocking his view.

“Tell me somethin’, Daryl. Enlighten me.” Ray shouted over the music.

Daryl dropped his arm and huffed with irritation. “You gonna get outa my way if I do?”

“You like pussy, right?” Ray yelled.

“What?!” Daryl exclaimed back after quickly checking that no one was paying much attention to them.

“I just been tryin’ to figure out what floats your boat. See, you’re in demand, hot stuff. If you ain’t gay, Selene likes you. If you are gay, I like you.” He told him, trailing an index finger down his bare bicep. Daryl shrugged him off straight away.

“What? Hell naw, I ain’t gay! Keep ya damn voice down.” He snapped.

“Why? You scared somebody’s gonna think you be peekin outta the closet, honey bun?” Ray retorted, stepping closer to him.

“Jesus! Shut up! Look, I ain’t got no problem with you… you people. But my brother’s gonna skin ya alive if he hears ya talkin’ like that.” He warned with a quick look over his shoulder to check that Merle was still preoccupied with the young woman he had nabbed.

“I ain’t scared of your halfwit brother.” Ray boasted.
“There somethin’ you need to say to me? I’m here to get a damn drink.” Daryl spat, anger rising in his chest. He wanted to leave, to remove himself from a situation which could potentially get him caught. The last thing he wanted was for Merle to figure out what was going on. It would have ramifications for all involved and not good ones at that.

“So, if you’re not gay… you’re just an asshole, then?” Ray shot at him.

“What are you talkin’ bout?” He demanded.

“Selene. Why didn’t you call her?” Ray spat.

“Really, man?! What are you, her fuckin’ bodyguard?”

Ray gave him a confused look “Oh Yeah, with my effeminate voice and queen bee swagger? I’m her fuckin’ friend. You are the one that rode in on ya chrome horse with ya pretty blue eyes and that sassy attitude and saved her from being violated by some lowlife in an alley. You are her bodyguard, you damn fool.” He scolded.

Daryl stepped back and ran a hand over his face, briefly rubbing at his eyes which were now beginning to blur slightly after he’d lost count of the amount of drinks he’d had.

“We’re friends” he said.

“You think she goes on dates with other guys? ’Cause she don’t. She don’t date at all.” Ray informed him

“They wasn’t no dates.” Daryl corrected.

“Oh, c’mon, Daryl! You ain’t as dipshit dumb as your meathead brother. Do you like her, or not?”

“That shit don’t matter.” He dismissed.

“Course it does! She’s still being all blasé about it. Acting like she don’t care but I see her checkin’ her voicemails three times a day. Under her angel of death bullshit, she’s soft as shit. So i’mma ask ya again, do you like her?” Ray continued, not letting up no matter how mad he could see Daryl had become.

Daryl sighed, an exaggerated, frustrated exhalation while Ray decided to just wait and see what he said. He could see Selene over Daryl’s shoulder, chatting to a random man that he didn’t know and laughing and making some semblance of an effort to enjoy the band.

“Course I like her” Daryl finally snapped. “she’s…”

“Pretty?” Ray offered.

“Yeah.”

“Smart?”

“Yeah”

“So hot ya wanna bend her over and bang her like a screen door in a hurricane?”

Daryl furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes in surprise.

“You sure ya gay?” He asked.
Ray closed the gap between them and leaned into his ear.

“Honey, you want me to prove it to you?” He purred.

“Uh, no.” Daryl answered, shrinking back slightly.

Ray tutted and shifted his weight into one leg, jutting his hip and picking up his Band T-shirt at the front, he leaned down and used the edge of it to wipe his brow, revealing the tight, rippled and tattooed landscape of his abdomen. Daryl rolled his eyes.

“Talk to her. Even if it means you guys stay friends, it’s better than her wandering around and wondering ‘what if’, y’know?” Ray suggested.

“Whatever.” Daryl growled as he shoved past him and caught the bartenders attention again. Ray let him go, satisfied that he’d said his piece.

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An hour later Merle’s was still obsessed with his new lady friend while Daryl stood next to him and seethed silently. He hated that Ray had accosted him so brazenly and asked such personal questions, but what he hated even more, was that he had a point. He hadn’t called her because he felt the risk was too high and more than that, because he was sure it was unlikely to go anywhere despite the signs he’d seen so far. He had no idea how to evaluate what had gone on between them, having had nothing to compare it to in the past. He was going in blind, but something in him was still urging him to push it, to take the chance and see what happens. If Merle found out, it would be game over. His job with her father was too important to him and he would do everything in his power to keep his brother away from her.

When Merle began kissing the young woman, Daryl curled his lip in disgust and stepped away from them, looking over at the bar and considering another drink. He was already pretty drunk but was able to stomach plenty more before he was KO’d for the night. Shiny black hair shimmered under the dirty, blue spotlight above and he recognised her straight away. Selene. After a brief check that Merle was still otherwise engaged, Daryl shuffled through the crowd towards her. He reached out and tapped her shoulder. When she turned, her face adopted a stern expression and she subtly lifted one eyebrow in a totally unimpressed look.

“Hey, can I talk to you?” He asked.

“Well hey stranger. What could you possibly want?” She quipped sarcastically.

“You got five minutes?” He requested.

“Yes, but I’m using them to purchase a beverage” She replied.

He sighed and drummed his fingertips nervously along the bottom of his leather vest. “Please” It wasn’t a question. More a reluctant statement. She studied him for a second and in her stillness he was able to get a good look at her bright eyes and pale skin. The choker around her neck had a metal ring through the middle of it and her lip rings had been changed for black ones, matching her nose ring and the jewellery in her ears.

“Fine, but only because I’m curious.” She agreed.

“Follow me.” He motioned with his head to a large, black door at the back of the building.
Outside, the air was biting and Selene wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged herself in a bid to keep warm. She wished she had brought her leather biker jacket with her instead of leaving it with Ray. Daryl didn’t seem bothered by it as he slowly paced back and forth in front of her. When the air had hit him as he’d left the building, his drunken state had instantly worsened and it occurred to him how inebriated he was.

“Shit.” He cussed under his breath while rubbing his face and shaking his head, as if to shake it into sobriety.

“What?” Selene asked.

“I’m fuckin’ drunk.” He confessed.

“Oh… great. That’s great. Y’know what? I’m done with this already.” She huffed, making tracks for the door behind him. He backed up and held an arm out to shield her from getting to the handle.

“Alright um… M’sorry I didn’t call.” He mumbled, getting to the point to keep her there.

“Why would I be bothered about that?” She wanted to know.

“Cause ya wanted me to.” He admitted.

“Did I? You don’t know anything about me.” She reminded him.

He growled to himself out of frustration and stepped in front of her, willing her not to go anywhere.

“I know ya told me ya don’t date. But ya went out with me. Twice.” He pointed out.

“I was testing the water. Why does this even matter to you anyway?” She groaned. The words coming out as if she were tired of the whole thing already.

“So, they were dates” he stated, ignoring her question.

“No. Yes. I don’t know. Friend dates, I guess.” She rambled.

“Testin’ the water, huh? I’m some kinda test?” He questioned.

“Yes. No. It wasn’t like that.” She could hear herself, she knew she was making hardly any sense and out of the two of them, she was the one that sounded drunk.

“What was it like?” He continued.

“Is this the booze talking? Because you’re a lot chattier when you’re mad” She observed.

“And you’re just damn confusin’. Answer the question” he demanded.

“I don’t want to.” She stated in defiance, crossing her arms tighter. The breeze was now prickling at her skin under her shirt. She was freezing and she wanted so badly for him to just step aside and let her back into the venue, avoiding the uncomfortable conversation altogether.

“C’mon, I aint good at this. Gimme somethin’ here.” He reasoned.

She grunted and began wandering around in front of him, it was a motion that both helped her think and keep warm at the same time. Daryl watched on, wondering if he was doing the right thing at all. He was conflicted. He wanted to see her, to spend time with her, but at the same time knew it would never work. Yet here he was, desperately hoping she would give him something to go on.
She stopped briefly and scratched the top of her arm before resuming her path. When she halted and faced him, her arms dropped and her hands balled into fists and a growl escaped her as she stamped her foot.

“You are insufferable! You know that? You want to know what’s going here? FINE! I have this stupid thing for you. Alright?! But we’re friends and that’s all we’re going to be so I don’t know why the word ‘date’ keeps getting thrown around and why you’re stood here demanding answers when you didn’t call me and why I’m even angry about it because I don’t have a right to be. It’s just…stupid. It’s all stupid. Stupid Stupid”

Daryl’s eyebrows were now both raised at her revealing speech. But he had nothing to say just yet, his drunken mind trying to process her words. A silence hung around them and the more he mulled over what she had said the more he struggled not to smile at her confession and how utterly embarrassed she looked.

_Goddamn. She is so cute when she’s shy._

“I just said ‘stupid’ five times. Oh my god. Fuck You.” She cussed under her breath. Her words contrasting to the smirk that was evident on her features. She began to pace back and forth again, fiddling with the chains hanging from her belt. Horrified by how quickly it had all had escaped her, slipping out before she could even try and take it back and breaking her naturally composed state of mind.

“I didn’t do nothin’, you did this.” He smiled.

She stopped pacing, her head hung low and her eyes fixing on the dark, cracked ground beneath her feet and Daryl could hear her murmuring under her breath.

“Oh god. ‘I have this thing for you’?! What am I, like twelve?!” She whispered to herself.

He couldn’t help it; his smile had grown and he was watching her with both great amusement and admiration. She glanced up at him and caught his eye, the two of them chuckling quietly.

“Why didn’t you call me? Said you don’t have a girl. You married?” She asked.

“Hell no” he replied

“So…ignoring my dumb confession, do you want to see me again? As a friend”

“I’m seein’ ya now.” He mentioned.

“I gave you five minutes, buddy. You’ve already had six.” She informed him with a warning glare.

He had to make a decision. A tough one. His head was telling him not to go there, not to get in too deep with this because no matter how many times she said they were friends, his heart meant he couldn’t help but think how alluring and addictive she was, how he didn’t think of her as a friend at all but how he would be willing to try. Even just for a little while, until she realised that he wasn’t worth the trouble.

“You free tomorrow?” He asked

“Yes. All day”

“Pick ya up around noon.” He told her.
She stilled and blinked at him in surprise.

“Wait, what? I didn’t agree to anything. You can’t just tell me that you’re picking me up like that.”

“Alright. Do you want me to pick you up at noon tomorrow?” He smirked.

Noticing how silly her complaint had sounded, she tilted her head from side to side thoughtfully and pursed her lips.

“Yes.” She reluctantly mumbled, earning her a laugh from him. “OK. I’m going away now because this is awkward and Ray gets separation anxiety”

“Alright.” He agreed.

Now, he let her pass by him and reach for the door handle. She paused and side glanced at him.

“Daryl”

“Yeah?”

“Just as friends” She cemented.

“Whatever you want.” He muttered.

For the rest of the night, he managed to acquire a few, decent glances of her and even caught her smiling over at him a few times. It had both pleased and panicked him, the constant threat of Merle seeing it hanging over him. He wished he could just stay with her, walk right over and listen to her talk and sing all night. But his feet were rooted to the ground, keeping him out of trouble. For now.
Another one!
This is a slow build, stick with it. There are a lot of OC's in this so I'm enjoying building them up as we go along.

The mouse clicked and clicked. A tiny, snap-snap-snap of the button over and over as Selene swore under her breath and started bashing buttons on the keyboard in anger. The front desk computer was always freezing and everyone else knew all it took for it to right itself was a step back and not to be given anymore commands. But on this particular day, Selene found herself anxious, nervous even in the few moments before Daryl arrived to pick her up.

An outfit choice had been a tricky one without knowing where she was going, so she had chosen simple black jeans and a loosely fitted, off the shoulder, black fishnet knitted top. She had curled the ends of her hair and her leather biker jacket lay across her lap as she sat in front of the still-frozen computer.

Even on her days off, she still found it difficult to tear herself away from the tattoo parlour and was frequently being told off by Ray and the others for never being able to switch off. But The Ink Cabinet was her pride and Joy and she wasn’t always completely comfortable with handing over the reins.

She reclined in the leather office chair, unwrapping a strawberry lollipop and popping it into her mouth. She tried to ignore the whimpering of a young woman coming from Shorty’s cubicle who was in the middle of getting her first tattoo. Selene had snorted with laughter at the thought of her first tattoo being done by Shorty. As talented as he was, he wasn’t so great at being gentle, believing that a little extra pain only added to the art.

She reached out and angrily stabbed at the enter key on the keyboard in frustration just as the door swung open and Daryl appeared. She slowly pulled the lollipop out from between her lips and Sat forward in her chair.

“Hi” she smiled.

*She needs to get rid of that lollipop. That shit is distracting.*

“Hey, ready to go?” He said with a nudge up of his head.

“Well, I don’t know where you’re taking me. So, I can’t answer that.” She remarked, waving the lollipop around in front of her.

“Get up n’ you’ll find out.” He retorted.

Slipping the lollipop back into her mouth, she gave him a lingering look laced with so much sexual tension he became irreversibly convinced in those few seconds that there was no way in hell he wanted them to just be friends.

*Holy shit.*
Axel broke the atmosphere when he walked in and rummaged around in the drawer behind the desk before finally noticing Daryl’s presence and snapping Selene out of her entranced staring.

“Axel, this is Daryl. Daryl, this is Axel, he’s like ten years old but he’s an exceptional artist. He’s one of my award winners, along with Ray.” She explained.

Axel straightened and held out a muscular arm to shake Daryl’s hand. He accepted and greeted him with a nod.

“She’s too kind. Nice to meet you, Daryl. I’m not ten, I’m twenty-two” Axel said cheerily.

“You too, man.” He replied.

“So how do you guys know each other?” Axel asked Selene.

“We know each other from High School. Daryl is taking me out today.” Selene announced as if it were nothing. Daryl almost flinched at the statement, not expecting her to be so blunt and open.

“Wait, so, this is the dude you went out with that other time?” Axel enquired quietly, looking down at a nodding Selene. “I’ll keep that one to myself. Don’t want Bear finding out.”

“Thank you very much.” She said, patting his bare, toned and perfectly decorated arm and deciding to discard her lollipop. She dropped it into the metal trash can under her desk with a ting.

“Why’d you never wanna go on a date with me, Selene?” Axel grinned.

“Because you’re a baby.” Selene joked, pinching his cheek. “You’re seven years younger than me and I’m a little old for chuck-e-cheese.”

Daryl disguised a laugh at her witty remark, clearing his throat and looking away briefly.

“And it’s not a date.” She added, shooting Daryl a stern look.

“You’re a hard woman. I couldn’t handle you anyways. Good luck, Daryl. Have a good day, guys.” Axel winked at him before disappearing back into the main studio.

Daryl had borrowed Merle’s bike which wasn’t out of the ordinary considering Merle was often too drunk to even remember he owned a bike. Daryl maintained the vehicle and Merle let him borrow it when he wanted, that was the deal and it was a deal that Daryl was OK with, even though the bike pretty much felt like his anyway. Selene beamed when she saw it parked in the parking lot and squealed like an overexcited child.

“We’re going on the bike?” She questioned.

“Said ya wanted to.” He pointed out.

“I did. I do.” She confirmed.

He motioned for her to follow him and hop on the back which she did without hesitation. Daryl started the engine and revved the accelerator, stiffening slightly when she slipped her hands around his waist over his leather vest. She cocked her head to the side while she studied the angel wings sewn onto the back of his leather vest.

“Are you an angel?” She called out over the sound of the engine. He looked over his shoulder at
“Far from it.” Was his simple reply.

“Good” she grinned as she shifted forwards and gripped onto him tighter. She was closer than she needed to be but neither of them was about to point it out.

The route Daryl took was winding, quiet and picturesque. Selene trailed her hand out above her as they climbed higher into the mountains, the wind blowing her long, black hair behind her like the sail of a ship. When he turned into a wooded area, she scanned her surroundings with excitement and wonder. Parking the bike at the start of a makeshift pathway, he killed the engine and Selene dismounted the vehicle, wandering about with her hands pushed into her pockets. Daryl was rooting through one of the bags on the side of the bike when he called out to her.

“Hey, ya want a burrito?”

She peered back at him with a baffled look. She considered how odd a time it was for him to offer her a Mexican snack, but she went with it anyway.

“Um…sure” She shrugged.

“I got a box of Nacho’s in here somewhere too. Beer?” He continued.

“Daryl, do you have a small, Mexican man in that bag making us a picnic?” She giggled

“No. I was passin’ the burrito place n’ was hungry.” He replied stoically.

She approached him at the bike and he held out a foil wrapped burrito followed by a bottle of beer.

“Thanks, Juan.” She winked as she turned on her heels and resumed her wandering. He followed on, soon over taking her and nudging his head up to the left, gesturing for her to follow him.

“This way.”

After a couple of minutes of walking quietly, Selene found herself stood on a large rock that protruded out of the side of a drop that looked over a lake. A picturesque view that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a vacation brochure. Although the air was cold, the sun was out and as a result, the ripples in the lake resembled thousands of tiny, twinkling diamonds on a velvety blue canvas, lined by thick forest on either side. She couldn’t quite believe that she’d lived right beside this for her whole life and never realised it was there.

“Take a seat.” She heard Daryl say from behind her as he dropped a blanket onto the flattest part of the rock and tugged the creases out of it with his boot.

With her burrito clutched in one hand and her beer in the other, Selene couldn’t quite believe what was happening. For someone that had never dated, she hadn’t really known what to expect past more drinks at the bar, so this had exceeded her expectations so far. It may not have been an official date, but it was a beautiful setting and she also had food and alcohol. All of the priorities on her imaginary list had been ticked, along with a companion that was nice to look at. She was impressed that he had brought her here and wondered what he would be capable of had he taken her out with romantic intentions. She unwrapped her burrito and cracked open her beer while Daryl was in the middle of devouring his. While she ate, she didn’t say a word and neither did Daryl. Both of them happy to sit in a comfortable quiet. Lighting a cigarette, she then offered one to Daryl,
who accepted and they both sipped from their beer bottles.

“It’s beautiful here.” She uttered. “You come up here a lot?”

“Sometimes. Mostly when Merle’s bein’ a prick.” He responded.

“That’s a lot then.” She smiled over her shoulder at him.

“Yeah, spose it is.”

“Why were you never at school? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“No point.” He muttered “had a pretty screwed up childhood.”

“I saw you one night” She paused, noticing him look over at her. “It was after a football game. Bear was on the team so Ray and I went to cheer him on. After the game, I went home to get my camera, I was into photography at the time and wanted to get some shots of the field in the dark but with the floodlights still on. Anyway, I’m wandering across the grass and I look up and there you are. All alone, sat in the middle of the bleachers. You had your head down, I could see you had a cigarette in your hand because of the red glow. You looked…troubled. Sad. It was the perfect shot I never took.”

“Why? I wouldn’t have known no different.” He shrugged.

“Because you needed that moment. It was your moment. Not mine.” She told him. He was staring at her and she could feel the intensity of it despite only being able to see him from the corner of her eye. “Do you remember that night?”

She saw him nod and rub a hand over his face. “Yeah. Was a shitty night.” He said firmly.

She decided not to ask anymore. This was a subject she could revisit once they knew each other a little better. Already feeling like she’d intruded, she fell silent.

“Remember ya bein’ late for Biology class.” He suddenly said. Selene felt a familiar feeling of embarrassment rising in her chest at the memory.

“Oh god.” She chuckled.

“Ran in like a bat out of hell. Took out a whole bunch of textbooks with ya bag.”

“Stop. Just, stop.” She laughed.

“Almost got paired with ya that day.” He recalled

“Yeah, I remember that. I was disappointed to get switched up for Sarah at the last minute.”

“Disappointed. Yeah, right.” He scoffed.

“I’m serious! If you knew who I was, why didn’t you talk to me?”

Daryl shook his head, as if reacting to a thought in his mind instead of Selene’s question. He looked out over the view and took a deep breath.

“’Cause I didn’t think ya knew I existed.”

“I did.”
“C’mon, nobody did.”

“No.” She said sternly “I did. You could have talked to me.”

“Yeah, n’risk ya ol’ man tannin’ my hide.”

Selene growled in frustration.

“I fucking hate him.” She complained “he’s done nothing but make my life hard with his mob boss lifestyle. He’s the reason I don’t date.”

“Really? Thought us guys were more trouble than we’re worth?” he reminded her, repeating her own sentence from their first night at Marty’s bar and proving that he had listened to everything she said.

“Yeah about that…I lied. I just don’t think It’s fair to put a guy through that. All his fucking tests and questioning. It’s just not worth it. He’s probably having me followed right now. So, it’s for the best that this isn’t a date. No matter how much I want to be. We should be friends.”

“Friends is good.” He replied.

She wants it to be a date. But wants to stay friends. I am so confused.

“Yeah. Friends is good.” He conceded, despite his bafflement at the situation.

When she shivered, Daryl noticed goosepimples appear on her arms. The sky was beginning to cloud over and the air was cooling. He shrugged off his leather vest and draped it over her shoulders. She startled when the heavy weight fell across her back and smiled to herself once it had occurred to her what he was doing.

“Thank you.” She whispered.

When Daryl pulled the bike back into the parking lot of the Tattoo Parlour, evening had fallen and the sky had developed a collection of orange and pink lines. The Temperature was warmer than up in the mountains but Daryl had let her keep his leather vest anyway, thinking that it looked much better on her than it ever would on him.

She dismounted the bike and slid the vest down her shoulders as Daryl killed the engine. Selene was sure she had experienced one of the best days of her life and all it consisted of was sitting up on a mountain with a burrito and a mysterious man. She didn’t feel the need to act a certain way or be anything other than herself with him and she couldn’t deny that there was something about him that was likely mean she would seek him out again.

“Thanks for the vest.” She said as she handed it to him. He opened it up and pulled it on over his sleeveless shirt.

“No problem. Can’t have ya freezin’ to death.” He mentioned.

“No” She smiled.

Daryl sat back in the bikes seat and circled the fuel cap on the tank in front of him with his finger.

“I had a really nice day.” She told him.
He nodded down at the fuel tank before cocking his head up to look at her. The tension in the air was evident to both of them, although they were making a marked effort to ignore it.

“Me too” He replied.

“Thank you for taking me out.” She said sincerely.

“Pleasures all mine.” He rasped.

“OK. Well, I better go. I’ll see you around” She told him as she backed up, tripping slightly on a large pebble and giggling awkwardly.

“Yeah, see ya.” He called out, before starting the engine again and turning the bike around. Dust and dirt kicked up into the air creating a misty brown cloud and Selene watched as he sped out of the lot and onto the road.

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Bear stood at the back door, stony faced and blocking the entrance to the building with his big, imposing frame. He refused to budge an inch when Selene opened the door and attempted to move past him. She sighed dramatically and placed her hands on her hips while Bear just glared down at her like she was some unruly teenager that had stayed out past curfew.

Selene had always had Bears back through high school. She yelled at people when he was relentlessly taken advantage of by his team mates for not being the brightest of the bunch, she sat with him when he had to pull all nighters to get his grade point average up, she slapped a girl in the face when she’d cheated on him and now, they were adults, the tables had turned and that didn’t always sit well with her.

Bear was an overprotective and overbearing big brother who hated the thought of his sister being in a relationship with anyone. Much like her father, he was an extremely off-putting fixture in her life that most potential suiters were put off by. From a young age, Brad and Selene had to deal with their father’s criminal tendencies as he built his empire which fast became more important than either of them. When their mother was diagnosed with terminal Cancer, Selene spent most of her time taking care of her while Brad made sure he was at every single doctors and hospital appointment without fail. Their father became even more absent, burying himself in his work and it wasn’t long before Selene noticed he had packed some bags and partially moved into the living quarters at the top of the Velvet Rabbit. She had been hurt and let down by him on so many occasions that Brad had become sick of seeing her cry all the time and so set out to make sure that no one would ever hurt his sister again.

“Where the hell have you been with him?” He demanded.

Selene raised an eyebrow at him and tried to shove past him again, only for him to block her path once more.

“He took me out for the day. Platonically. Before you lose your shit.” She informed him.

“I don’t like you going out with him.” He said directly, his floppy, dusty blonde hair hanging in front of his face. Selene had wondered more than once how they could both be biologically related yet look so different. She was small in stature, slim with dark features and naturally jet-black hair. Bear was enormous, heavy set and broad with blonde hair. Their mother had joked once or twice about how he was the mail man’s kid, but had eventually explained that there was Italian in their
blood and that Selene seemed to have inherited those genes along with the partial Heterochromia in one of her eyes, her grandmother had been the same.

“And I don’t like you breathing down my neck about it. We are friends. We went out as friends.” She snapped.

“You ain’t seeing him again” He ordered.

Anger bubbled in her chest at his blatant disregard for her happiness.

“Stop it, Brad! I know you’re not the brightest bulb in the box but what part of ‘we are friends’ don’t you understand?! Do you know who you sound like?” She shouted.

“Don’t say that” He pleaded. “I’m not him.”

“You sound like him.” She argued.

“No I don’t”

“You do, you sound like dad” She spat.

“You’re my little sister” He reasoned.

She balled her hands up into fits at her sides briefly before stepping closer to him and proving that his size and intense stare were not a match to her and her strong will.

“I’m not a kid anymore. I’m a fucking grown up. Do you really want me to have no male friends? Because my entire workforce would have to go! Or even, god forbid in the future I get a boyfriend and want to be happy! Do you want me to be alone, Brad?” She asked.

“No. I want you safe.” He stated.

“I am safe! I was safe today with Daryl!” She cried, her hands flying in the air in front of him. “I had the best day that I have had in a long time. I should be able to tell you about it, share it with you. But instead, we’re here, arguing about it. I’m done with this conversation, leave me alone and get the hell out of my way.”

She saw him exhale, a small huff of surprise that he had once again been put in his place by his younger sister. He reluctantly stepped aside and let her pass, rubbing his hand over his face as she charged into the tattoo parlour.

“Clear your fucking workstation, it looks like a bomb hit it!” She called back to him.

Three days had passed and Selene had not managed to grab more than a couple of hours sleep due to the weather getting even colder and her having to use her heating more often. The buildings pipes clanked and banged all night along and she had tried everything aside from spending the money on someone to come in and fix the problem.

Passing her night stand, she picked up her silicone earplugs and popped them back into the plastic box they lived in.
“Fucking useless.” She murmured to herself before heading to the door and down the stairs to work.

In the Studio, Ray was busy munching through a bowl of fruit loops when she wearily reached the bottom of the steps and slumped into her office chair at the front desk.

“Pipes again, huh?” He asked.

“Like world war three last night. Sometimes I think I’d rather freeze to death.” She complained.

Ray had attempted to grill Selene about her day with Daryl twice in the days since but she had remained adamant that it was purely platonic and that it was simply a nice day out between friends. Ray had griped that she never had any decent gossip and that he would have at least tried to cop a feel in the woods. Selene had shot back that she had more class than that.

Ray perched on the edge of the desk and flipped the skull plant pot over with one hand, sending lots of scraps of folded paper scattering across the surface.

“I forgot about this” Selene mused with a twinge of guilt for letting her staff Christmas party slip her mind.

“Don’t worry your pretty head. I got this, girl.” Ray replied, gently tapping her hand. During the next couple of minutes Selene watched as Ray picked up each piece of paper and read out the suggestion before throwing them back into the plant pot and finishing up his fruit loops.

“So, I think it’s safe to say we are the most unimaginative bunch of assholes I’ve ever known.” He sighed. “Not one suggestion for Reflex after I spent so much time making these guys gay friendly.”

“That place is savage, even I won’t go there with you. Think I’d have nightmares for weeks if anyone ever switched on a black light in there” She mentioned. “Looks like it’s Marty’s then.”

“If that’s what they want I guess we have to provide, Sunshine.” He hummed, reaching out and running a hand through her hair.

“We could reserve the back corner, decorate it, play some games.” She suggested.

“I can organise that. Leave it with me.” He offered.

“You’re an Angel.” She smiled up at him.

“Oh, I know honey. No need to state the obvious.” He grinned.

She got to her feet, her eyes stinging from the lack of sleep and slid open the desk drawer. She plucked out a couple of notes and stuffed them into the pocket of her black leather pants.

“I need caffeine. You want something from across the road?” She asked him.

“No thanks, baby girl.” He chirped, hopping off the desk and wandering into the back, swaying his skinny jean clad hips as he went.

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Daryl wasn’t about to admit to another living soul that he had very deliberately changed his route to work in the morning and now preferred to park his truck or bike in a parking lot at the other side of town rather than just drive straight into his workplace and park there. He knew he’d see her most mornings and it was never really his intention that she would notice him. He knew that if she ever found out, his behaviour would look bordering on stalkerish but he paid it no mind. No one was ever going to know and it meant he could catch a glimpse of her before he started his day. It was a new habit he was willing to perform. By now, he had realised that he most definitely did not see her as she saw him. She was not a friend to him. She was an unattainable beauty, a spirited, individual and fearless personality in a sea of clones and she was bright like the sun and at the same time dark as the night and she fascinated and scared him. She was not a friend to him. She was the girl he had been waiting for. The girl he would never have.

As he passed the coffee shop, he knew she was inside having just seen her sprint across the road. He wandered past slowly and contemplated stopping and going inside before resigning himself to the fact that he really did have to get to work. He continued to amble along the sidewalk, head low and hating himself for becoming so caught up with another person. It was against everything he had ever told himself. Connections to people always fail or they leave. Nothing comes of them except loss and hurt and people are better off looking out for themselves. Then she said his name.

“Daryl”

And everything he thought he believed was suddenly weakened by the sound of a single voice. He turned to see her stood there in front of him clutching a large takeout coffee cup. Her ripped and frayed, black sweater pulled up over her fingers and her hair laying flat over her shoulders.

“Hey, how are you?” She said breezily.

“Hey. I’m alright. You?”

“Tired” She answered, rolling her eyes.

“S’a big coffee.” He pointed out, motioning to the beverage in her hand.

“Yeah. White chocolate Mocha. Sugar and caffeine fixes. I need it this morning.” She shrugged, holding it up and glancing at the scrawled writing on the side of the cup.

“Bad night?” He asked

“Yeah The pipes in my place bang away all night like a bunch of poltergeists having an orgy and it’s too damn cold not to have the heating on” She grumbled.

“Should get somebody to fix that.” He suggested.

Should I offer?

“I can’t afford it and sadly none of my guys at the tattoo parlour are any good with tools that aren’t needles.” She said.

“Ya want me to take a look?” He suggested.

You were never not going to offer, dumbass.
“You’re a heating engineer now?” She giggled, narrowing her eyes at him in confusion.

“Naw. But I can fix most things.” He told her.

He considered that this was slightly ironic considering the number of repairs that he’d been putting off at his own place. But there wasn’t a wildly attractive woman needing help with repairs at home.

“You’re good with your hands” She mentioned, well aware that her statement had been treading the line between innocent and highly flirtatious. She figured he could take it as he pleased.

“Yeah, spose so.” He smiled shyly.

“Um… that’s too much to ask of you. You don’t have to do that.” She dismissed.

“I don’t mind, really.”

She studied his expression, trying to read his eyes and determine if he really didn’t mind or was offering simply because he felt it was the right thing to do. Something she knew he liked to honour after wanting to walk her home after their first night at the bar.

“Alright. I have a box of tools I was given by Ray when I moved in. He thought he was being funny. Turns out, he was. Neither of us knows how to use anything that isn’t a tattoo gun or an eyelash curler. I’ve never used an eyelash curler in my life.” She explained to a now amused looking Daryl. “At least let me buy you a coffee. What do you like?”

He shrugged noncommittally. Coffee was coffee to him in any way, shape or form as long as it kept him awake.

“Surprise me” He told her.

“Really? Because I’m going to come out with an oversized, overpriced, Choca, Mocha cup-o-bullshit topped with cotton candy and a little umbrella.” She warned with a wide smile.

“And I’ll drink it” He nodded.

“Someone likes to live life on the edge” she winked at him “it’s your funeral, buddy. Death by sugar!”

She disappeared back into the coffee shop and left Daryl waiting there, wondering what excuse he was going to use for being late to work.

When she returned, she handed him a coffee that was recommended by the barista. Telling him it was some fancy blend from Africa that she couldn’t pronounce. He half smiled at her and made an impressed face while he sipped it and walked beside her to the tattoo parlour across the street.

Inside, the sound of Shorty and Ray arguing was the first thing Daryl heard.

“Have I really gotta set Selene on your ass? Clean up ya fuckin workstation! Sweeping it all to one side on the floor does not count as cleanin’ up! I counted three candy wrappers on ya desk!” Ray raged from the kitchen area across the entire studio to an exasperated looking Shorty who had obviously just arrived, jacket and bag still on.

“I’ll do it in a minute. Jesus” He muttered.
“Jesus aint got nothin’ to do with this, ya fuckin’ trash goblin!” Ray shouted back.

Feeling a rising sense of embarrassment at the high tempers in her workplace, Selene decided to step in and divert everyone’s attention.

“How, where is everyone?” She asked Shorty.

“Crash on the freeway, traffics backed up. It’s just me, you and Cinderella out there.” He confirmed.

“Good job we’re not busy until 10am” she mumbled. “Oh, Shorty, this is my friend Daryl. Daryl, this is Shorty. His real name is Daniel, but even his mother calls him Shorty”

*My friend, Daryl.*

Shorty stepped forward and dropped his bag onto his tattoo bed in passing.

“How dude, good to meet you.” He said.

“Hey, you too.” Daryl replied as he shook his hand firmly.

“Daryl’s going to take a look at the poltergeist pipes for me. I’m just going to show him closet of doom.” Selene announced, dragging a huge bunch of keys from the desk drawer. They clinked and glittered in the spotlights and Daryl tried to fathom how in god’s name she knew what key did what.

“Closet of doom?” He asked.

“Oh yeah, good luck with that shit. Nobody’s been in there since before Selene moved in. It’s a mess. But the boiler is in there.” Shorty tells him.

“And the tools” Selene added “c’mon.” She waved a hand at Daryl, wanting him to follow her.

“Oh! Wait wait wait! Before I forget!” Shorty cried out, rummaging in his bag and pulling out a black envelope. He held it out to Selene.

“What’s this?” She asked

“Wedding invitation. Sorry it’s so late notice, we only got them back from the printers yesterday.” He beamed with raised eyebrows.

“That’s cool, I saved the date anyway. So, you guys got your venue, huh?” She beamed.

“Yeah, it’s pretty awesome too. Think you’ll approve.” He mused in excited anticipation.

“Oh, I’m so excited!” She shrieked as she pulled the invite out. It boasted a raised, velvety border and a dark red background with black, calligraphy. “No. Fucking. Way. The Renaissance?! Are you a secret Millionaire, Shorty?”

“Nah, Maria’s parents paid for it. Their money is about all they’re good for.” He laughed. He had met Maria for the first time four years back when she’d booked him for a tattoo. A small, pagan symbol on the back of her neck. Everyone at The Ink Cabinet knew that Shorty had fallen in love as soon as he saw her that day and whispers had swept through the staff like wildfire. Within months, they had moved in together and although Maria’s parents were not all that fond of Shorty and his career choice, they had allowed him their blessing to marry their daughter, a Mortuary Technician who apparently fell for the short, round, tattooist with the messy workstation.
“Lucky you! And we have to wear black?” Selene asked.

“Yeah, you know she’s into all that death shit. Wants it to look more like a funeral” He shrugged.

“Fine by me, sounds right up my street. I get a plus one? Can I take Ray?”

“If I haven’t buried the guy under the parking lot by then, sure.” He chuckled.

An hour later and after some suspect noises from the pipes, Daryl thumped down the stairs, coffee still in hand to find Selene sat beside Ritchie on the chesterfield couch, immersed in a fit of giggles. Ritchie watched her in awe as she laughed and his eyes shot down to his knee when she gently slapped it in jest. Daryl stopped in his tracks, surprised not only by the sight but also at Selene’s company. Ritchie.

You.

Selene noticed him standing there and immediately got to her feet. Daryl quickly noted that Ritchie averted his gaze and peered out of the window at nothing particular.

“Just had some air in the system. Should be fine now. Just turn the heatin’ on tonight. All the radiators too. It should work its way out.” He instructed as she approached him in anticipation.

“Oh my god. Thank you. It’s been like this for a year!” She giggled.

“No problem. Anythin’ else, just ask.” He told her.

“You’re a handy guy to have around.” She smiled, glancing over her shoulder and spotting Ritchie focusing on something outside the window. Daryl went to move past her and she walked beside him, stopping by the couch.

“This is Ritchie. He’s our piercer. But I think you guys already know each other.” She suggested.

“Yeah, from the Rabbit.” Ritchie suddenly said, his whole body whirling around and his hand gripping the leather arm of the couch. He peered up at Daryl with pleading eyes.

Liar.

“Yeah, we do.” Daryl agreed, observing Ritchie’s more than obvious relief. “S’up.”

“Hey.” Ritchie grunted.

Selene wasn’t stupid. She could see the awkwardness between the two men and put it down to them probably not being on the best of terms after some kind of altercation in her father’s club. As was the way of most of the clientele. Although she didn’t know Daryl all that well, his brutal beating of the man that attacked her in the alley told her he was no stranger to physical violence.

“Allright, I gotta get to work.” Daryl said to Selene who took him completely off guard by positioning a hand on his forearm and gently kissing his cheek. He was sure he actually flinched at the gesture but hoped with everything he had that he didn’t.

Shit. Did she just kiss me?!

His face tingled where her lips had touched him and he wished he could hold onto this small yet profound moment and make it last a lot longer. Ritchie gawped at them both for a moment before
he remembered the situation and forced himself to look away, a quiet rage burning inside of him.

“Thank you, Daryl.” She whispered before opening the door for him. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

He opened his mouth to respond but nothing came out. Cursing himself for losing his composure, he simply gave her one nod and ducked out of the door, racing along the street until he was well clear of the building.

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As midnight drew in, Daryl finished up rolling a joint in the living room and sparked up, inhaling deeply and letting the drug fog his mind with every drag. He tilted his head back, his eyes becoming heavy and bloodshot. The room filled with the strong odour of Marijuana but he didn’t care and he knew Merle wouldn’t either, both of them more than aware that worse had been consumed in the same room.

Eventually, he heaved himself out of the armchair and padded to his room, rubbing his hand in his hair and leaving it sticking up and dishevelled. His Motorhead T-shirt was peppered with hot rock burns from many a year of being worn while his interest in drugs was at its peak.

He slumped on his bed, hearing it creak under the strain and closed his eyes. The tranquillity was soon shattered when Merle slammed the front door. Daryl grumbled to himself impatiently.

“Daryl!” Merle called out from the middle of the living room.

“In here” Daryl replied.

Merle appeared in the doorway wearing his usual white vest and black shirt along with a scowl on his face.

“Saw ya this mornin’.” He said casually.

“So?”

“Goin into the Ink Cabinet. You feelin’ flush, boy? Gettin’ one of those pretty boys to draw on ya?” Merle asked.

If it wasn’t for the drug running through his veins and calming his mind, he would have panicked. Considering it to be probably the best time that Merle could have challenged him on it, he shrugged and sucked in another lungful from his joint. Holding it in his lungs, he made eye contact with his brother before exhaling the smoke in his direction.

“Maybe.” He said simply.

“Maybe? Here’s a maybe for ya; Bill’s kid, Selene. She owns that place. Maybe, you been sneakin’ around with her, huh? Tryin’ to get yaself a little dark and stormy between the sheets, boy?” Merle slurred, his speech now obviously tainted by alcohol.

Daryl had to think quickly before he dropped himself in it. Selene too, which was the last thing he wanted. The thought of Merle turning up at her Tattoo parlour filled him with dread and made him feel slightly nauseous.

“Ritchie works there. He owed me ten bucks from the last time I saw him.” He stated as convincingly as he could.
Merle frowned, the lines on his aging forehead turning to caverns.

“He pay up?” He wanted to know.

“Yeah” Daryl replied. “Somethin’ else ya want or ya just gonna stand there barking like a damn dog at me all night?”

The older brother stalked into the room and stood over the bed, looming over Daryl in a scene that reminded him of when they were younger. Daryl hadn’t been any younger than ten when Merle first punched him in the face for stealing his cigarettes. As they’d grown, the fighting had lessened due to Merle knowing that Daryl could more than hold his own now he was in his late twenties and full of nothing but pain, rage and resentment. Still, he pressed his buttons from time to time, liked to poke at the wolf, test its patience and sometimes, he’d get bitten. But on this occasion, Merle thought he had the upper hand.

“I catch ya fuckin’ around with that girl, I’mma knock them teeth so far down ya throat you’ll spit em out in single file.” He threatened.

Daryl scoffed loudly and threw up a hand at him.

“I aint fuckin’ around with nobody. Get the hell outta here” He demanded.

“Don’t piss down my back n’ tell me it’s rainin’, kid! I aint no idiot!” Merle yelled.

“Yes ya fuckin are!” Daryl fumed back “Who’s the one on their last strike, huh?! ‘Cause that aint me, Merle! And I aint no kid, you gonna find that out if don’t climb down outta my ass about it! Get the fuck out!”

A tilt of the head and a snarl was Merle’s only response to an argument he knew he had no grounds to enforce. Daryl was right and he couldn’t stand it.
Whiskey Hangover

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the encouragement! You're angels!
Apologies for any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, even if it edited something
fifteen times something always manages to slip through the net!

Selene swigged the whiskey in the bottle as she lay back on the tattoo bed. She hadn’t even agreed
to it, but had somehow ended up on the hard liquor with Axel and Bear after closing. Bear had won
the bottle at a quiz night at Marty’s and it had sat on the shelf of his workstation for months until
he finally decided to crack it open and share it. Now, with a tiny dribble of liquor in the bottom of
the bottle, they were all well and truly on their way to being quite inebriated.

“So, you and Daryl, huh?” Axel blurted out without thinking about the company he was keeping.

“What?!” Bear snapped.

“Oh, for god sssakes, Axel. There is nothing going on between Daryl and I, we are friendsss.” She
rambled, waving her hand in the air “Really nice looking…friendssss.”

“I don’t like him” Bear grumbled.

“Yeah, buddy. We know.” Axel said in a most patronising manner as he patted his big shoulder.

“I bought him a Mada-Ma…Uh, Madagasssscan coffee for his troubles with the pipes. He fixed
my pipes. Wow, that sounds wrong.” Selene announced for no apparent reason.


Axel and Selene locked eye for a moment before falling about in fits of laughter. Selene clutched
her stomach while Axel wiped tears from his face. Bear looked on in bafflement.


“I don’t fucking care” Bear shot back.

“Geography isn’t your strong point, iss it, Big brother?” Selene giggled. “Do you know where
Ssssicily isss?”

“Yeah, course I do!” He proclaimed. “It’s in Asia!”

“Hah! this is great!” Axel howled “Asia! How the fuck did you win that bottle in a quiz, man?!?”

“I googled everything on my cell.” He shrugged.

Selene’s hand clamped over her mouth and her eyes widened in exaggerated shock.

“You cheated!” She gasped.

“He needs to” Axel added before they both broke down into a chorus of giggles again.
“Shut up. No need to be Jerks.” Bear mumbled to himself.

“Then you should stop being a- a jerk about my new arms. I mean, my new friend.” She slurred, wagging her finger at her brother.

Axel was now halfway out of his seat, his face screwed up and his laugh now nothing more than a wheeze. “She said ‘arms.’” He managed.

“I’m-I’m going for a ssssmoke. On the outside. Out there. Bye.” She told them as she stumbled from the tattoo bed and through to the front door.

Daryl heard the door to the tattoo parlour crash open loudly and rattle in its hinges from across the street. He was on his way to Marty’s bar after work, rewarding himself with a beer for having to deal with particularly difficult customer when Selene fell into view, her hair hanging in front of her face and her eyes partially closed. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and waved her lighter around in front of her face, missing the end of the cigarette that was poised between her lips each time. Daryl stopped and leaned against a street light with an amused smirk on his face which escaped as a full-on chuckle when she stamped her heavy, bucked boot in frustration.

“These stupid cigarettes!” He heard her complain.

Deciding to give her a hand, he quickly slinked across the street and slowed as he approached her, wary of taking her off guard.

“Here, let me” He said quietly.

She lifted her head and peered at him through her hair. He gently took the cigarette from between her lips and lit it with his own lighter. Her eyeliner was smudged under her eyes and she had the strong odour of whiskey.

“Who are- Oh! Oh! It’s Daryl! Hey Daryl!” She exclaimed, her voice getting louder the more she spoke “Everybody! It’s Daryl!” She shouted to the deserted street.

“Shhh, here. Smoke this.” He soothed, giving her the cigarette.

“Oh, well look at that! It wouldn’t light for me. It kept on-on moving.” She told him, wavering around on her unsteady feet. Daryl thought it might have been a good idea to remove her platform boots before she got so drunk, but who was he to judge after inflicting many an accidental injury upon himself while in worse states.

“It’s Wednesday night. Why you so drunk?” He wanted to know.

She attempted a flirtatious grin but it just made her look slightly unhinged as she staggered towards him. He reached out and grabbed her forearm, steadying her.

“Because…it’s Wednesday. Shhh.” She replied, giggling to herself.

Axel and Bear were both peering around the doorframe after hearing Selene babbling away to someone at the front of the studio. Axel had managed to convince Bear to stay put and just observe them before he got impulsive and angry and as a result, they were witnessing Daryl alone with a very drunk Selene.
“This right here” Axel told Bear “is how you can really tell what the guys intentions are. We can just about hear them from here. Shut up, and watch what he does.”

Bear had trusted Axel from the moment they met, the two of them forming an immediate bond over their favourite sports teams and music. They also had similar taste in famous women, as Selene had found out one day when she spotted an Angelina Jolie calendar pinned on the wall between both of their workstations. While they didn’t always get along, there was a mutual respect that they had for one another that was always present, even when they were cussing at one another.

Daryl watched her carefully as she took drags on her smoke, even moving her hair from her face to stop her burning it at one point. He still held onto her arm and wondered if she even noticed. Her eyes slowly dragged around the empty street and she shook her head as if to try and sober herself up. She suddenly looked up at him.

“You are so nice. So nice and brave and a gentleman and and and I think, I think you’re hot.” She blathered “Ray, he thinks you’re hot too. Ray is hot. He'sss like a model. We have lots of hot guysss here. Axel, he’s hot, but he’sss too pretty. And Ritchie is ssssuper cute. Shorty, he’s kind of cute too. blue eyes. Blue eyes. They're all hot but you…you’re ssssuper-hot. Mmmmister Mystery. Mysterious.”

“OK. Think it’s time ya slept this off.” He told her.

“No! Noooo! You’ll leave then! Don’t leave! You lit my cigarette for me! Light me another!” She pleaded.

“Sorry, no can do. That’s enough for you.”

“Too pretty? Am I pretty?” Axel asked Bear, who looked over his shoulder blankly.

“Dude, I don’t fucking know!” He cried.

“I always thought I was kinda macho looking, but I guess I’ll take pretty.” He continued. "What makes a guy pretty though?"

“Axel?” Bear said.

“Yeah, man?”

“Shut up and watch. This was your idea!” Bear snapped.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Outside, Daryl was still trying to argue with Selene which was against his better judgement. Arguing with drunk people was like arguing with stupid people, no matter what you say to them, they are still convinced they’re right. She had now finished up her smoke and tossed the end into the street and was attempting to lean on the door, which only kept swinging back under her weight and threatening to send her plummeting backwards into the studio. Noticing her inability to stand up by herself after being out in the fresh air and finally feeling the full force of the whiskey, Daryl knew he would have to intervene further.
“OK, I’m gonna pick ya up. Don’t freak out. I aint gonna hurt ya.” He told her.

“I know you’re nooooot” She groaned.

He leaned down, hooking her arm over his shoulder and snaking one arm around her back and the other around the back of her legs and lifted her effortlessly from the floor.

“Oh shit” Axel hissed. “Fall back! Abort! He’s bringing her in!”

“Uuuum…Where do we go?!” Bear fretted.

“The back door, hurry!”

They both scurried off as fast as they could without sounding like a hurricane was sweeping through the parlour and ducked into the kitchen, running to the back of the building and closing the door between the kitchen and the parking lot exit. Cooped up into a tiny, square space, Bear could see the beads of sweat on Axel’s forehead he was so close to him. He also noticed that there was no key in the lock to the back door.

“We’re trapped in here. This was your bright idea. We’re going to look like we’ve taken a leaf outta Ray’s big, gay book if he catches us in here. Better start thinking of an explanation.” Bear fumed.

“Yeah, you’re right. Uh, what about…we’re having a private conversation?”

The suggestion earned him nothing but a stare of complete disbelief.

“And I thought I was the dumbass out of the two of us”

Daryl carried Selene into the studio and glanced around for somewhere to set her down. In the few seconds it had taken him to cross the threshold from outside, she had snuggled against his chest and closed her eyes which made him feel both uncomfortable and very much like her bodyguard. He considered the stairs, knowing that she lived up there somewhere, but didn’t want to chance intruding into her personal living space if he wasn’t wanted there. Then, he saw the tattoo beds. The farthest away had an empty bottle of Jack Daniels on a trolley beside it.

*That will have to do.*

He stomped to the back and gently lowered her onto the bed.

In the tiny box at the back of the building, Axel and Bear were beginning to get on each other’s last nerve.

“Shhh! Why do you have to breathe so fuckin’ loud? I can’t hear a thing!” Bear raged.

“I’m not the reason you can’t hear, fat head. It’s all those times you’ve been knocked out playing football.” Axel argued.

“Shut up, shut up” Bear hushed “He’s setting her down n’ talking to her.”
“The guy’s done alright so far if you ask me.” Axel considered.

“There’s still time. If he tries to cop a feel I’m gonna beat his ass.” Bear warned.

Daryl perched on the edge of the bed next to her and looked down at her clutching his hand in hers.

“Selene?” He cooed.

“Mmm?” She mumbled back.

“Need ya keys, for the door. Gotta lock up. I’ll post ‘em back through the mail box.” He reasoned as he tried to slip his fingers from hers. She clung on, now with both hands, drawing him closer to her and feeling over his forearm and up to his bicep.

“These are…nice arms.” She whispered, her eyes firmly pressed shut in a drunken, confused and sleepy state.

“Uh…thanks. I gotta go. Where are ya keys? C’mon, work with me here, girl.” He pleaded, managing to free his arm and seeing her eyes flicker open briefly.

“Desk.” She uttered from her hoarse throat.

“Desk…OK…” He said to himself, whirling around and spotting her huge bunch of keys discarded carelessly on the keyboard. He strode over and scooped them up before turning and heading to the door. Then, he paused.

Bear held his breath and Axel’s mouth dropped open.

“What’s he doing?” He asked.

“I don’t know. Just wait.” Bear instructed.

Daryl sighed deeply and wandered back over to her, brushing her hair from her face and lightly running the back of his finger across her cheek. She stirred and murmured, a brief smile flashing across her face before she appeared to fall back to sleep.

“Should be safe here. Just stay layin’ on ya side like this, alright?” He told her.

“Mmhmm” She hummed.

He wasn’t sure if she understood him. But he had tried. He rubbed his face with the hand that wasn’t holding onto the heavy bunch of keys and scratched the back of his neck as he looked down at her.

“Alright. I’m goin.” He said as an attempt to urge his feet to move. When they finally did, he was out of the studio in seconds and as soon as Bear and Axel heard the keys drop into the mail box, they tumbled out of the hallway and stood as far apart as they could possibly get.

“Bear.” Axel said seriously. “He’s got it bad for her.”
“Hmm” Bear mused, glaring at his passed-out sister on Axels tattoo bed. ”He touched her.”

“C’mon, man! He only touched her to help her out and bring her in here. OK, he moved her hair n’ shit but you saw it, those were not the actions of a guy just lookin’ to get laid. Chicks love that next level romantic shit he just did” Axel confirmed.

“I don’t like Dixon’s.” Bear stated.

“Alright, everyone think’s Merle Dixon is a grade A prick. But Daryl might have just convinced me he cares about Selene tonight.”

“I’ll see.” Bear dismissed.

“No wonder she gets so mad at you. C’mon, get her upstairs to her own bed.” He said, motioning to Selene.

In the morning, Bear and Axel had confessed everything to a very unimpressed Ray, who scolded them for their childish behaviour and told them that if Selene were to find out what they did, she’d be extremely angry and hurt at their sneaky act to gather more information about Daryl. The three of them had met at the coffee shop and Ray drummed his fingers on his coffee mug as he scowled at Bear and Axel from across the table. They were surrounded by people in suits and families in their way to daycare and school runs, but Ray was never one to worry about cussing in front of anyone. They were just words to him.

“Y’know, as beautiful as Daryl is, he’s an out n’ out brawler. And so are you.” He directed at Bear.

“What did you think would happen if he caught y’all spying on him like that? I’ll tell ya what would happen, a fight. In the middle of Selene’s business! I mean, what the fuck, guys?”

“We were drunk. It was an impulsive decision. But what we saw was-“ Axel tried

“I don’t give a damn what you saw. You invaded Selene’s privacy and Daryl’s. She can never know about this. Y’all are gonna have to tell a lie and say she was too drunk to remember that you both left.”

“Alright.” Axel agreed, stirring his coffee solemnly and trying to ignore the thudding of his chair being kicked by a small child behind him.

“You’re her brother, Bear. You’re a little dumb so I expect this kind of shit from you, but this is too much. Ya need to back off and let her do her thing.” Ray told him.

“I’m protectin’ her” Bear protested.

“Ya pissin’ her off is what ya doin!” Ray corrected.

Silence fell around them except from the light banging from Axels metal chair leg. He rolled his eyes and twisted in his seat, giving the small, blonde boy his best death stare. The child recoiled slowly before turning and running back to his mother. Satisfied with the outcome and confident that his response wasn’t going to get him embroiled in an argument with a soccer mom, Axel resumed his conversation. “I like the guy.” He confessed. “Thought he did right by her last night.”
“What did he do?” Ray asked.

“You said you didn’t give a damn what we saw” he reminded him.

“I know what I fuckin said. Just tell me.” He demanded.

Axel proceeded to explain how Daryl had not only treated Selene with respect and dignity, he had also been thoughtful enough to think of her livelihood and lock up after himself too. Bear had added that he’d touched her, but before Ray could react, Axel jumped in with some context, explaining that Daryl had merely picked her up because she couldn’t stand by herself, moved her hair from her face and brushed her cheek.

“Brushed her cheek? As in romantic movie style bullshit?” Ray asked.

“Right outta The Notebook.” Axel confirmed.

“You’ve seen The Notebook?” Bear scoffed.

“Unlike you, I’ve had girlfriends.” He retorted.

Ray began fanning himself dramatically and propped his head up with his hand.

“Mr. Dixon. Where have you been hidin’? You absolute dreamboat.” He sighed.

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Hangovers were not an unusual thing to Selene. Having spent most of her life around bars and a strip club, she had got her hands on hard liquor at a tender age and the morning after the night before had only worsened with age. Usually, she’d had the good sense to drink enough water to see her through dehydration until she woke up and was able to take painkillers. But on this particular occasion, burning the candle at both ends had meant she had woken up with a mouth of sand and a head that felt too small for her brain.

She dragged herself from her bed and into the shower, sitting on the floor of the shower tray for what felt like forever, wishing her skin would soak up the water like a sponge and free her from the nightmare that was a whiskey hangover. Giving breakfast a miss, she threw on an oversized, black hoodie, black jeans and a baseball cap branded with the studio’s logo. She braided her hair and managed to summon up a few scraps of energy that enabled her to apply some foundation and eyeliner but it was about all she could manage.

When she emerged downstairs, everyone stared at her hesitantly but she only acknowledged Axel and Bear, flicking up her middle finger at them both as she passed and headed to her desk. They didn’t bother to argue, knowing she blamed them both for her current, fragile state.

At her desk, she checked the morning’s appointments and cursed under her breath when she discovered the lack of gum in the desk drawer when she needed it the most. She slumped back and crossed her arms, looking out onto the street and spotting Daryl on his way to the front door.

“Oh god. Oh no. No, no. I’m not here.” Selene mumbled as she sank further down into her chair, pulling her black Ink Cabinet baseball cap down and hiding her face.
“What?” Ray asked from his desk.

“Daryl is on his way over and I look like I should be in the morgue” She complained.

“Ya look stunnin’ like ya always do. Just don’t breathe on him.” Ray grinned.

The door swung open and Daryl walked in, giving her an awkward smile and holding a large takeout coffee in his hand.

“Hey. Thought you might need this.” He said.

She gingerly reached out and took the drink, hoping he couldn’t see the heavy circles under her eyes and smell the alcohol that seemed to be seeping from her pores.

“What’s this?” She asked.

“White chocolate Mocha. You need caffeine and sugar, right?” He checked.

Selene immediately brought the beverage to her lips, tasting the hot, sugary contents and sighing deeply, her eyes rolling back into her head briefly.

“Oh that tastes good, thank you. You sweetheart.” She praised.

Ray glanced over at them, pencil in hand in the middle of drawing up a design for a customer. He wore black rimmed glasses for such close up work that Selene always told him made him look like a Prada model. He loved the thought and was frequently caught checking himself out in the mirror opposite.

“How you feelin’?” Daryl wanted to know.

“Humiliated?” She shrugged “I remember you bringing me inside. Talking to me. But that’s about it.”

Daryl nodded and chewed on his bottom lip. She was looking up at him over the plastic lid of her coffee cup and he could see the daylight from the window reflecting on her two-tone eye as clear as he had ever seen it.

I could look at that all day. I could look at her all day.

“Yeah, couldn’t leave ya out there like that.” He eventually responded.

“Was good of you. Thank you.” She said.

“No problem. Anyway, I gotta go to work.” He backed up and motioned over his shoulder with his thumb.

“Wait…” She got up suddenly, placed her coffee on the surface and rounded the desk, noticing Ray leaning slightly towards them and figuring he could hear their entire exchange. She stopped close to Daryl, her back to Ray and shielding his view of her so he couldn’t lipread. “Did I, say anything embarrassing to you?”

Unbeknown to Selene, Ray caught every word and struggled to hide a smirk as he listened in.

“Embarrassin’ how?” Daryl asked, not wanting to give anything away.
“Y’know, like… if I hit on you or something.” She whispered.

“Oh. Uh, naw. You were just talkin’ shit mostly” He told her.

Ray grinned to himself at Daryl’s gallant effort to save her any more embarrassment.

“Good. Thank god. Thought I was going to owe you a very awkward apology. Instead I just owe you my awkward gratitude.” She explained, playing with the long sleeves of her hoodie as she spoke.

“It’s nothin. Just be careful. Getting’ so messed up on ya own with the door unlocked. S’a good thing I found ya and not someone like that jerk in the alleyway that night” He warned, careful not to come across as patronising.

“I wasn’t on my own.” She said, confused. “Axel and Bear were here”

“There was nobody here when I brought you inside.” He corrected.

“Axl? Bear?” She called out, the volume of her own voice snapping through her head like a lightning bolt. She winced at the sound, regretting it instantly.

Both tattooists wandered though to the waiting area and stood in the entrance next to Ray, who’s back stiffened as he prayed that they would both be convincing enough in their lie.

“When did you guys leave last night?” She demanded.

“After you finished the bottle.” Bear said, a little too quickly.

“Yeah, no point in staying since you drank most of it. We told you we were leaving. You don’t remember?” Axel questioned.

Her narrowed eyes shot between them, gauging them with suspicion.

“No. Apparently I don’t.” She grumbled.

Daryl nudged his head up to them “lock the doors when y’all leave next time.” He mentioned before looking at Selene again. “I gotta run, see ya later.”

“I’ll walk you out.” She said, catching him off guard. He was stood only a couple of feet away from the door and she had never done this before. She ushered him out and waved the others back to work behind his back. Stepping out into the cold, she drew her hands inside her hoodie and pulled it tight around her waist. She bit her lip and Daryl started to wonder if her sheepish demeanour was because of her antics the previous night or something else.

“OK. So, after last night you’ll probably say no and I won’t blame you. But I was wondering if you’d like to go to Shorty’s wedding with me. As my plus one.” She asked, dropping her eyes to the floor and running the toe of her boot along a crack on the ground. Daryl’s heart began to thud faster. This was more than just a drink at Marty’s and a burrito in the woods.

“Thought ya were takin’ Ray” He stated.

“Rays going anyway, he has his own invitation.” She informed him.

“Right” he grunted. “I ain’t been to a wedding before.”

Now she raised her vision to him, smiling broadly and although she looked tired, she was still
striking with her pale skin and soft, pink, silver ring adorned lips.

“Really? They’re pretty fun. You get to eat lots of food and get drunk and not pay for anything. Then you can watch old people try to dance and laugh at them all night.” She giggled.

Also seeing the amusing side, Daryl laughed quietly with her. “You sure ya want me to go with ya?”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t.” She confirmed.

“Uh, Ok. I’m in.” He nodded.

“Great. It’s an overnight thing at the Renaissance. So, pack a bag. Two weeks on Saturday. It’s all been a bit last minute”

“Alright. I’ll take my truck n pick ya up?” He suggested.

“OK. Shorty’s fiancé is really into the dark and twisted so we have to wear black. Wear a suit. It starts at 1pm and it’s about an hour drive so if I don’t see you before then, shall we say 11:30am?” She proposed.

“I’ll be here.” He agreed, walking backwards and turning on his heels as he pulled out a cigarette. He lit it before walking away.

“Later.” He called over his shoulder.

Selene wondered if he even knew how much swagger he seemed to have sometimes, it just seemed so natural, like he wasn’t even trying. As the angel wings on his back swayed while he walked down the street, she just couldn’t believe that the younger brother of Merle Dixon was as thoughtful as he had proved himself to be.

*****

Merle Dixon cared little for niceties. Politeness was lost on him and he considered it to be a waste of time when all a person really needed to do was get to the point. That was, unless he was speaking to a female, trying to pull the wool over their eyes and coax them into going home with him.

Merle’s job wasn’t exclusively doing one thing. He was a jack of all trades for his boss, adapting and learning over the years that to get anywhere in life, he had to make sure that he was always ahead of his game, survival of the fittest, he had to be the fittest.

But he wasn’t a model employee by any means. Coming with a myriad of problems, Merle had been bailed out by his little brother more times than he cared to admit and it hadn’t been until the latest year or so of his employment that he had managed to form a hint of a trusting and reliable relationship with his boss.

Merle did everything from promotion at the Velvet Rabbit, to security, to dabbling with dealing drugs and ‘taking care’ of certain individuals. Daryl cared little for the details of Merle’s job, ensuring that he kept his brother just sweet enough to make his life with him more tolerable.
At the bar of the Velvet Rabbit, he perched on a barstool next to Merle and knocked back a shot of tequila, slamming it down and signalling to the busty and over friendly barmaid for two more.

“Fixin’ to get cork high and bottle deep?” Merle gruffed from beside him.

“Naw, just takin’ the edge off.” Daryl replied as the barmaid refilled their glasses.

“Ahh well, take ya own sweet time and young Crystal over there might stop eyeballin’ ya n’ actually make a damn move.” He laughed. “Or, y’know, you could grow a pair n’ go on over there yaself.”

Daryl shook his head and peered down at the liquid in his glass, the smell stung the back of his throat and made his stomach bubble. It wasn’t his usual poison of choice, but tonight he needed something strong and more like a punishment.

It had been a long day, he had been woken up at 3am by Merle and one of the strippers crashing through the front door and jeering loudly with a bottle in a brown paper bag being passed between them. They had proceeded to blast loud music until daylight hit the windows and finally passed out at 11am, meaning Daryl’s day off had consisted of picking up broken glass and trash from all around the house before he had to run out and covertly visit the tailors to hire a suit for the wedding he was attending with Selene.

“Aint interested man. Wound tighter than a clock thanks to your drunken ass hollerin’ somethin’ awful at all hours of the god damn night.” He snapped.

“Quit ya bellyachin’, Darlina.” Merle brushed off

Daryl knew he wasn’t going to be able to tell Merle about the Wedding he was attending the following weekend. Instead he was going to have to lie and hope that his brother would be too drunk to go near the truck and notice the suit hanging behind the tinted back window. He figured he had a good chance at his deception, considering Merle usually didn’t even notice when his bike was gone, let alone pick up on something like that.

“I aint gonna be around next weekend.” Daryl began, his stomach clenching as he threw the tequila down his throat. “Got a job out of town, guy I know hooked me up. Worked on his Harley a few times. Bike event. They need Mechanics. Gonna need somebody to take over my patch.”

Merle side glanced at his younger brother, who didn’t give him the satisfaction of any eye contact.

“N’ I’ll be able to get some damn shut eye for once.” He added.

“Well, whatever suits your fancy.” Merle scoffed.

When two men passed in bad suits, Daryl nodded politely in acknowledgement while Merle got up and shook each of their hands, welcoming them and slapping the bar to get the barmaids attention. This was his gig, playing the host and making out he wasn’t a meth addicted criminal. It was all a front and Daryl knew it more than anyone. He kept his distance, letting Merle have the limelight and spinning the small glass around on the bar between his fingers. When Merle broke away from the men and took up his previous spot, Daryl decided it was time to leave. Getting to his feet, he stepped out from the barstool, only to find Merle had copied him and was now stood inches away from him, a threatening look on his face.

“You better not be lyin’ to me, boy.” He hissed.

“Get outta my way, Merle.” Daryl retorted, his back straightening in defiance.
“Askin’ for trouble goin’ near that girl n’ ya know it. Ya lucky I aint been runnin’ my mouth already.” He warned.

Daryl almost laughed but figured it was best to withhold it for fear of escalating the situation.

“Ya aint been runnin’ ya mouth because you got more to lose than I do. ‘Sides, there aint nothin’ goin’ on. I know her from fuckin’ high school so just pipe the hell down.” Daryl growled back before shoving past his brother and storming towards the door.

*****

The trucks engine ticked over as Daryl sat in the driver’s seat, his hand clasped around the key in the ignition. He was in the parking lot of the Tattoo parlour, dressed up to the nines and feeling like a stranger in his own body. He hadn’t anticipated how wearing such an expensive and well fitted suit could have such an effect on how he held himself. Even as he looked in the rear-view mirror at his reflection, he didn’t recognise himself. His hair was properly styled, flicked up and to the side at the front, what he considered to be the usual bags under his eyes from lack of sleep and living with Merle didn’t seem to be present at that time, his eyes were brighter but his mind raced. What was he doing? He had no idea what to expect and if he would even be able to enjoy such an event. But she had invited him, so he had to try. He shut the engine off and heard himself exhale slowly before climbing out of the trucks cab and wandering across the gravelly surface to the back door.

Selene had agonised over her dress for a week before the day of the wedding and changed her mind three times before finally deciding on a long, fitted black gown with lace panels cut out at the sides and thin shoulder straps. The salon next door to the studio had styled her hair for her and she had kept her make-up classic, with dramatic wings and red lips.

Daryl took a step back in surprise when she hurled the door open and began chattering away to him instantly about how she was almost ready and she just needed to lock up and grab her suitcase and put her bracelet on. But he hadn’t heard a word. He just stared as he stepped inside, his eyes locked on her breezing about the place. She finished zipping her black, shiny suitcase on the desk and clicked over to Ray’s workstation, where her satin clutch bag lay beside a silver bracelet. Finally, she stopped and looked up at him. He didn’t bother to hide his shock. He had never seen someone so stunning in his life and his voice had stopped working momentarily. He blinked at her, his lips parted slightly and she gave him a strange look.

“What?” She asked “Is this too much? Do I look overdressed?”

Her questions snapped some sense into him and he cleared his throat and rubbed his chin with his hand.

“N-no. You um, you look real…nice” He managed.

“Nice?” She asked, flashing him a brilliant white smile and picking up her clutch.

He huffed and shook his head “Yeah. Sorry, ain’t so good with words”
She shot him a sympathetic smile and decided to go along with it, inwardly reeling that he thought she looked good enough to be rendered pretty much speechless.

“Nice is good, I’ll take that. Thank you. You scrub up well yourself.” She grinned.

“Thanks.” He replied shyly.

“Where’d you get that suit? It’s sharp.” She questioned, stepping closer and looking him up and down.

“Hired it.” He admitted.

“Ooh, good choice. Love the satin lapels.” She admired.

He nodded awkwardly and turned his attention to her suitcase. He grabbed the handle and set it down on the floor beside him.

“You ready?”

“Yeah I just need to put this on but I can’t do it myself.” She said, holding up a thin, silver bracelet. He inhaled a deep breath and took it from her grasp without a word. She held out her wrist and he was suddenly all too aware of how close they were to one another. He could smell her perfume as his fingers brushed against her skin while he fastened the bracelet. Eventually managing to fasten the clasp, he let go.

“Thank you” she uttered.

“Sure” He replied, all the while hoping she couldn't hear his heart thudding in his chest.
As far as weddings went, Selene had never seen anything so elaborate and luxurious. The Renaissance was a famously expensive castle venue and hotel with two onsite chapels, including one that had wooed Hollywood and political royalty with its grand archways, flying buttresses, soaring domes and towers. It was an ideal wedding venue for aspiring kings and queens. The location of Shorty and Maria’s ceremony would take place in the St. Francis Chapel, which featured 22-foot mahogany doors mimicking Westminster Abbey in London and included an 18-karat gold altarpiece and Tiffany stained glass. The building itself, dated back to 1740.

On the tan, gravelled parking lot, Daryl was able to take a second to marvel at some of the most amazing cars he had ever seen and although he knew the entire weekend was only going to serve to remind him of what he was never going to have, he considered that it must be nice, living like the other half. Shorty sure hadn’t done bad, marrying into money.

He turned to the trucks window and began to attempt to tie his tie in the reflection when Selene approached him and placed her clutch bag on the trucks hood.

“Here.” She said, placing a hand on his arm. “Let me”. She noticed how he tensed under her fingers but opted not to bring attention to it. He turned to her and allowed his eyes to scan her face as she fastened his tie expertly. Her skin was flawless and her lips perfectly lined. When her eyes moved up and met his, her two-tone iris once again, seemed to strike him even though he already knew it was there. It was beginning to become one of his favourite things about her. Among others.

Yes, he now had favourite things about her and that meant he was growing even more attracted to her. She hesitated slightly with her hand pressed flat against his chest, the tie underneath while they looked at each other.

“You make an excellent plus one” She told him.

She had no idea where it’s come from or why she’d chosen to say it at that point. He instantly looked embarrassed and gave her a shy smile.

“Good” he eventually managed to croak.

She slid her hand down his suit, smoothing the lapels and ending up at his forearm. Slipping her arm around his, she collected her bag from the hood and nudged her head up in the direction of the entrance.

“Ready?” She questioned.
“Think so” He replied, taking a deep breath.

His nerves were beginning to rise and he was slowly realising that he was way out of his depth already. Selene had picked up on it straight away, even as far back as when he had showed up to collect her. She knew the whole weekend was going to a new and strange experience for him and was determined to make sure he at least enjoyed some of it by staying by his side. She squeezed his forearm and they began to walk to the entrance.

As they walked into the lobby, Daryl spotted a waiter with a tray of champagne and caught his eye. The waiter didn't hesitate to approach them and offer the tray. Needing some kind of dutch courage and wishing he was looking at a tray of tequila shots instead of Champagne, he shrugged and picked up a glass, it would have to do. Before he could get it to his lips he paused and looked Selene, who was stood motionless next to him, her mouth open in wonderment as she looked up at the elaborate paintings on the ceiling. He lowered the glass and moved it in front of her. She looked down at it and grinned.

“Champagne” She beamed.

Daryl smiled thinly and took another glass from the tray for himself, quietly thanking the waiter and internally praising himself for remembering his manners. He took a quick sip and winced. He had never liked champagne. Selene held her glass up, initiating a toast.

“Thank you for being here with me.” She said “here’s to a great weekend”

“Thanks for askin’ me.” He said sincerely.

He clinked his glass on hers and they both took a drink, Daryl screwing his face up in disgust but figuring he may as well keep hold of it until he could find some harder liquor.

When Selene spotted The Ink Cabinet’s staff all stood together in a corner clutching champagne glasses, she tugged on Daryl’s arm and he dutifully followed. As they approached, Bear looked down into his flute with a disgusted look and Ray suddenly seemed unable to control the volume of his voice once he spotted Selene and Daryl.

“OOH! Somebody call for the queen?!” He shouted at her before running over to her and kissing her cheek. “You gonna upstage the bride dressed in that getup.”

“Stop it, Ray.” She giggled as he wandered around to her side, inspecting the lace panel at the sides of her dress.

“Damn girl, that lace goes down pretty far. Can almost see clear to the promised land. You got panties on under there? Because it aint warm out there. You don’t want a frozen foof when ya got for a smoke, y’know what I’m sayin’?” He teased.

“Ray!” Selene cried.

“I’m just playin’. Ya look hot, babygirl.” He winked.

“Thank you. You look amazing” She told him.

While the others were all dressed in their regular funeral attire, the exception being Ritchie who
still insisted on wearing his slouchy, black woollen hat, Ray was dressed in a black suit and shirt with a deep burgundy waistcoat with a cravat and pocket watch chain.

“I should think so, this cost me two months worth of pay. And you.” He directed at Daryl. “You’re doin’ somethin’ to me in that suit. Hot damn.”

Selene laughed again and Daryl nuded his head up before half smiling at him.

Bear stepped forward and Selene’s grip on on Daryl’s arm grew noticeably tighter. She stepped closer to him in a show of defiance and was ready to move in front of him should her big brother decide to cause a scene. Daryl glanced down at her briefly, surprised at her outwardly supportive gesture towards him.

“Dixon” Bear rumbled.

“Brad.” Daryl replied.

An awful moment of quiet tension swept through the group as everyone exchanged glances except for Daryl and Bear who were now glaring at each other. Selene’s back pricked at the thought of some kind of showdown in the middle of the lobby before the wedding had even started and she knew that if it did, she would be firmly on Daryl’s side.

Bear slowly held out his hand and Daryl heard Selene exhale loudly in relief as he shook it. It wasn’t solid confirmation that Bear was about to give Daryl a free pass at all, but a truce for the time being for the sake of both Shorty and Selene. She caught her brother’s eye as he backed up ‘thank you’ she mouthed noiselessly.

Following on from Bear’s gesture, Axel also stepped forward and indulged in a handshake with Daryl before placing a gentle kiss on the back of Selene’s hand and Ritchie followed suit, kissing Selene’s cheek shyly and nodding in acknowledgement to Daryl.

“Fuckin hate this fizzy shit” Bear complained. “I’m going to find somewhere I can get a real drink.”

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It seemed like forever before the Ceremony finally started and whispers began to flitter between the guests questioning why everything was taking so long. Daryl sat at the end of a row by the wall next to Selene who was chattering away to Axel and Ray while Ritchie fumbled with his hands in his lap and kept to himself. Shorty waited nervously at the end of the aisle next to his brother, who was also his best man.

Getting married had never been something that had crossed Daryl’s mind and he couldn’t say that it was being sold him very well by that point. To him, everyone looked out of sorts, too dressed up or too anxious, especially Shorty and it was supposed to be the happiest day of his life. Having never found anyone that he’d felt much for, the prospect of going through this himself was bizarre and completely alien and he was utterly convinced that it would never be him stood at the end of an aisle, nervously awaiting a bride.

When Maria finally arrived in her corseted, couture, gothic gown, Selene saw Shorty freeze on the spot and thought that she had never in her life witnessed a man look at a woman with such love and appreciation before. Her eyes began to moisten and she took a deep breath, willing herself not to cry.
Daryl glanced to the side at her as Maria passed and did a double take. Selene’s eyes were glassy and her jaw was clenched shut. He leaned to her slightly, his arm touching hers and he felt her shift closer to him, using him as a literal support. She refused to look at him, keeping her eyes trained on her friend saying his vows and not wanting Daryl to see her cry.

When everyone filtered out, Daryl clocked a tickling feeling in his hand and glanced down to find Selene grasping for his fingers in the mass of people. Shocked and confused, he let her take them as they shuffled amongst the other guests. He continued to look down at her fingers with black polished nails gripping onto his hand, only taking notice of where he was going once they were out of the threshold of the door to the chapel.

“Don’t let go, please.” She pleaded with a serious expression. “There’s so many people.”

“I won’t.” He assured her, squeezing her fingers slightly.

The crowd filtered into a large line, slowly ambling towards Shorty and Maria so they could greet their guests individually. Selene’s stomach growled with hunger and she curled her lip in disapproval when she realised there were no waiters around with champagne glasses until they reached the main hall. If she couldn’t have food just yet, another drink would have sufficed. Her hand grew hot in Daryl’s grasp but he still held on tight, the need for them to stay connected in such a way now lessened, but Selene wasn’t about to pull away.

After what felt like a lifetime of slowly one stepping along the longest hallway in the world and making minimal small talk, Selene finally got to Shorty and Maria. She kissed Maria’s cheek and the two women chatted about something Daryl couldn’t follow due to his focus still being on his hand. She hadn’t let go. Even while she was hugging Shorty, she used her free arm and refused to let Daryl go. A stab of pride rushed through him and he found himself having to try surprisingly hard not to break into a smile at the thought.

I’m right here, girl. I aint goin’ nowhere.

Once the crowd thinned and they entered the lobby again, Selene led him to a quiet corner and turned away from him, shielding her face with her other hand.

“Hey, you alright?” He asked worriedly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She replied, fanning her eyes. “They’re like my family. Seeing him get married, it’s a little overwhelming. Sorry, I’m being stupid.”

“Naw, ya ain’t.” he assured her. “I guess ya friends are the family ya actually got to choose, right?”

She took a deep breath and nodded, squeezing his hand again and wondering how the hell she got lucky enough to be able to spend the whole weekend with someone that never seemed to judge her on anything she did and just seemed to accept her. Daryl decided then and there that if he was to spend two days connected to her simply by holding her hand, it was good enough for him.

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The main hall was imposing and massive, filled with a sea of round tables all decorated with multiple sets of cutleries, place names, huge flower centrepieces and tall, red candles. Selene was pleased to find that Shorty and Maria had sat her with Daryl, Axel, Ritchie and Ray and had ensured that there was enough wine on the table to keep her happy all night, along with a bucket of ice and beer. She busied herself filling everyone’s glasses with water and dishing out drinks, taking
the lead and acting as the mother hen of the table.

Daryl watched her curiously and observed her ability to morph from beer and cigarette loving metalhead to elegant, polite and caring wedding guest. It wasn’t unusual for Selene to grab the attention of those around her without even trying, she didn’t look like everyone else and it wasn’t uncommon for Daryl to pick up not only on other women staring at her but also the appreciative looks up and down from men. This occasion was no different and he had already noticed one or two guys throw her an impressed look and check out her ass as she passed in her fitted dress. Now, as she sat and giggled with Axel and Ray, he kept her in his peripheral vision, not wanting to miss one bright and lively smile.

When the first course of the meal was served, Daryl leaned close to Selene.

“All these for me?!” He asked, gesturing to the knives and forks in front of him.

“Yes, start from the outside. Work your way in with each course” she whispered back with a wink that almost turned him inside out.

He ate with great interest, savouring every delicious mouthful and shovelling it in carelessly as he worked through his plate when it occurred to him that maybe he should be a little more aware of how he was coming across. That was, until he saw Selene wipe around the leftovers of her plate with her finger before sticking it in her mouth. He hid a laugh and figured if she was eating as if no one was watching, then he may as well do the same.

At the second course, he furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar sight in front of him as he looked down at his plate.

“What the hell is that?!?” Bear exclaimed, voicing exactly the same thing that was going through Daryl’s mind.

“It’s Caviar” Selene told him before realising that every single person at the table except her looked absolutely horrified. The only reason she had ever seen Caviar before was because her father seemed to think himself so much higher and mightier than everyone else and liked to have it shipped in to his fancy apartment above the Velvet Rabbit from time to time, even though she had never seen even a hint that he actually liked it. “Bunch of uncultured swines” She jested.

“That’s fish eggs, right?” Daryl asked her quietly

“Yes. From Sturgeon. Just try it.” She suggested.

“Yeah man, take one for the team, try it” Axel urged from across the table.

Daryl was certain he had eaten worse at some point. From skinned animals over a campfire in the woods to two-week-old food in the fridge as a child because there was no other option. He had a stomach of cast iron that even the boldest of food poisoning bacteria couldn’t touch.

Ritchie had spent the duration of the meal so far, staring at Selene shamelessly and it was something that Daryl had noted immediately. Although it hadn’t bothered him in the slightest at first, his patience was now starting to wear thin at the thought of Selene seeing him and being made to feel awkward. Forcing himself to ignore him, he dug his fork in the pile of Caviar and threw it into his mouth. The salty taste was one thing, but the eggs popping on his tongue was quite another. Still, he considered it tolerable.

“Had worse” He shrugged.
The others began to show more interest in their own meals and started to push it around their plate, trying small amounts. Ray dropped his fork and threw his hands up, pushing his plate away from him.

“Nope. Na-Uh. I had a lot of questionable things in my mouth but that right there is truly disgusting. Why the hell is it so expensive?!” He wanted to know.

“I don’t know but I’d rather just eat money than that.” Bear complained.

“Agreed” Axel added. “Where’s the burgers at? Ritchie? You’ll eat anything when you’re stoned, go get lit and come back and finish all this up. We don’t want to look like peasants” Axel suggested as everyone else chuckled.

“I like feet and even I ain’t eating that.” Ritchie commented, the first time anyone had heard him speak since they arrived in the morning. Axel sniggered childishly at his comment.

“Well… I wasn’t aware my employees were such massive pussies.” Selene grinned.

When the next course arrived, everyone was delighted to find it was chicken and a rumble of approval swept across the table before everyone dug in and the table fell quiet, only the slurping of drinks and the scraping of cutlery on plates could be heard along with the soft, instrumental tune played by a band in the corner of the room. Daryl checked the menu to find that he still had another course to go. He had never eaten so well.

For dessert, Selene squealed in excitement at the thought of having cheesecake. It was her favourite and she finished it after everyone else except Daryl because she wanted to savour the taste and allow it to touch the sides unlike Bear, who had polished off the entire thing in two bites.

“Oh my god. That was so good. I want another one.” She groaned.

Daryl slid his plate across to her. He had only eaten a quarter of his.

“What? No, that’s yours.” She protested.

“Desserts aint really my thing” He mentioned.

“Really? Are you sure?”

“You like it right?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Then just take it.” He urged.

She accepted excitedly and sat happily munching away on her second piece of cheesecake while Ritchie glared at Daryl with seething jealousy.

She had been to a few weddings in her time, none of which had compared to the decadence and luxury of Shorty and Maria’s and as far as first dances went, this one was by far her favourite. Selene and Ray stood for the duration of the first dance and filmed it on their cell phones while Daryl sat beside her and looked on, trying to understand why everyone seemed to tear up at such things. Having never even gone to prom, the experience of slow dancing with someone was lost on
him. He just thought it looked awkward.

When people started to mill past him, hand in hand and heading for the dance floor, Axel stood and looked down at Daryl.

“Mind if I ask your lady to dance?”

*Don’t make it a big deal. It’s just a phrase.*

He could see Selene peering up at Axel, her eyes flickering between him and Daryl with interest. *Yeah, she picked up on that too.*

“Sure” he shrugged as nonchalant as possible. Axel offered his hand to Selene

“May I have this dance, boss?” He asked.

Selene beamed at him and nodded enthusiastically before taking his hand and eagerly making tracks to join the other dancing couples. Daryl witnessed her chatter animatedly to him as they swayed and giggled. Ray tapped Bears shoulder and pointed to the bar, the two of them leaving the table meaning Daryl was left alone with Ritchie.

The dreadlocked piercer was slouched down in his seat, his eyes locked on Selene and his thumbnail in his mouth, being chewed mercilessly. Daryl wanted to tell him to put his eyes back in his head and stop staring at her, but he couldn’t deny that he spent a great deal of time doing the same and he couldn’t exactly blame Ritchie for his obvious and intense crush on Selene, as he was developing one of his own. Unable to tolerate his silent vigil anymore, Daryl got to his feet and joined Axel and Bear at the bar.

The deep Mahogany surface stretched for the whole width of the room and the hotel boasted some seriously expensive and rare spirits, some of which Daryl had only ever heard talked about in rap songs or on the TV. He leaned on the bar between a man and a woman and scanned the whiskey bottles intending to make the most of the fact that he wasn't going to have to pay for anything. Deciding on one he had never tried he thought he may as well get Selene one too, it wasn’t like she was going to turn it down judging by the way she knocked them back at their first night at Marty's bar. When the man next to him was served, he moved off to reveal Ray and Bear.

“Pssst Daryl. Ask Selene to dance!” Ray called out across the front of Bear, who was squinting at a long and detailed cocktail menu. Daryl glanced over his shoulder, noticing the song had finished and now saw Ritchie wandering to the dance floor towards Selene, who was waving him over from the dance floor.

“Hell naw, I don’t dance.” Daryl gruffed in response.

“You can learn! C’mon!” Ray cried, reaching past Bear and tapping the bar in front of Daryl. He could only guess that it was some kind of attempt to bring him to his sense, but Daryl felt surer than ever that he was making the right choice.

“Get outta here with that shit. I look like I dance? ‘Sides she just danced with Axel n’ now she’s with Ritchie, she’s all good” he reasoned.

“Please don’t tell me you’re dumb as well as pretty, Daryl. She invited you here. Go put those hands around her waist!” Ray urged, much to the disapproval of Bear, who was now giving Daryl a death glare with his hand clamped around a beer that had just been put in front of him.

Daryl didn’t want to dance. He didn’t even know where to start. But what he did want to do and
wasn’t about to say out loud, was put his hands on her waist. The thought was delectable, forbidden, tempting. But he would have to endure a slow dance in order to indulge. He met Bears eye.

*It’s just a dance. It’ll be worth it.*

“That OK with you, man?” he asked him.

Bear’s shoulders seemed to loosen a little, maybe at the fact that Daryl had asked permission, or maybe it was because Ray had his fingers dug into his opposite shoulder in a threatening move that told Bear not to overreact.

“If she’s happy, I’m fine with it…thanks for checkin’.”

“She’s ya sister, I get it.” Daryl nodded.

He waited for the two whiskeys he ordered and carried them back to the bar, all the while trying to ignore Ray’s excited grins.

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Ritchie refused to look at her and his hands felt heavy and wrong around her waist. He wanted to pull her to him, enclose her in his arms and snuggle into her neck. There was so much he wanted to say to her but she didn’t need to know. She would never like him the same way. Usually, he would have loved the chance to look into her eyes but there on the dancefloor with the woman that made his heart race held between his hands, he felt exposed and like she could read every thought running through his head if he made eye contact with her. He knew his hands were trembling and he tensed the muscles in his arms and wrists in order to try and control it, but to no avail. He was sure she had already noticed.

“Rich… look at me” She whispered.

His heart hammered. He now had no choice, he was going to have to expose the windows to his soul to her. His eyes flickered to hers and she could instantly see how nervous he was.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Nothin. Nothin’s wrong” He dismissed, faking a smile.

“Why are you so nervous then?” She wanted to know.

“Um…” he glanced around, checking that their table is otherwise engaged. “OK, so, at-at prom, I danced with this girl, thought she was the prettiest girl in school. Couldn’t believe it when she walked right up to me and asked me to ask her if she wanted to dance. I was so scared I almost said no.” He explained, even his voice was shaking now and he could sense a rising sensation of rage in his chest at his inability to control his emotions. Why couldn’t he control himself around her? How can this have gone on for so long and he was still a wreck when she spoke to him?

“But you did it” She confirmed.

“Yeah. But this is even worse than that.” He blurted out.

Selene’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion and she leaned back slightly to try and get a full view of his face.
“Why?” She probed.

“I’m at this fancy ass wedding. This suit cost more than my car. And I’m dancin’ with you.” He admitted.

“And that’s a bad thing because…?” She questioned, her mouth rising in the corner in a small smile.

“It ain’t. It ain’t a bad thing. It’s just…you look stunning. Like, really.” He told her. He had never said anything so blatant and direct to her before. He’d told her she was pretty, that she deserved someone decent amongst other things but it had always been difficult to get out and she had taken it as platonomically as possible each time.

“Ritchie, you’re so sweet. Thank you.” She grinned, a flash of shyness crossing her features.

“Yeah. So, that makes me a little nervous.” He said.

She drew herself closer to him, sliding her arms further around his neck and feeling his dreadlocks tickling her skin as they moved.

“Don’t be. You know me. It’s just me.” She encouraged.

Exactly. He wanted to say. Its you.

“Same tired looking, overworked and short fused Selene under all this make-up” she smiled.

“Ahh c’mon, don’t say that.” He pleaded.

“You need a girl, Ritchie.”

I need you

He shook his head. He hadn’t been interested in anyone since he’d first met Selene and a few one-night stands had been the only female contact he had allowed himself to try and quell the empty, loneliness of being in love with someone he could never have. Because to him, it wasn’t a crush anymore. He loved her and he knew it. In his eyes, no one compared to her. But she didn’t want him. She was obviously more interested in the Redneck sat at their table than she ever would be in him.

“You’re a real cute guy, you get a ton of attention from women. Date one of them!”

“Not really interested right now.” He mumbled.

“You’re also hard work!” She giggled, seeing him smile faintly. The music came to a pause between songs and she stepped back, one arm falling from his shoulder and the other keeping him in place. She leaned towards him and planted a tender kiss on his cheek, leaving a perfectly shaped pair of red lips on his skin. His vision hit the floor and he willed himself not to blush, but his cheeks were already burning.

“Thank you for the dance, kind sir.” She smiled.

“My pleasure, ma’am.” He replied. His ears and cheeks now a deep shade of red.

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Returning to the table, Selene sat next to Daryl and thanked him when he handed her a whiskey. Ritchie slumped back into his chair and blinked rapidly into his drink, trying to compose himself while Axel, Bear and Ray argued about which one was the better-looking bridesmaid.

Daryl felt pressurised, like he had been forced into a situation he now couldn’t get out of or Ray would open his big mouth and announce that he was too chicken to dance with a girl. Outwardly, he looked uncomfortable and unbeknown to him, Selene could see it. She tapped the back of his hand on the table and shuffled closer to him.

“Are you OK?” She whispered under her breath.

Keeping his voice low enough so that the others couldn’t over hear, he decided to just tell her the truth.

“Ya friends think I should ask ya to dance.” He confessed.

“Oh” She responded, her eyebrows shooting up.

“I don’t really dance though” He countered.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” She assured him, sipping her drink and sitting back in her seat. He spun the glass around between his fingers while he watched a crowd of people on the dance floor throw themselves around in all manners of humiliating and odd ways. Time passed and he sat, deep in thought. He was well aware that he didn’t have to do anything he didn’t want to and he resented Ray for even suggesting such a stupid idea. But it was Selene and he had already placed himself outside the realms of his normality for her. Something he had never done for anyone else. It would only be for a matter of minutes. He waited for a slower song.

“Alright, I’ll do it.” He blurted out “I mean, if ya wanna dance… with me.”

She slammed her cell on the table with a loud thud, attracting Ray’s attention and smiled widely “I would really love to dance with you.” She beamed.

“Ahh shit. Fine. Ya gonna have to teach me though.” He warned.

“I can do that.” She told him.

He got up, took a deep breath, caught Ray’s eye who gave him a subtle nod and offered her his hand. Ritchie looked up and swapped a glance with Axel who was visibly impressed by Daryl’s apparently out of character act of gentlemanly conduct.

On the dance floor, she took his hands and placed them on her waist, taking complete control in a determined bid to ensure he might enjoy it even a little bit. She felt him tense again when she draped her hands over his shoulders. Her skin was warm under his hands as he registered the lace at the sides of her dress, a flimsy barrier stopping him from feeling her bare skin in its entirety. There it was, the one thing that he had wanted, the chance to have her near enough to hold her waist and in those first few seconds it was already worth it.

“OK, it’s not difficult” She started “Just ignore everybody else and copy my movements. Listen to the beat. Nobody slow dances like they used to. There are no steps or anything, its kind of just flows.”

He nodded and swallowed hard, focusing only on her and desperately trying to pay no mind to the
people around them, or the fact that their whole table was watching. Selene was struck by how far he was willing to put himself out of his comfort zone for her. After a few seconds had passed, she smiled at him again.

“Relax.” She uttered, her lips barely moving.

“Can’t believe I’m slow dancin’.” He scoffed. “If Merle could see me now.”

“What would he say?” She enquired.

“Nothin, be too busy laughin’ his ass off.”

“Good thing he’s not here to spoil anything then, isn’t it?” She pointed out.

“Damn right.” He agreed.

“I need to thank you.” she confessed.

“S’just a dance”

“No, I mean for everything. You probably saved my life in that alley and you fixed the pipes in my building and you took me to that beautiful place in the woods. Oh and the coffee, you brought me coffee after making sure I was safe when I got hammered. Then you said yes to being here, hiring a suit, driving me here, holding my hand, eating caviar and drinking champagne when we both know you’d rather have a beer and a burrito and now, slow dancing with me in front of all these rich assholes. It’s been a lot to ask of you.” She explained.

She had felt selfish when she considered all the things he had done for her, and now felt it even more since she’d voiced it.

“Make it all sound like a chore.” He commented.

“It kind of is. You’ve done so much for me.” She admitted.

He caught her eye and focused on the brown and blue hues in her iris. Suddenly unsure how to proceed with the conversation, he didn’t want to say too much and so hesitated for a while, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Aint no chore. You’re worth it” He uttered.

Such a bold statement stuck in Selene’s mind and she hadn’t expected him to say anything like it. Her heart fluttered and her stomach flipped. It rendered her speechless. She moved closer to him, draping her arms further over his shoulders and bringing her face closer to his. She traced her fingertips up and down the back of his neck and sensed his shoulders go rigid momentarily before he relaxed against her.

“See? Slow dancing is easy. Eventually you find your rhythm. Just like sex.” She purred.

He licked his lips awkwardly and raised his eyebrow.

“Oh, really?” He said.

“Mmhmm” she nodded.

“Aint sure what to say to that” He said quietly
“I’m sorry, I’m just playing. That was mean of me.” She apologised “No more champagne for me. God knows what else I’ll end up saying to you.”

He thought that he’d like to know what else she might say. He had already been bold once during this conversation and the result was her moving closer to him.

*Justsay it. Blame the booze if it goes to shit. Just like she has.*

“In that case, one more can’t hurt.” He suggested

She leaned back and grinned at him.

“Are you flirting with me?” She asked in surprise.

Ray reclined in his chair and threw one leg over the other, resting his ankle on his knee and crossing his arms. Axel sat beside him, a beer bottle in his hand and his attention fixed on his boss dancing with the quiet, rough redneck that he had decided he didn’t entirely dislike.

“That’s my girl” Ray muttered “nice move”

Axel glanced to the side to see Ray pursuing his lips and nodding with an impressed expression.

“What, you think she’s hitting on him?” He questioned.

“Oh yeah.” Ray confirmed. “Like a pro too. Nice and subtle, don’t scare him off, then reel him in.”

“I can’t watch this. That’s my damn little sister.” Bear grumbled from the other side of Ray. He turned his body to face away from the scene and ran a hand over his face.

Ritchie couldn’t watch either, his hands working their way into his pants pockets and clutching his bag of weed and his lighter.

“You want a joint, Bear?” He asked.

“Is the pope Christian?” He answered.

As they stood up, Ray raised his hand and clicked his fingers loudly in between them.

“It’s ‘Catholic’, the pope is catholic, you big Oaf. This is a classy establishment. If y’all are gonna do drugs like a couple of junkies, at least take the long walk to the edge of the grounds.”

“Yes, boss” Ritchie said sarcastically as he rolled his eyes. Bear shuffled out from Behind the table and he and Ritchie made for the exit. Ray turned back to Selene and Daryl, resuming his previous positioning, this time thoughtfully stroking his chin.

“She’s goin for the three steps. Oh my god. The balls on that bitch!” He exclaimed.

“Three steps?” Axel asked.

“Three steps to flirting success. A little something we came up with in high school that’s just kinda stuck. She’s already done a couple with him. Just watch her and I’ll narrate.” Ray instructed, gesturing to them by flicking his hand in their direction.
Axel got comfy in his seat as if they were both at the movie theatre and they watched Daryl and Selene intently.

Selene beamed at Daryl in between giggles and he is almost pinned to the spot by the sensation of her fingers stroking the back of his neck. It was enough to almost make him forget that he had a question to answer.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I can’t flirt” he mumbled.

“I think you just did. You want a little flirting 101?” She offered.

Daryl hadn’t considered flirting to be part of his repertoire any more than dancing was. In previous encounters, he had merely had to say yes or no, buy the girl a drink or offer a small, throwaway compliment of some sort. He hadn’t cared what any of them thought of him, so the need to impress with a smooth chat up line was non-existent. Selene was out of bounds. He knew that much, but the subtle and undeniably enjoyable tension between them was tempting him to make the most of the situation he’d found himself in.

“Sure” he agreed.

“OK so step one. It’s very deliberate eye contact and smile. Simple, right? Nope. You have to hold it without it seeming forced or creepy.” She explained. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I know what you’re doing

“You doin that right now?” He challenged.

“Sure am” she confirmed casually.

He didn’t respond, only holding her gaze until she finally spoke again.

“Step two, physical contact. But you’ve gotta know the boundaries.”

She slowly threaded the fingers of one hand up into his hair at the top of his neck. He lowered his head and closed his eyes at a sensation that was irresistibly addictive and unfamiliar. He didn’t want her to stop and it was as if she knew it, so she kept her fingers laced into his hair as she spoke. The sound of her voice forced him to open his eyes.

“Step three. Be direct but not trashy.”

She gently pulled him even closer to her and slowly ran her tongue over her lip rings before leaning in to him again.

“You want me to help you find your rhythm?” She whispered.

He let out a bashful huff and lowered his head briefly again and she was sure she had never seen him look so vulnerable. For a few seconds, she actually thought he did cute quite well.

Jesus. What do I do?!

“You’re not used to being flirted with, huh?” She asked.

“Not really.” He admitted.
No shit.

“Well I’ll always help you get some practice in. Y’know as your friend.” She said suggestively.

Daryl’s mind raced. What was she doing? And why?

“You think I’m gonna need it? As my friend?” He prodded.

“You’re a good-looking guy, Daryl. I do think you’ll need it.” She told him.

“Then I’m lookin’ forward to that.” He said bravely, against his better judgement and everything he had promised himself so far. She was his friend. Strictly his friend. But then there was this. He was confused again. Confused and mixed up and left even more clueless as to how to act going forward.

Ray nodded, impressed with Selene’s efforts and if he was honest with himself, proud that she’d pushed the boundaries of friendship between her and Daryl. He knew she had wanted to but had always held back and it was with a heavy heart that he had watched them be nothing but friends in recent weeks when they had so much potential. He could also see how smitten Daryl was with her, even if he hadn’t realised it himself yet.

“That is a perfect three step flirt.” He told Axel who was enthralled by the scene unfolding in front of him.

“Between me and you, if he doesn’t take her up on that, I might.” Axel confessed.

Ray chuckled loudly and patted Axels big thigh patronisingly.


“Yeah, I know” Axel sighed as he watched Daryl and Selene finish their dance. She stepped back from him and caught his hand, turning and leading him away from the dance floor. As they weaved in and out of the masses of round tables, Daryl realised how the entire experience had left him needing a drink more than ever.

Shooting Selene a wink before she could even sit down, Ray nudged his head up at the exit. She immediately got the message and followed him, fully expecting to be grilled about what had happened on the dance floor. They stepped outside and he handed her a cigarette, silently lighting it for her and looking down his nose.

“You gonna tell me what the hell I just witnessed? Because that was some heavy shit for my innocent eyes to handle” he remarked.

She shrugged one shoulder and absent-mindedly twisted her torso from one side to the other in a careless, childish display, as if she wasn’t interested in talking in the slightest.

“It’s none of your business” she tried.

Ray threw up his hands dramatically.

“Oh hell no. You do not get to do that to me. I have been your side bitch all your damn life. ‘Fess
up. Thought you guys were just friends” he demanded.

“We are” she said simply.

“Then why are you three steppin’ him, Selene?! You like him! Just admit it! Ain’t nobody gonna be surprised, ya brought him to a damn wedding.” He complained.

She went to speak, but didn’t know what to say. Explaining herself had proved to be a difficult task, even she didn’t know why she had flirted so shamelessly with him when their relationship had stayed platonic.

“I…” she stammered.

“Selene. Just admit it.” Ray said sternly.

She stormed off, her heels clicking over the flagstones as she reached the edge of the walled smoking area. Ray simply followed, not allowing her to walk away from his questions. She turned her back to him and sighed, exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Ray, you know what my father is like. I don’t want to put Daryl through that. I’m not worth it” His eyes flashed with anger and he grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around to face him and glaring at her.

“Don’t you ever let me hear you talking smack about ya self like that again. You are a goddess and you are worthy of who ever you fuckin’ want.” He snapped.

Selene’s face broke into a small smile. Ray had always been her biggest fan. Selfish, egotistical and overly dramatic as he was, the only person he loved other than himself was Selene. His partner in crime, sister from another mister and the person he could always rely on when his life came crashing down around him. Which had happened on a surprising amount of occasions.

“I love you, Ray.” She whispered.

He stepped closer and gently kissed her forehead.

“I love you too. But not as much as I love me.” He replied.

“Yes, I’m aware of that.” She nodded.

“C’mon, girl. He’s done a lot for ya so far. I think he’ll stick around.” He continued.

Selene took a final couple of drags from her smoke and extinguished it under her foot quick enough so that no one could see her.

“I don’t know, I just need time to figure this out. Brad is being civil enough but my father doesn’t have the same morals.”

“No. Bear is dumb as a box of rocks but he cares about ya. Ya daddy’s just a dick.” Ray expressed.

“Ain’t that the truth.” She added.

“Give Daryl an opportunity.” He suggested.

“I’m not sleeping with him, Ray.” She countered firmly.
“I mean an opportunity to kiss you, ya damn hussy.” He scoffed. “Ya want him to kiss ya. I know you do. C’mon, say yes.”

She stared at him, her eyes scanning his face as she thought about her real intentions here. She had invited him because she liked spending time with him. So much so that a weekend long trip together seemed like a good idea. She had never set out to feel anything for Daryl, least of all enough to push her to be having this conversation with Ray. But it had happened and if she answered in the way she thought she should, she would be lying.

“I wouldn’t push him away.” She confessed.

Ray gave her a knowing look and began nudging her in the side with his elbow, the two of them erupting into fits of laughter.
After many drinks were consumed and Daryl had eaten his weight in posh food, the guests started to filter up to their rooms and some back through the main doors to their vehicles. Having forgotten to check in when they arrived, Selene and Daryl joined the line for the reception desk. His head was slightly fuzzy but he could definitely drink more and he was amazed at the fact that he wasn’t absolutely trashed after being thrown in the social deep end all day. Selene dragged on his jacket sleeve, snapping him out of his thoughts and pulling him towards the desk. The polite but stern receptionist informed them that it was one room per invitation due to the hotel’s capacity being booked to its maximum. All family rooms had been allocated to those with children.

“Would you still like to book into the Luxury double as stated on your invitation?” The receptionist asked. Daryl tried to intervene, to suggest that he would sleep in the truck, but Selene merely waved a hand in his face, silencing him.

“That’s fine, we’ll take it.” She announced confidently.

Daryl looked sideways at her, waiting for her to look back at him. “I’ll take the floor” he offered.

She rolled her eyes and he was sure he heard her stamp her heeled foot on the carpet.

“Like one of those cheesy, romance novels.” She commented “oh my god, there’s only one bed!” She laughed placing a hand on each of her cheeks for added effect.

Daryl just smiled shyly at her and took the handle of her suitcase, picking it up and crossing the lobby to wait by the elevators.

Ray breezed past and tapped Daryl on the shoulder as Selene was filling out a form and waiting for their room key. He had a leather back pack slung over his shoulder and paused to check they didn’t have any company within earshot before engaging Daryl in conversation.

“I might have me some inside information that you’re gonna find of utmost importance.” He muttered under his breath as he stood next to him with his back to the wall.

“Um, what?” Daryl mumbled.

“You guys are sharing a room, right?” Ray asked.

“Yeah, ain’t got no choice.” Daryl confirmed.

Ray swapped a brief smile with a lone, passing woman.
“Perfect opportunity for you to step shit up.” He suggested.

It hadn’t gone unnoticed by Daryl that Ray was trying to push him and Selene together. He understood that as her best friend, it was Ray’s duty to ensure her happiness but what he couldn’t fathom, is why he seemed to think her happiness was with him.

“The hell are you talkin’ about?” He questioned.

“Don’t play coy with me. You two are gonna be locked up in some sumptuous environment with blackout drapes, a lock on the door and a minibar fit for a king. Tellin’ me you don’t wanna make a move on her?” Ray pressed.

Daryl stared at him with a baffled look.

“You think that’s why I’m here?” He asked.

“Why are ya here?” Ray shot back.

“’Cause she asked me. I ain’t gonna touch her.”

Ray moved from the wall and glided around to stand in front of him, not intimidated by his now irate demeanour at all.

“Even if she wants you to?” He continued.

“She don’t want me to.”

“Sure about that, sunshine?” Ray grinned.

Daryl’s gaze hadn’t moved, still locked on Ray and his probing expression. Irritation licked at his skin and he wished he would just spit out what he really wanted to say.

What is he trying to tell me?

“You got shit to say to me or not?” Daryl snapped.

Ray sighed and ran a hand through his hair, a few strands falling away from his product dense quiff and bouncing in front of his eyes. He quickly looked over his shoulder to check Selene wasn’t on her way over. It was safe, she was still at the desk. Then, he drew his attention back to Daryl.

“If you kiss her… she won’t push you away.” He told him.

Daryl’s eyebrows lifted slightly at the thought. How did he know that? Did she tell him, or was he just saying it? Did it even matter? She was a no go. Too risky and far, far too good for him anyway.

“I ain’t gonna do that.” Daryl uttered.

“Why?” Ray wanted to know.

“Ain’t what she wants.” He shrugged, hoping indifference would be enough to get the message across to Ray that this conversation was over as far as he was concerned.

“You know what the three-step flirt is, Dixon?” He shot at him. Daryl instantly took a deep breath in and straightened his back. The corner of Ray’s mouth lifted. “Oh, you do, don’t you? She three stepped you on that dance floor. Axel didn’t get no three step. Neither did Ritchie, as much as
they’d want to. But you, you got the whole shebang, twice over from what I saw. You just think about that and have yourself a good night.”

He patted Daryl’s chest as he walked off. But Daryl had a question of his own.

“Ray.” He called out, causing Ray to stop in his tracks and turn around. “Why you pushin’ this?”

Ray thought for a while, briefly taking in the sight of Selene laughing with the receptionist.

“Saved her life, took care of her when she was drunk, said ya aint gonna touch her tonight and I believe it. She’s my best friend, I love her and I don’t want some egotistical jackass that thinks with his dick takin’ her away from me. But you, you respect her. She don’t deserve nothin’ less than that.” He said, turning on his heels and walking away.

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The room was huge and Selene wasted no time in undoing her case and tugging out some comfy clothes. Daryl wandered about, touching everything and opening drawers and cupboards. He picked up the remote and switched the TV on, leaving it on a late-night talk show. Selene paid no attention to it but she did notice his need to connect with everything, dragging his fingertips across surfaces.

She ambled out into the balcony and the view, even in the dark, was incredible. Lines of lights created a runway like appearance in front of her, reaching right down to the bottom of the grounds. Some guests still milled around the back lawn, their muffled voices floating up to the balcony she stood on. The air was cold and although Daryl stepped outside to see for himself, neither him nor Selene wanted to stay out there too long. Closing the French doors, they retreated inside. Selene picking up a pair of shorts and a large band T-shirt and pausing, her eyes widening.

*I didn’t think this through.*

“Shit” She whispered under her breath when she remembered that she couldn’t get her dress undone by herself. She had managed alone when getting dressed, having managed to hook the metal handle of a hanger through the zipper and pulling it up. But getting back out of it was a more difficult task. She looked over her shoulder at Daryl, who was now opening mini bottles of liquor and stuffing his face with potato chips from the mini bar.

“Uh…Daryl?” She said sheepishly.

“Yeah?” He replied, chewing a mouth full of food.

“Could you help me with something?”

“OK. What?”

She tapped her thigh nervously through the side of her dress and bit her bottom lip.

“The zipper on this dress, I can’t undo it by myself. It’s kind of stubborn.”

“Oh. Um, sure.” He answered, setting the bag of potato chips down on the dresser and licking his fingers. He walked over to her and went to take hold of the back of her dress, she quickly flinched away and he instantly held his hands up to show her that he wasn’t trying to touch her.

“This dress cost me four hundred dollars. You’re not touching it with your greasy hands.” She warned with a faint smile. He nodded, looking down at his hands before disappearing into the
bathroom. Selene could hear the faucet running and set to taking her heels off. When Daryl returned, he walked confidently up to her, hoping that his unease about having to unzip her clothing wasn’t apparent.

“Lift ya hair up.” He instructed.

She slid her hands under her hair and gathered it together, holding it up. Daryl pinched the tiny zipper between his fingers and began to slide it down the back of her dress, feeling it become taut around the middle.

“It’s partly corseted inside, hence the difficulty in the middle.” She said, feeling the need to clarify that a four-course meal and several glasses of alcohol had nothing to do with it. Passing the stubborn part, Daryl stopped at the base of her back and used one hand to hold the dress together at the top, thus preventing her from being exposed in any way.

Daryl had been with women, he was no stranger to the curve of a waist or the subtle tones of shoulder blades beneath the straps of a bra. But what he hadn’t done, was partake in a motion so simple and casual yet so seductive all at the same time. She let go of her hair and turned, his hand following her as she moved.

“It’s OK. You can let go. Thank you.”

“Sure”

She peered up at him as she slid her T-shirt and shorts from the table beside her. Try as she might, she could not get her conversation with Ray out of her head. Should she take a risk on this? She wasn’t even a hundred percent sure that he liked her the way she liked him which then led her to think that if he did, could she really put him in a difficult situation between her and her father?

Daryl was also looking right back at her and considering Rays words. Did she want him to kiss her? Would making their friendship something more put both him and Merle at risk?

One thing he did know, was that she made him different. When he was with her, life made more sense. He was able to enjoy the small things more, actually smile and laugh with her. She made things easier, brighter and she was the best view he had ever seen. He hadn’t ever been interested in the prospect of a relationship, but if he were to get involved in one, it would be with her. He could kiss her. Right there and then, just lean down and kiss her. But his mind raged with conflict and he considered what it would happen if she did pull away. He would lose her. Before he could come to a decision, she made it for him.

“I’m going to change.” She said, skirting around him and going into the bathroom. When the door clicked shut Daryl let out a long breath and sank down onto the edge of the bed.

*****

In the middle of the night, Daryl lay on the floor with a pillow and spare blanket, in a T-shirt and shorts. It wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as he’d imagined it to be but it certainly wasn’t the treat that was the memory foam, oversized mattress that Selene had. Still, he was determined to make sure she didn’t feel uneasy and so stayed away, using the floor to try and get some shut eye.

Selene lay on her back, staring up in the darkness, the blackout blinds blocking even the faint glow of the floodlights that lit the grounds outside. She wore a Lamb Of God band T-shirt and shorts and her face was bare. No longer covered by a layer of make-up. She had scooted from the bathroom to the bed and shut off the light quicker than Daryl could register, but he had managed to catch a
glimpse of her real face, so different from the one she wore during the daytime but still just as intriguing. They both lay there in the dark and silence, only hearing their heartbeats and the gentle rhythm of breathing. Selene suddenly flipped her arms beside her on top of the quilt.

“Oh this is stupid. Get up here” she told him.

“What? Naw. S’ok. I’m good” he responded from the floor.

“You’re not good. While that carpet is probably so expensive it could feed a small country, it’s not a bed.” She complained.

“Really, I’m fine.” He urged, not wanting to get into a conflict about it but remaining sure that this was the best option.

“Daryl, I won’t sleep knowing you’re down there on the floor” she sighed. “Please” She sat up and flicked on the lamp. Daryl shielded his eyes from the harsh burn of the light, cutting through the heavy darkness all of a sudden. He grunted and rolled over into his side.

“Jesus” he muttered.

“I’m sorry, I should have warned you I was going to do that.” She apologised.

“Ya kinda stubborn, ya know that?” He managed to say from behind his hands as he rubbed his eyes, trying to adjust to the light.

“It’s been said before.” She admitted. “Please just get into bed. I feel so bad.”

Daryl let out a long and gravelly exhalation and threw his pillow back up onto the bed.

“Alright, fine.”

Climbing up and sitting on the edge of the bed, for a moment he found himself unable to speak as he peered back at her. Her hair was draped over her shoulder, framing her face as she sat propped up on an elbow. Her bare face was more beautiful to him than he had ever expected now he could see it properly. Now, he was savouring it, burning the image into his mind.

Then, it occurred to him that this was a first. He hadn’t ever shared a bed with a woman. Not usually one to stick around after sex, he had always removed himself from the situation and as a result, had never found himself about to actually sleep next to another person. Worry began to creep into his mind. The nightmares. The violent thrashing around. Would she have to witness those? Then, there was the idea that not many women had actually trusted him before due to his reputation. Being Merle’s brother, a Dixon and frequenting places known for less than respectable men had earned him a title similar to that of his brother, even though he knew they were nothing alike. The urge to say something was overwhelming.

“I promise, I ain’t gonna touch you.”

She startled at the comment, her eyebrows pinching together as she peered at him with shock and confusion in her blue eyes.

“Why would you say that to me?” She whispered.

The truth was, he didn’t know. The thoughts had just come out of nowhere with him feeling a strong push to reassure her that he was not like the guy from the alley, or most other guys for that
“I dunno.” He mumbled.

She reached out and rested her fingertips on the back of his hand on the bed. His skin tingled and he lowered his gaze to where her delicate, painted nails lay over his rough hand on the crisp, white sheet.

“Daryl, I trust you. I wouldn’t have made you come up here if I didn’t. I know you’re not going to touch me if I don’t want you to. You didn’t need to tell me that.”

“I guess not a lot of folks trust me.” He uttered.

“You mean… women?” She asked.

The only women that had ended up going home with Daryl or taking him back to their place were the girls from the Velvet Rabbit. But they weren’t just strippers and working girls, they were friends that had built up friendships over the years with the quieter brother that only acted up in front of Merle while intoxicated. Daryl hadn’t established such friendships with all of them either, one or two being the maximum. He figured they trusted him enough, but any other women outside of the realms of the strip club were simply not worth trying for, his reputation around town making sure that there was no point. That was, until he beat up the man that attacked Selene in the alley and earned himself the trust of the pretty metalhead that was completely forbidden. It was kind of typical, really.

“Yeah. Part of bein’ a Dixon. I ain’t never hurt nobody… like that. I mean, its bullshit. I never would-“

“Daryl. Stop it. I don’t care. I trust you, OK?” She interrupted.

He looked round at her again, her hand still on his hand but now covering it more with her fingertips curled around the edges.

“OK.” He muttered. She let go of his hand and sat back, seeing him nod solemnly and slide under the covers. She switched the light off and settled down beside him.

They lay side by side in the dark. Selene considering the repercussions if she made a move on him. Now would be as good a time as any to prove her trust in him and show him how much she liked him. But she decided against it, the thought of her father hurting him putting her off. It occurred to her there in the darkness, just how much she had grown to care for him.

“Daryl.” She whispered.

“Yeah”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She turned onto her side to face him, not being able to see him didn’t matter at that point, it just felt right.

“That night that I saw you sitting on the bleachers alone. You said it was shitty night. Mind me asking why?”
A deep sigh sounded up from in front of her and she felt a stab of worry.

“I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer that. Forget I asked.” She backtracked.

“Said ya trust me.” He started “I trust you too.” He rubbed his face and she could hear the sound of his hand rubbing over his stubbly chin. “Um… OK, so… my ol’ man got home that night to find Merle gone. He’d left for the military. Packed his shit n’ that was that. My dad, He was real mad. Took it out on me. I probably should have gone to the hospital that night n’ got stitched up. But I guess I just didn’t really give a shit.”

“You needed stitches?” She asked cautiously.

“Shirt was stuck to my back with blood. He liked to use his belt.”

“Jesus, Daryl.” She breathed. He could hear her shift further up in the bed, closer to Him. “I wish you’d spoken to me in high school.” She whispered, her voice cracking. “I could have helped you.”

“Nobody could. I learned to stay away. Spent a lot of time in the woods. Then, I got older and learned how to fight back.” He concluded.

She sniffed loudly and he wondered if she was crying. It certainly sounded like she was.

“Hey, c’mon, it’s in the past.”

She felt along his arm until she found his fingers. Taking hold of them and enveloping them in both of her hands, she lifted his hand to her face, lightly kissing the skin. He stayed completely still, in awe that this woman seemed to trust him irrevocably and was upset by the story of his past. He had never told anyone about his childhood, or expected them to give a damn. She still held onto his hand, refusing to let it go and he figured he may as well just tape them together, because she had spent very little time with her hand apart from his.

“I’m sorry I didn’t go and talk to you. Sit with you.” She said.

“Probably would have yelled at ya anyways” he said honestly.

“I would have yelled back” she answered quickly. He huffed.

“Yeah, no doubt about that.” He agreed.

He wished he could see her and he tried to imagine what she would like like right at that moment. Toying with the idea of switching the light on, he struggled to find an appropriate reason why, other than he thought she was beautiful and simply wanted to look at her. He had no regrets around telling her a sensitive and dark secret from his past. Her reaction had been one of sadness which he wanted to avoid, but it only meant that he could see she was starting to care about him, which was a strange notion altogether.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re amazing. To have gone through that and still be how you are.” She offered.

He contemplated what she meant and came up with nothing.

“How am I?” He queried.

“You’re a good man, Daryl.” She replied. Her hand was still closed around his, everything in him
was screaming at him to pull her to him and just kiss her. Forget about all the reason why he shouldn’t. But things were never that cut and dry, never that black and white and he suspected it was the same for her.

“Naw, I ain’t.” He argued.

“How do you think you are?” She said, surprising him by turning it around on him.

Evaluating himself wasn’t something he usually did. While he was quietly, inwardly conflicted between his aggressive and resentful tendencies, he was also the polar opposite, calm and sensitive. Such a stark difference raged inside him and meant that even he didn’t really know ‘how he was’ except for the more prominent side of him, which was violence.

“Some violent asshole with a violent asshole brother.” He rasped

“I guess I’ve seen first hand that you’re capable of violence.” She sighed.

Shame welled in his chest. He hadn’t wanted her to see the side of him that could beat a man unconscious within seconds. He didn’t want her to see him with bloody fists or a shirt covered in evidence against him.

“I would never hurt you.” He said.

“OK, stop it. Just, stop with this.” She snapped, gripping onto his hand tighter to show her irritation.

“That’s not what you are to me. You’re not an asshole and you’re not some savage. The only reason I’ve seen your violent side is because you beat up a guy trying to help me and y’know what? You didn’t have to, you could have just gone back inside.” She hesitated for a while, he didn’t say anything, knowing she wasn’t quite done. “You’re fucking wasted being single, you need a nice girl.”

Her words shot through him like lightning and he closed his eyes and grit his teeth. How would he respond to something like that? Selene bit her tongue, thinking she may have gone a bit too far with him. She wasn’t sure how many minutes passed but she was sure they were actual minutes and not seconds. She grew more and more nervous as she sat there, hand in hand with him, in total silence.

“I got a nice girl.” He finally said.

Selene’s heart all but stopped.

Daryl battled with himself, chopping and changing between leaving it at that or following up with something else. He wasn’t sure he wanted her to think he considered her his or that he had ownership of any kind. But he did want her to know that she meant something to him. He had crossed a line, he knew that much and reversing it was going to be difficult, because in his heart, he really didn’t want to.

“She’s a good friend.” He added, backing out of the confession at the last minute.

Selene was confused and if she was honest with herself, disappointed as well. Having no desire to give anything away, she said nothing. Daryl was in turmoil, wishing he could bring himself to tell her the truth, but seeing no point.

“That’s… good.” She eventually managed, letting go of his hand and settling back down in the
Noise from outside crept through the door to the hallway and they could hear a couple arguing fiercely about money for what seemed like hours but was really only around twenty minutes. When their door slammed and the stillness fell around them once more, Selene thought it was totally deafening.

Daryl was a man of few words, grand speeches and lengthy conversation were not his forte and he preferred to let his actions show how he felt, whether that be good or bad. He had done just that with Selene, stopping short of going too far. But Selene was a conversationalist and preferred the direct approach which was something he liked about her and imagined that if they were embroiled in this painful back and forth with each other that he would know firmly where he stood with her. But something was simmering under the surface for him, something he was dying to say and had never in his life uttered to anyone, even while drunk and the urge to do so at that very moment was something he couldn’t ignore. She had to know.

“You looked beautiful today.” He said.

Selene grinned to herself but couldn’t quite feel completely happy. A certain part of her was irritated at the whole situation. But she wasn’t about to throw away such a profound compliment from him.

“Thought you weren’t good with words” she uttered.

“ Took me all day to get that one out.” He admitted.

She couldn’t help but laugh at the fact that it was obviously true. She had complimented him as much as she thought she could without seeming too over the top, but his use of the ‘B word’ allowed her a little more room for manoeuvre.

“You look gorgeous in a suit.” She said.

“Glad ya think so.” Answered.

She shuffled closer to him and lay with her head close to his shoulder, reaching up and tickling her fingers across his arm. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself not to freak out and move away, hoping the nightmares would keep at bay or he wouldn’t do something to scare her.

She eventually fell asleep with her hand on his arm and when the sun started to rise, she was in exactly the same position.

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He watched her sleep for a while, guilt stinging at his conscious. He didn’t want her to think him strange, but the sight of her was perfect to him. He observed how peaceful and pretty she looked with no make-up. When she murmured and turned over, he froze until she settled again and decided to slink out of the bed and get into the shower.

Selene had slept soundly, only waking once and wondering for a fleeting moment where she was before she caught the scent of Daryl’s aftershave in the room. She smiled sleepily and closed her eyes again, her hand working further over his arm and her face only a couple of centimetres away from his shoulder.

When he returned from the shower, his hair damp and towel dried, he had buckled up his belt over bed.
his jeans and threw on a flannel shirt which hung open at the front. He looked around the room for Selene, noting the open French doors to the balcony and headed outside.

The weather was surprisingly warm for the season and sunlight poured through the thin clouds, casting a warm glow on the doors of their room. Selene sat on an elaborate and over the top, metal chair on the balcony in her oversized Jack Daniels T-shirt, shorts and sunglasses, sipping on an orange juice. She had ordered breakfast and had already dug right in. Daryl reached over the table and helped himself to some cereal, sitting down opposite her and not bothering to button his shirt up. They both rested their feet on the railings and looked out over the hotels grounds where golf buggies were driving around and gardeners tended to the estates flower beds.

“Well hey there!” Ray yelled from the next balcony along. Ruining the chilled, conversation-less and quiet morning they were both enjoying.

“Oh god” Selene groaned, her eyes rolling up to the sky. “Hey, Ray.”

“You kids enjoy your night in the big bed?” He chirped, leaning on the railings at the side of the platform.

“Let me do the talking” she hissed at Daryl through her teeth as if he had some monologue planned. “Uh, Yeah. Axel told me you got company in there”

“Shhh! I ain’t one to kiss and tell.” He hushed.

“Don’t tell lies, Ray.” She sang at him, waving her finger at him. “Who is it?”

“Well… y’know there’s that tradition that the best man goes off with the chief bridesmaid? In this instance, the chief bridesmaid was very married, very pregnant and very… what’s the word? Oh, female. So, I got to step in and offer my services.”

“Ray… Shorty’s best man was his brother” she said, perturbed by his explanation.

He merely shrugged and grinned at her.

She stared at him in horror. Daryl slowly looked around at him standing there shirtless with his sunglasses on. His skin was tanned and his tattoos across his chest were bold and intricate. His expression, one of the smuggest Daryl had ever seen.

“Oh my god, you didn’t.” Selene said under her breath.

“Don’t underestimate me.” Ray retorted with a raised eyebrow

“Ray! How the hell are we all meant to keep this a secret?!’”

“I don’t know, but ya gonna! Shorty thinks his brother is straight as an arrow. Really, he’s so far back in the closet he’s in Narnia!” He chuckled.

Daryl snorted from behind her and she whirled around to see him hiding a laugh behind his hand.

“Sorry” he mumbled.

“It’s not funny!” She told him “Shorty is not going to be happy.” She couldn’t help it. She broke out into hysterical laughter half way through her sentence. Ray and Daryl joining in.

“Really, really thought he was straight” Selene mused.
“You never noticed that he’s a snappy dresser? That’s what a lifetime in the closet does for you, honey” Ray called out. Daryl found himself laughing even harder. Ray wasn’t the kind of guy he would normally be seen around, mainly because Merle’s narrow mind got in the way of him having many friends at all, let alone gay ones. He knew Ray had always been outrageous from High School but the level of brash, unashamed self confidence in him was astounding and Daryl couldn’t deny that he was a funny guy to be around, as much as he irritated him sometimes.

“Ahh man” Daryl sighed as he lit a cigarette.

“Besides, I’m just makin’ sure we tick all the wedding boxes. Terrible dad dancin’, check. Someone threw up in a shoe, check, family argument, check. Scandalous sex with the best man, check.” Ray continued.

“Where is he?!” Selene asked

“He’s sleepin’ it off. I wore him out.”

“Oh, Jesus! Ray, get him out of your hotel room and don’t let anybody see him!” She instructed

“Yeah yeah. Jeez. All in good time. I got some more ogling to do first. Catch ya later, love birds.” He cried as he flitted off back into the room.

“His speciality is turning straight men gay.” She stated.

He knew this already having been on the end of more than one flirtatious comment from Ray.

“Yes, I know.” He mumbled.

“Right, he’s got the hots for you. Watch out.” She winked at him.

“Ain’t no danger of that.” He confirmed.

Just when they thought Ray had vanished, he stepped back out into the balcony and narrowed his eyes right at Daryl, who spotted him over Selene’s shoulder. She twisted around to see him.

“If you don’t button that damn shirt, i’ll come in there and climb you like a fuckin’ tree.” He threatened.

Daryl’s face froze while Selene fought not to spit her orange juice out, sensing it welling at the back of her nose. Ray, not bothering to see Daryl’s reaction, ducked back inside the room and closed the doors, leaving him listening to Selene howling with laughter and wiping tears from her eyes.

“I told you!” She managed to wheeze.

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Selene had packed black skinny jeans, knee high buckled boots and an off the shoulder sweater for the day after the wedding. She wore a plain, black choker and her leather wristbands as she wandered slowly across the lawn at the back of the building with Daryl. Having thrown their luggage in his truck, they decided to meet up with the others before heading off back to the town they both lived in.

She swung her sunglasses from her hand, pinched between her fingers. The sun had started to subside, meaning the air had grown colder. Daryl had turned his sleeves up to his elbows and put
on his leather, Angel winged vest. He smiled at her as she regaled him with stories of the guys from her tattoo parlour would rather forget, her hands telling the story as well as her words. He liked to watch her immerse herself in a memory, chuckling away as she spoke and not caring who could hear.

Ritchie heard Selene’s voice and turned to survey the grounds, spotting her in the distance as she turned to Daryl and bounced along backwards, throwing her hands up and enthusiastically chirping away to him. Daryl was laughing with her and Ritchie’s stomach turned. He didn’t know how much more of this he could witness but it was inevitable that he would have to accept that Selene’s affections were very much with someone else, even if they all knew she was holding back.

Ray, Ritchie, Bear and Axel were sat around a large table littered with coffee cups and various breakfast items. Axel leaned forward in his chair, resting his head on the table and groaning while Bear paced about, intermittently glaring at Selene and Daryl, Ritchie smoked a cigarette and Ray tapped away on his cellphone.

“Morning guys” Selene beamed as she approaches with Daryl beside her. Part of her wanted to hold his hand again, but she couldn’t think of a reasonable excuse this time. Ritchie smiled at her before looking down at his cigarette and not making an effort to acknowledge Daryl. Ray held a hand up with one finger extended. Signalling that he was aware of their presence but was busy.

“Uhhh. Stop yelling” Axel complained.

“Me? I’m not yelling” Selene corrected.

“Yeah you are. Everybody’s yelling. Stop yelling.” He groaned, covering his ears with his hands as he remained buckled over in his seat.

“Hangover, dude?” Daryl asked him.

Axel looked up with bloodshot eyes. He looked like death warmed up and Selene snorted with laughter at him, remembering the last time she saw him the night before. He had been clinging onto the bar for dear life, begging the bartender for just one more drink and trying to hit on a bridesmaid that had taken a shine to him, but not enough to endure his drunken state. When he’d started to argue with the bar staff, she had beat a hasty retreat and Selene opted not to get involved. Here, she wasn’t his boss.

“Yeah. Feel like someone opened up my skull in the night and took a shit on my brain.” He complained.

“The worst kind. If ya ain’t drivin’, ya need a beer.” Daryl suggested.

“Oh god, no.” He denied, shaking his head gently. “No fucking way.”

“C’mon, I’ll go to the bar with ya.” Daryl urged, moving around the table and taking hold of Axel’s big arm. Selene was impressed by Daryl’s determination, even if she wasn’t sure his solution was the best one. He hauled Axel to his feet, ignoring his protests.

“No. I-I can’t.” Axel tried.

“Ya already on the way. Stop being such a pussy. Be right as rain before long.” Daryl explained as he slapped him on the back and led him to the bar.

Bear stepped closer to Selene, who was smiling in admiration at Daryl helping Axel out although he didn’t even know him all that well.
“You share a room with that guy?!” He growled at her.

Selene’s chest burned with rage at her brother. She knew a truce wouldn’t last long and as soon as he found out about the room situation he would revert back to his overprotective and annoying self.

“Oh, Yeah. We swapped carnal knowledge all night. The guy can really go some” she said loudly.

Everyone stilled and she felt all of their eyes on her. Ray’s mouth dropped open and his thumbs stopped tapping on his cellphone. Ritchie’s cigarette smoked as it balanced between his lips, a small piece of ash breaking away and falling to the ground. Bear’s cheeks started to go red and she knew it wasn’t from embarrassment, it was pure anger.

“I’m fucking kidding guys! I didn’t really have a choice. Brad, it was one room per invite. He slept on the floor” she lied “he didn’t touch me and if I’m honest, I can’t say I would have stopped him if he did. I’m going to remind you that I am an adult. So, stop looking at me like you’re going to lose your shit. Get over it”

Bear continued to glare at her for a few moments before skulking around to the other side of the table and joining a miserable Ritchie who had been left reeling by her admission that she would have let him touch her.

She nudged Ray in the side.

“Where’s your little friend?” She wanted to know.

“He is texting” He remarked, smiling down at his phone.

“You are a nightmare, you know that?” She said

“Yep.”

On the drive back, Selene didn’t attempt to make conversation and chose to sit a comfortable silence with Daryl as he steered them back down the winding mountains. She could see him in the reflection of the window and knew he took every opportunity to look over at her, thinking she wouldn’t know any different. His secret observations caused her to smile to herself from time to time as she relished the knowledge that he was quite obviously admiring her. Appreciating her looks was one thing, but feeling something for her was quite another and she couldn’t take those actions alone as proof that he had feelings for her.

The truck squeaked as it ground to a halt in the parking lot of the tattoo parlour and Selene felt the heavy weight of disappointment to be home after such an eventful and decadent weekend. She had thought on more than one occasion how nice it would be to be rich enough to just live at The Renaissance Hotel or to buy a house just like it. She slid her leather biker jacket on and angled her body towards Daryl.

“Does Merle know we’re friends?” She asked.

He shook his head and she could sense his reluctance to talk about his brother instantly.

“No. Wanna keep it that way.” He replied.

Curiosity got the better of Selene and she pushed further.
“Why?”

“It’ll get back to ya ol’ man.” He said curtly.

She let out an irritated sigh and rolled her eyes.

“We’re friends.” She pointed out.

“It’s complicated. He don’t like me much.” Daryl told her.

“Why?” She probed.

“S’a long story. Merle fucked up. I helped him out and pissed ya ol’ man off in the process.” He explained, his vision scanning the parking lot instead of being on Selene. “That… and ya don’t want my brother hangin’ around ya. He’s a damn creep.”

Accepting his explanation, she nodded wearily before leaning forward and trying to catch his eye.

“So, I’m your secret?” She questioned, her voice turning raspy at the end of the sentence, creating a somewhat lustful undertone to her question that Daryl found it hard to ignore.

“Yes.” He affirmed, still looking out of the front of the truck with his arms draped over the steering wheel. “A good secret” he added.

She laughed softly and bashfully bit her thumbnail.

“Stop, you’re adorable.” She responded quickly “So, where does Merle think you’ve been this weekend?”

“Workin’ out of town.”

“I see.” She smiled “Thank you again for being my plus one.”

“Thanks for inviting me. It’s been good” He confessed.

Having a much better time than he had ever anticipated, he was genuinely grateful not only for being given the chance to see how the other half lived, but to spend an entire weekend with the one person that was always on his mind.

“You really are a gentleman. I find it hard to believe that you’re single. I think you’re lying to me, you must have a secret wife or something” she jested.

“I guess I ain’t got much game” he suggested with a small shrug.

She paused, maybe for a little too long. It meant Daryl was gearing up for some kind of move from her. The look in her eye coupled with the complimentary things she was saying conveyed that her leaning in to kiss him wouldn’t have been totally out of place.

“Oh, you do.” She eventually purred.

All he could do was stare at her. Her comment had rendered him speechless, clueless as to how to reply and stunned by the amount of tension that had built between them within seconds. He sat completely still, only his eyes moving as he studied her expression and tried to predict what she was going to do or say next.

Selene stared back. It was on the tip of her tongue. I really fucking like you and this is driving me
“Anyway, I better go. See you soon.” She blurted out.

Daryl visibly flinched as if he were literally snapped out of a daydream.

*Think of something. You want to see her again. Ask her out!* 

“Um…You wanna catch a movie one night or somethin’?” He said as she turned and pulled the handle on the door. She stilled when she heard the question before looking over her shoulder at him.

“Sure, that’d be nice. It’s my birthday on Sunday. I don’t have any plans.”

“OK, I’ll take ya to the movies for ya birthday” He offered, giving her a crooked smile.

Her heart leapt at the thought and she wished she didn’t have to wait a week.

“We also have our Christmas party on Saturday. It’s in Marty’s. You’re welcome to stop by” she told him.

“Alright. Maybe.”

“OK. Um…bye”

“Later”

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Ray had arrived early for work on Monday and let himself into Selene’s apartment. Since she’d moved in, he’d known where she kept the spare key and had almost become part of the furniture he was there so much. It was 7am and Selene was still sleepily rubbing her eyes and feeling around on the nightstand for her cell phone. She heard the key in the door and lifted the quilt all the way up, covering her head. Ray wandered in wordlessly, kicking the door shut and placing two bags of food and a cardboard coffee cup carrier on the kitchen counter.

Selene’s apartment was small and consisted of only three rooms. A living room/bedroom with a kitchen at the back, a bathroom and a closet. She lived modestly and had little need for clutter, therefore had never really wanted more space. That was unless she could buy a house like The Renaissance, of course. The walls of the main room which housed her couch, TV and bed were painted dark red and the furniture and shelving was black. Ray had made no secret of the fact that he preferred things a little lighter and still maintained that her black furniture was a ‘dust trap’.

He unpacked both bags of breakfast food, pancakes and maple syrup with strong coffee. Gripping one of the coffees in his hand, he wandered over to the end of the bed and took hold of the covers, yanking them down and earning him an angry growl from Selene, who’s head snapped up to glare at him. He held the coffee cup in the air and grinned.

“Morning!” He sang.

She reached out to him and he leaned over, passing her the drink and quickly going back to the kitchen to get the food.

Settling next to her in bed, they both sat up and ate their pancakes quietly, Ray getting a thumbs up and an appreciative nod for his Monday morning breakfast efforts. After a while, they both quietly
concentrated on drinking their coffees.

“I have a massive, massive crush on Daryl, Ray.” She suddenly said.

She was in the middle of taking a long drink of her coffee when she had spoken, moving the cup from her lips and peering over the plastic lid at him. Ray merely raised an unsurprised eyebrow and side glanced at her.

“I know” He said casually.

“That obvious, huh?” She mumbled.

“Buttercup, there’s not a single soul at that weddin’ that doesn’t know you have a crush on Daryl.” He mentioned.

“I think I care about him.” She continued. “The more time I spend with him, the worse it gets. He’s gorgeous.”

“So, pin him down and ride him into next week.” He suggested.

She shook her head and took another gulp of her coffee, running a hand through her hair. “Usually, I’d scold you for that comment.” She stated. “But on this occasion, I’m going to let it slide because every time I looked at him in that fucking suit, I just wanted to do all kinds of bad things to him.”

“I hear ya. Was a helluva suit, huh?” Ray said as he tilted his head back and recalled certain moments of the weekend.

“Oh yeah.” She agreed.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before? Why play all coy and waste a bunch of time?” Ray wanted to know.

“Didn’t matter. Nothing can happen between us.” She murmured. “I don’t want him threatened and put through a ton a crap for me. I couldn’t watch that happen to him. Also, I don’t think he feels the same about me anyway”

“He does.” Ray said firmly. Selene’s head snapped round and she gawped at him.

“What?”

“OK, don’t be mad” He pleaded.

“I’m going to be mad. I always am when you say that” She retorted

“I might have dropped a little hint that if he wanted to make a move you weren’t likely to run for the hills” Ray admitted.

“You did what?!” She exclaimed.

“Oh relax. He was so fuckin’ respectful of ya it made me sick to my stomach with jealousy. Dude’s a Casanova and he doesn’t even know it. Anyways, his reaction told me he does feel the same, but he didn’t think it was what you wanted.”

“I know you like to make something out of nothing, but that doesn’t mean he likes me in the same way, it just means he was considerate.” She expressed.
“Bullshit.” Ray snapped. “Don’t be a dumbass. You know better than that.” He pointed to her with the hand that held his coffee, his expression stern.

“It doesn’t matter, Ray. It can’t happen anyway. Besides, Angelo will be here in a couple of hours, I guess I could use a distraction.” She mused.

Ray wrinkled his nose and shot her a disapproving look.

“Ugh. Girl. Dude can draw an exceptional pair of breasts on a trucker’s arm, but he’s got the personality of a ladle and the morals of a Russian dictator. Remember what I said, standards.” He told her, wagging his finger at her.

“He’s pretty. He’ll work as a distraction.” She dismissed.

“Axel’s prettier, three step him instead.” He suggested.

“I’m not into kids, Ray.” She stated, hearing him laugh from beside her as she finished up her coffee.

“You’re a bitch” He quipped.

“So are you.” She smirked.

*****

Guests artists were booked by Ray to inject more variety and give the Tattoo Parlour a few exclusive opportunities to generate more appointments and revive interest. Angelo had won various awards during his ten years as a tattoo artist, his style being mainly old school work that neither Selene or any of the others were keen on, but it seemed the clients were. The studio was always packed when he was in town and Selene would always let him crash in her apartment, usually falling victim to his charm, giving in and sleeping with him. No one except Ray was aware of their activities outside of working hours, but they had witnessed him kiss Selene in a drunken act of humour after a few hours at the bar. It had happened a few times and none of them paid it much attention, none of them aside from Ritchie, who hated him with the fire of a thousand suns and made it surprisingly obvious. Bear was wary and balled his hands into fists whenever Angelo touched Selene, usually needing to be distracted by one of the others or given a pep talk by Axel. Angelo was not the kind of person any of them would have chosen to associate with, he was monotone, bordering on rude because of his dry sense of humour and was so sarcastic it was sometimes hard to tell when he was serious and when he wasn’t.

For the whole week, Daryl had executed his regular morning walk past The Ink Cabinet in the hope of catching a glimpse of Selene. On two occasions, he had been lucky. The first time she had been outside smoking and had given him a low-key wave coupled with a wink and it had replayed over and over in his mind for the rest of the day. On the second occasion, she was sat at her desk as Angelo perched on the corner of the table, making her laugh. Daryl was unimpressed and had quickly scooted past and tried not to spend the rest of the day wondering who the creep with the slicked back 70’s haircut was that was leering over the girl he liked.

*****

At the Ink Cabinet’s Christmas Party, Ray had decorated the back of Marty’s bar with the Tattoo parlours logo on pink balloons and put up what appeared to be millions of rainbow coloured bunting and flags. Ritchie had commented that it looked more like a gay bar than a tattooists Christmas party. Selene found it hilarious and was just glad she didn’t have to be the one to arrange
any of it. After multiple rounds of drinks and shooters, Selene wandered off to the bar with Angelo in tow.

Daryl shoved open the door to the bar and was met by a chorus of jeering and laughter from the back of the room, where he could see Ray parading around with rainbow flags in his hair. He stopped to check his watch, 11:30pm. He knew he was late, but he had previously decided not to show up and let Selene enjoy her Christmas party with her staff without him, but had changed his mind when he realised that he missed her and any opportunity to see her was a good one.

Ray threw a hand in the air and waved to Daryl across the bar, the others now noticing his presence and holding their hands up or nodding. Ritchie was the only one that did nothing but throw back another shot of Tequila. Daryl politely offered a half-hearted wave and turned to face the bar, stopping dead in his tracks.

Selene was backed against the bar, one leg bent and her foot against the front, her arms gripping the metal pole that ran along the edge of the surface, behind her on the countertop stood multiple drinks and in front of her was Angelo, his hands on her hips, slowly working their way down to the edge of her short, fitted skirt and fishnets, his lips on hers and her not fighting it.

His stomach flipped and rage blazed through his veins. He tightened his jaw and took a deep breath in an attempt to stave off his desire to run over, drag the guy away from her and connect his face with the floor instead. He must have stood there for at least a minute, the ruckus from the back of the room now dying down as the others started to realise what he was staring at. Selene’s arms were draped over Angelo’s shoulders and he could tell, despite the restricted view, that she was smiling into the kiss.

He took a step back and rubbed a hand over his face, his vision dropped away from them and hit the floor as he tried to control his anger and decide what do to, where to go, what to say. Then an urge too strong to fight took over. He had to leave. He whirled around and crashed through the door, slamming it on it’s hinges so hard the glass cracked and drew the attention of everyone in the bar. Flying out into the cold, night air, he stormed along the street in the direction of home, wishing he had never got involved with her in the first place.

“Daryl, where are you going?” A voice called out from behind. Feminine, but male. Ray.

“Home. What’s it to you?” He fumed as he kept walking.

“Just…stop.” He pleaded, grabbing at his arm and stopping him. Daryl flung his arm up aggressively and Ray shrank back slightly, realising he was in no mood to talk and he would have to tread carefully. “You saw her kissing him. The guys a fuckin’ sap, Daryl. She aint even into him.”

“So?” He snapped.

“Do you have feelings for her?” Ray asked directly, braving the potentially dangerous response.

“I aint talking about this shit with you. You already fucked my head up the last time we talked about her” Daryl threw at him, turning to walk away.

“For chrissakes!” Ray shouted at him, stopping him with shock instead of having to touch him. “I see how you look at her.”

“Don’t look at her no different to anybody else.” He tried.

“Bullshit. You look at her like the whole fuckin’ world could fall apart and you wouldn’t even
Daryl studied his face for a moment. There was no doubt he was sure about what he was saying, confident he was correct in everything he said.

“Shut up, Ray. You don’t know whatcha talkin’ ‘bout.” He spat defiantly, knowing in the back of his mind that Ray was more aware of what was going on in Selene’s life and mind, having been her friend since they were children.

“I’ve dated enough cheaters to know what jealousy looks like,” Ray said, lowering his voice and trying to scratch at the reason Daryl was so angry.

Daryl hesitated and ran a hand through his hair as he sighed, his anger still evident but slowly subsiding, etched on his face like it might never dissipate fully. He began to pace back and forth in front of Ray.

“We’re friends.” He eventually muttered.

“You wanna fuck all your friends?” Ray asked.

“I don’t…I mean I don’t just want…aint doin this.” He raged as he turned and stalked off again. Ray let out a growl of exasperation, he was losing the battle.

“She told me.” Ray called out. “She told me she thinks you’re gorgeous and she cares about you.”

Daryl stopped but didn’t turn around, his head dipped and his shoulders heaved as he breathed. Ray was aware he was toeing the line of confidentiality and running the risk of betraying Selene’s trust. But if he believed in something, like he believed Selene and Daryl could and should give things a chance, he was always dead set on seeing it through.

“She told me she’s scared of telling you how she feels about you for a lot of reasons. One of them is that you don’t feel the same. But you do, don’t you?” He pressed.

“I can’t be with her.” He heard Daryl state quietly

“Why not?” He questioned.

“It don’t matter why. I just can’t. She’s got him now anyways.” He complained, his hand flying up and gesturing in the direction of the bar.

“He’s just gonna screw her and leave her. Like he did last time he was in town.” He paused and considered the ramifications of his next comment but decided to go ahead anyway, almost certain it would have the desired effect. “Maybe she’s only good for a little hit n’ run, huh?”

Daryl slowly turned and glared at Ray, his eyes dark and hard, filled with pure anger.

“Don’t you talk about her like that.” He warned.

“Ooh.” Ray hummed, pursing his lips and placing one hand on a hip with a degree of attitude. “There it is, I knew that would get a reaction. You got some damn fierce need to protect her for someone that’s just gonna give up on her.”

Daryl tilted his head back and looked down his nose at Ray who seemed the most unlikely out of Selene’s friends to confront Daryl’s aggressive mood. But he hadn’t given in and Daryl had to respect him for that. If he was scared, he wasn’t showing it. Portraying only a steely determination
and an iron backbone. One thing was certain when it came to Ray, his devotion to his best friend was rock solid and unwavering.

“I’m done here. Stop me again and I’ll knock you the fuck out.” Daryl warned as he walked off. This time, Ray let him go and watched him take the corner at the end of the street and vanish from sight before he backed up and headed for the bar. A shadow stepped out from the corner, a few feet from where he and Daryl were stood and Ray almost landed a punch in the stranger’s face when he realised who it was.

“Bear?! How long have you been there?!?” he cried. “I almost pissed my pants!”

“The whole time.” Bear stated, his voice flat and his eyes trained on the corner where Daryl had disappeared.

“Jesus, clubfoot. You learned some fuckin’ ninja skills or something?” Ray exclaimed, his hand on his chest and soothing his racing heart.

“I just followed y’all. Saw him storm out. Heard the whole thing.” He confirmed.

“Yeah. I’m sorry Bear, I know you’re protective over Selene and you’d rather her die alone, but that guy right there with the biceps and the angry stare? He’s in love with her. He doesn’t know it yet, but it’s written all over his face.” Ray explained.

Bear crossed his huge arms across his chest, dwarfing Ray as he peered down at him. The sleeves of his black T-shirt strained against his biceps, as if they were about to rip at any second.

“I don’t like Dixon.” He grumbled.

“Well, I know that but-” Ray tried.

“-I aint finished, princess.” He interrupted.

“Oh?”

“But I fuckin hate that motherfucker in there with his hands on my sister. At least Dixon aint so bad in comparison.” He admitted. Ray almost fell over with shock, never expecting Bear to think there was anyone worse than Daryl and actually sounding like he’d prefer his sister to be with him over Angelo. Ray looked up at his towering friend and flashed him an ice white grin.

“Ain’t nothin’ like a bit of perspective, is there?”
Ritchie tugged his latex gloves off and deposited them in the trash before holding out a hand and helping his female client from the piercing chair. She was young, 23 judging by her I.D. Her hair was much like his, except her dreadlocks were bright blonde and swept up into a black Alice band. Her arms were decorated with flower tattoos and Ritchie had just provided her with her first facial piercing, in the middle of her lower lip. She wore a short, denim skirt and heavy, black boots with a deliberately ripped and distressed black, knitted sweater. There was no doubt this girl was pretty, very much Ritchie’s type and easy to talk to being an added bonus. She took his hand and scooted from the chair, perfectly capable of managing it herself but Ritchie was brought up to be chivalrous and respectful by his late father and always offered a hand even if it was turned down.

“Thank you” She said, dabbing at her lower lip with her fingers.

“Uh-uh, no touching it.” Ritchie said “Try and leave it alone, don’t play with the inside either.”

He handed her a small envelope containing an aftercare information card and a small pack of Sea Salt. She took hold of it and peered up at him with emerald green eyes brighter than he had ever seen.

“Um…Y-you need to wait four to six weeks before you can change the bar.” He stammered, her pretty features distracting him. “I know it feels real big right now but your lip is going to swell up some”

“No need for lip fillers then” She smiled.

“Nah, you’re pretty, don’t need that crap anyway” he said without thinking. Always having a tendency to blurt out what was on his mind before his brain could catch up with it, it was a miracle that his feelings for Selene hadn’t been exposed before. But if there was one thing he didn’t want, it was to lose her and so he had kept it all safely locked inside, eating away at him.

“Thanks” She said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Right, um, yeah so when the swelling goes down which is usually a couple days to around a week, then you can change the bar. If you want, you can just come back and see me and I’ll do it for you or if I’m not here, my boss, Selene can do it for you. Or, you can try on your own but be careful, make sure you sterilize everything and wash your hands. Remember that rings rotate in the piercing so they need to be cleaned a lot to stop them dragging bacteria into the hole.” He explained as he collected the wrappers of the needle and jewellery and disposing of them.

The girl was staring at him as he spoke and he was aware that she wasn’t really listening, preferring instead to look at him. He wasn’t a stranger to female interest and while he couldn’t say he hated it, it did stir his naturally shy and quiet soul and make him feel a little uncomfortable. Selene was always telling him how cute he was and that she wasn’t surprised that girls fell for his bright blue eyes, clear skin and gentle personality. Of course, hers was the only opinion that had
mattered to him in the last few years.

“Do you have any questions?” He asked.

“Just one.” She said “Do you have a girlfriend?”

Ritchie stopped statue still for a few seconds until shyness embraced him and he felt his cheeks become warm.

“N-no. I’m single.” He replied, his voice suddenly cracking unintentionally which only made his bashfulness worse.

*Pull yourself together, man. It’s just a girl, not Godzilla.*

“Me too” She chirped.

“Really? That’s surprising.” He said, knowing it would please her.

“Is it?” She questioned.

“Yeah, good looking girl like you. Plus, you’re an Incubus fan, can’t get much better than that.” He huffed bravely.

He had this, he knew he could flirt and say all the right things despite being nervous, he knew he could do it because it wasn’t Selene.

Speak of the Devil and he shall appear, they say. Only in this case, Ritchie thought of her and there she was. Selene. Thudding up the staircase and almost bowling him over again like she had with that damn black dress at the wedding. He had never seen her in red before and he hoped he never would again, the sight was too much to handle if he couldn’t have her for his own. The red, lace, plunging neckline showed off the middle of the tattoo under her breasts that Ritchie didn’t even know was there until now. He could only make out some kind of black, symmetrical pattern. She also wore a short, leather skirt and knee-high boots, finished off with a studded, leather jacket and a black choker. Her hair was wavy, hanging about her shoulders and her eyes smoky with lips to match the shade of her top. He knew she was dressed up because she was going out. With Daryl. She reached the top of the stairs and handed Ritchie a small, brown box.

“This just arrived in the mail for you.” She told him before turning to the girl and squinting at her lip. “Ahh! It Looks great! Are you happy with it?”

“I love it. It didn’t hurt anywhere near as much as I thought it would either.” She admitted.

“I like I said downstairs, Ritchie’s good at his job. He’s very gentle. He did some of my piercings too.” Selene informed her, shooting Ritchie a quick glance. He was clutching onto the box she had given him, his eyes flickering between the two stunning females in front of him, both very different, but both equally as terrifying.

“Yeah, he’s been fantastic with me. I was super nervous. I’ll be coming back to see him.” She hinted, quickly making eye contact with him as he took a deep breath and tried to calm the burning in his cheeks. He wasn’t sure if they had turned red or if it was just simmering somewhere, waiting to come out at the worst moment.

“Excellent. Well, as long as you’re happy, you can pay downstairs on your way out. The beautiful gay guy at the desk, Ray. He can do it for you.” Selene instructed before wandering to the other side of the room and opening up a cupboard, looking for paper towels and boxes of gloves. The
blonde, dreadlocked girl stepped closer to Ritchie.

“You wanna get a drink sometime?” She asked, quietly enough so she thought Selene couldn’t overhear.

Ritchie raised his eyebrows and attempted to hide how much he wanted to smile but failed and only made her more interested. She grinned at him when his icy blue eyes caught hers.

“Um, we have this policy, I can’t date clien-” He started

“He’ll go for a drink with you.” Selene cut in from across the room. They both turned to look at her, shocked by her interruption as she picked up a pen and scrawled about for a piece of paper. Spotting the envelope in the girl’s hand, she glided over to her, snatched it from her hand and slapped it on Ritchie’s shoulder. Using him to lean on, she scribbled his name and number on the back on the envelope and handed it to her.

What the hell is she doing?!

“Change of policy” She stated. “Here’s his number. You should text him. He doesn’t do phone calls. Don't forget to read your aftercare card. It was nice to meet you, sweetheart.”

With that, Selene collected her boxes of paper towels and gloves and wandered into the adjacent room which was used for storage. She didn’t need to be in there, she just knew she had to beat a hasty retreat and allow Ritchie to do the rest. When she closed the door behind her, she dropped the boxes and pressed her ear to the wood, straining to hear and being thankful the door was almost hollow.

“She’s your boss?” She queried.

“Yeah, and my friend. She’s awesome.” He confirmed, his fingers playing with the edge of his Ink Cabinet hooded jacket.

“Right. Well, I guess I’ll text you then. If you want me to?” She probed.

“Yeah, I’ll look forward to it.” He nodded, seeing her back up to the stairs.

“OK, thanks for the piercing.”

“No problem, you did great. Told you all the nerves were for nothing.” He chuckled slightly.

“You did” She beamed “Bye, Ritchie.”

“Wait” He called out as she took the first step. She stopped and glanced up at him.

“Your name is Skye, right?” He checked.

“Yeah, Skye with an ‘e’.” She giggled.

“OK, see ya, Skye with an ‘e’.” He held one hand up and stepped back, turning and heading to the store room where Selene was pressed against the back of the door.

When the door crashed into the side of her face, she jumped back and tripped over the box of gloves she’d previously dropped and stumbled further back into the room. Steadying herself just as Ritchie entered the small room, she held a hand in front of her face and started to laugh.
“Oh my god, Selene! What are you doing to me?!” Ritchie cried, his own amusement becoming apparent when his mouth curled into a smile and he began to shake his head in disbelief. “We can’t date clients, it’s policy.”

“I’m the Boss, I say what policy is and if I want to change it, I can.” She affirmed, pointing at him with a grin. “I know I’ve forbidden it in the past but she’s a little hottie and she’s into you. You can’t pass that up.” She went to bend down and collect the boxes she’d dropped previously but Ritchie held out a hand to stop her and picked them up himself. He handed them to her only to see her slide them onto a shelf and leave them there.

“I didn’t need them I was just finding an excuse to stick around.” She admitted with a smirk.

“Suppose I should thank you.” He scoffed.

“No need. Save it until you’re inviting me to the wedding.” She commented as she wandered out of the room and sat in the piercing chair, crossing her legs in front of her. Ritchie tried not to stare, wishing she was wearing something less alluring. She glanced around the room, admiring how tidy everything appeared to be which was a world apart from the tattoo studio downstairs. Ritchie found his bag under a table and pulled out a square gift, wrapped in brown paper with a small, black bow.

“Here, wanted to give this to you before you went out” He said, swallowing hard. “Happy Birthday.”

Selene’s eyes widened and a smile breezed across her face. She took the gift and traced her fingers over the bow before looking at him with a mixture of surprise and affection. She plucked at the bow, delicately unravelling it and pulled the tape from the folds at the sides of the gift. A wooden surface met her touch under the paper as she opened it up to reveal a black, wooden frame containing a bright blue butterfly.

“It’s a Menelaus blue Morpho, same as the tattoo on your leg.” He mentioned.

Selene moves the paper away and held the frame next to the realistic butterfly tattoo on her thigh, it was almost identical. She had chosen the Blue Morpho for its intense colour and impressive size, wanting it to be the only tattoo she had with colour in it so it stood out. Ritchie began to panic when she didn’t say anything for a long time, unable to move, he struggled to think of something to break the silence with.

“Do-do you like it?” He asked gingerly.

Selene looked up at him.

“Rich, this is beautiful. And- and very thoughtful of you.” She uttered, now holding the frame in her lap with both hands. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to.” He mumbled, dropping his vision to his skater trainers and noticing one of his laces was untied. He had thought long and hard about a small but meaningful gift to get her and had found the butterfly on an oddities website. The previous year, he had bought her the thin, silver bracelet that she wore to Shorty’s wedding and had never seen her wear it until that day, when his heart had leapt into his throat at the realisation that she saved it for special occasions. Selene slid from the chair and walked over to Ritchie, bringing him into her arms and holding him in a tight embrace, the frame still clutched in one of her hands behind her back. Ritchie was rigid with nerves but eventually lifted his hands enough to be able to slide them around her middle. She gently kissed the side of his face and he couldn’t help but turn his head slightly, his cheek meeting hers.
I want to kiss you so badly.

“Thank you so much” She whispered into his ear.

“You’re welcome.” He breathed nervously.

She broke away, picked up the paper, threw it away and slowly headed for the stairs while looking down at her new butterfly.

“I’m going to name it.” She mused. Stopping at the top. “El Pensativo.”

“What’s that mean?”

“These butterflies are found in the Cerrado, which is a tropical Savannah in Brazil. They speak Portuguese in Brazil. El Pensativo means ‘The Thoughtful.’ Like you, Rich. It’s going to be named after you, but not in the standard way.” She explained. “This is going to look awesome on my wall.”

Ritchie didn’t really know what to say. He wanted to tell her that he wasn’t surprised she hadn’t chosen the standard way, because nothing about her was standard.

“That’s pretty cool. Thanks” was all he could manage.

Despite earning himself a lingering and memorable hug, he still had one more thing to do before she left. One more burning question that had been bothering him all night and all morning. He stepped forward and she waited, sensing he was about to say something.

“Selene, um… I know you’re gonna think it ain’t my business but- but we all care about you here. So, I guess I just wanna know why the hell you keep hookin’ up with a douchebag like Angelo.”

He forced himself to say.

She rolled her eyes but not in frustration at Ritchie, more at the situation as a whole and leaned against the handrail at the top of the stairs.

“I needed a distraction.” She confessed.

“From what?” He asked. She bit her bottom lip and gave him a pained look “Oh…Daryl.”

“Yeaaaah” She groaned.

He began playing with the sleeves of his jacket, winding his wrists inside them and gathering them inside in his fingers.

“You like him?” He pushed.

Selene sighed. A long, dramatic and troublesome sigh and tucked her butterfly under her arm.

“Yes, I do. But I can’t do anything about it. My father would go after him and he doesn’t feel the same, so…” she trailed off.

Ritchie had realised at some stage that his feelings for Selene were more than just a schoolboy crush and that he genuinely cared about her, to the point where she was near enough all he ever thought about. When she was happy, he was happy and when she was sad or angry, he felt the same. If he sensed she was lonely, he would offer to take her out or simply sit with her and talk about films and music. Those were the moments that solidified his certainty that he would never find another woman like her.
“He tell you that?” He wanted to know.

“No.” She replied meekly.

“Then how do you know?”

“I guess I don’t.” She conceded.

Hating the idea of her being with Daryl or anyone else, Ritchie’s need to see her happy was far outweighed by the need to keep her away from every other Male that showed interest and so he found himself torn between his own misery and the happiness of the woman he had fallen for. He had a decision to make and it was obvious to him what path he would choose.

“I think he feels the same. I mean, he broke the door at Marty’s last night because he saw you and Mr. Douchebag from Florida.” He expressed.

Selene caught his eye and gave him a sad look which was almost enough to snap his heart into two pieces.

“Yeah, I saw that. I guess I just figured Angelo doesn’t even live in this state so I wouldn’t care much if my dad scared him off. But I would hate to see Daryl have to deal with that shit.” She told him.

*I need you to be happy. You have to be happy. If that means I have to push you to him, then so be it.*

“If he treats you good and you’re happy when you’re with him, you should just tell him. Figure all the other shit out later. Believe me, you’ll spend your life kicking your fucking self if you don’t. Life is too short for that.” He offered.

Selene looked confused for a moment.

“I got the impression that you didn’t like him.” She stated.

Ritchie shook his head. From what he had seen and heard, Daryl had proved that his intentions towards Selene were respectable and that he had treated her well so far. He could also tell when he observed how Daryl looked at her, that he was falling for her. He knew because he had done the exact same thing.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. What matters is that you’re happy.” He urged, the words almost choking him.

“Try telling that to my father.” She scoffed.

“Could be worse, it could be Merle.” Ritchie suggested, attempting to lighten the mood with some humour.

“Not if I was the last woman on earth and he was the last man and humanity depended on it.” Selene confirmed.

They both chuckled quietly and Selene reached out and took hold of Ritchie's Wrist, his hand working out from inside his sleeve. She held his fingers in hers and squeezed them gently.

“Thank you for your perspective. I love you, Ritchie.” she smiled.

*I love you too, but not in the same way. So, I can’t say it back.*
“Anytime. Have a good time at the movies. You look amazing. That the top Ray bought you?” He asked, trying to change the subject but regretting honing in on her low-cut outfit

“Yeah… it’s… red.” She pointed out, letting go of his hand and looking down at herself.

“He kept showing it to us all, asking opinions. I dunno why, like any of us know about women’s clothes. That’s more his area of expertise.” He smiled.

“That, and eyeliner.” Selene added. “Anyway, I better go, I’ve got to go talk to Bear about Daryl taking me to the movies.”

“Something tells me you won’t have to say much. I think he’s coming around to the idea.” He informed her.

“Huh” she huffed. “Miracles do happen. I won’t bother then.”

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Bear had held back his doubts about Daryl taking Selene to the Movies. After his showdown the previous night outside Marty’s bar with Ray, he had seen a new side to him, a side that spoke volumes about Daryl’s true feelings for his little sister. Unlike their father, Bear didn’t actually want Selene to never date or have a relationship. In fact, he wanted her to settle down and get married and make him an uncle one day, but the person she did that with had to pass a rigorous and difficult test that meant he had to be won over in a spectacular manner. That evening, he deliberately stayed behind later than everyone else after closing and took his time checking his appointments for the next day and drawing up designs.

Appearing at the bottom of the stairs, Selene grabbed her cell and keys from the desk in front of him and quickly checked her lipstick in the reflection on her cellphone.

“You’re dressed up for the movies.” Bear commented.

She lowered her phone and shot him an angry glare.

“And that is none of your business.” She scolded. “If you’re staying, remember to use the spare key and lock up when you leave.” She turned and clipped across the wooden floor in her heeled, knee high boots.

“Selene” Brad called out as he stood up behind the desk. She stopped and turned to him.

“I know you’re going to do what you want, no matter what I say.” He started “Dixon, he’s got a rep y’know. He’s been in trouble with the cops and you know he never even finished high school.”

“Get to the point Brad, I’m late.” She snapped.

“Alright, he kinda surprised me at the wedding. He never left your side. So, I guess what I’m trying to say is; if he’s good to you. Treats you well and makes ya happy. Then I won’t stand in your way. But if he hurts you, I’ll fucking kill him, Selene.” He warned.

She slowly sank down onto a tattoo chair and clasped her clutch bag in her lap. Her eyes were low and she studied the grain of the wooden floor as she contemplated what was going on in her life at that point. What was she doing with Daryl? Was this even fair on either of them?
“We both know that if dad gets even a hint that there might be something between Daryl and I, he’s going to send in the cavalry and do everything he can to keep him away.” She said solemnly.

Bear shuffled out from behind the desk and walked over to where she was sitting. He held out a hand and she peered up at him before taking it and allowing him to help her to her feet. He kept hold of her, his huge hand wrapped around her pale digits, decorated with skull rings.

“If this is what you want, if he is what you want. I will do everything I can to keep dad and his merry band of pricks from finding out.” He offered.

“Brad, you said you wouldn’t go near any of them again and that was over six years ago now.” She pointed out.

“I’ll do it if it means you’re happy. I fuckin hate you lookin’ like this. I hate you kissing Angelo more, but we won’t talk about that. Might just follow the guy back to Florida, feed him to some gators. Problem solved. You seem happy around Daryl. Is he what you want?” He questioned.

She tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. “If he wants me too. Then, yes.”

Bear reached out and tapped her shoulder, signalling for her to hug him. She obliged, her small frame enveloped in his massive limbs.

“I just hope Dad doesn’t already know.” She whispered. “If he does, there’s no point to any of this.”

****

Daryl had spent the entire night awake, staring at the ceiling in the dark and replaying the image of Selene kissing another guy in his head. He hadn’t expected to feel so passionately about her showing interest in someone else. But he was angry. Angry and hurt and realising that if he wanted to continue to see her, he would have to swallow the notion that she would eventually end up with someone else and that she would never really be his.

He had been torn about taking her to the movies, knowing he was risking a lot by being around her. Especially when three of her father’s suited and armed employees had shown up on the doorstep first thing in the morning and threatened him with violence if he ever touched her, he had said nothing. Not even one word. He simply listened, nodded, closed the door and checked the Movie times for later that night. Not a single flicker of fear. Daryl knew violence, it was as familiar to him as eating or breathing and so being threatened with it had little effect. He knew he should stay away; her father had made it more than clear that he was being watched and didn’t want him to be any more than an acquaintance to her. But as long as nothing happened between them, he could continue to see her and that was better than the alternative.

When he arrived in the parking lot of the tattoo parlour, he switched off the engine and caught sight of himself in the rear-view mirror. He looked tired. Exhausted from hours spent simmering and thinking about Selene smiling as she kissed Angelo. He wished he could turn back time and make the decision to stay away from Marty’s that night.

Hearing the door to the building slam, he glanced out of the window and his breath hitched in his throat.

Selene sauntered towards him in her new, red top and short skirt, showing off her thigh tattoos. He wasn’t usually one to leer at women like his brother did, but he wasn’t altogether disinterested. At that moment in time, he was the most interested he’d ever been. He climbed out of the driver’s side
and as he waited for her to reach him, he took a second to appreciate the curves of her body. Aside from her shorts the night they shared a bed at Shorty’s wedding, he had never seen her in anything as revealing. Usually covered in fishnet and corsets, he was now able to see her in a more simplistic outfit with her new, red, low-cut top and short, black leather skirt. Even with the cold air prickling his skin, his palms grew warm and he suddenly forgot all about how cold it was outside the truck.


“Hey” She grinned

“Hey. Happy Birthday. You look good.” He offered, a brave compliment that had just slipped out without him thinking too much about it. She seemed pleased by it and looked down at her clothes, smoothing her hands over her skirt.

“Thank you. I don’t usually wear colours but Ray bought me this for my birthday. I’m not sure about the red.” She disclosed, curling her lip.

“I like it” Daryl expressed.

“Well you’re the one that has to look at me all night so that’s a good thing.” She chuckled.

Daryl walked round the truck with Selene following, he opened the passenger side door and she smirked at his chivalrous gesture that seemed so out of place for a rough redneck, yet it made him all the more endearing.

*****

At the movie theatre, Daryl had refused to let Selene pay for a single thing, even after she’d picked armfuls of popcorn, candy and drinks like an excited child in a toy store. He smiled to himself all the way through the movie due to Selene laughing animatedly at all the scary parts and the way the audience jumped and when she had decided to rest a hand on his leg, his entire body went taut. He didn’t shy away, or even acknowledge what she’d done, but he did sit there and wonder why. Hours before, she had been kissing another guy. Merle had always told him women were complicated as shit and it was easier to just agree with what they said and say sorry even when you weren’t sorry at all. In his current situation, he was inclined to agree with Merle’s perception of the female species, considering he had never felt more mixed up and perplexed in his life.

His skin warmed under the light weight of her hand and he considered if she had plans to surprise him with anything else. If she did, there was no telling how he’d react. Selene had seen it as a kind of test to see if he would move away or brush her off. When he didn’t, it became a small triumph and a sign that maybe he did like her in the same way that she liked him.

He hadn’t spoken much and Selene could tell he was pensive and withdrawn while still remaining polite enough. But on the drive home he didn’t utter a word, his attention was firmly fixed on the road as Selene observed from beside him, not bothering to hide her interest in his quiet mood.

Back in the parking lot, Selene jumped out of the truck and headed towards the back door, Daryl slamming the trucks door on his side and following her. Halfway to her destination, she turned and fumbled with her hands in front of her.

“Thank you, for the movie. You didn’t have to pay.” She told him.

“Ain’t ‘sposed to pay for shit on ya Birthday.” He shrugged.

“Well, I appreciate it, I’m going to turn in. Goodnight.” She held up a hand in a small wave and
made tracks towards the door.

“Night.” Daryl grunted, taking a few slow steps back. He didn’t intend to leave before she was safely inside and so saw no point in rushing, especially when the view was so good. When she stopped and gradually turned back to him, he paused and noticed her nervously playing with the rings on her fingers,

“Daryl…” She tried

“Yeah?”


“Naw, what’s up?” He called out, more curious than anything else. His mind quickly ran through all the possibilities of what this could be about but he came up with nothing. She sighed and stamped her foot like a toddler which made him break into a small smile. He liked how she got so easily irritated by her own need for honesty and how it seemed to present it’s self in an immature yet totally adorable way.

“Are you OK?” She asked.

Daryl looked confused. *Am I OK?*

“Yeah, why?”

“You’ve been real quiet with me tonight.” She stated.

“Sorry. Just tired. Didn’t get any sleep last night. Merle was high” He disclosed, stopping short of telling her the reason why his night had been sleepless.

“Oh…OK.” She nodded. “I-I know you saw me kissing Angelo. I saw you turn and storm out.” The words had tumbled out and as she heard herself say them, she cursed herself for not thinking it through in greater detail.

“Oh.” Daryl grunted.

Suddenly, everything began to rise in her mind and she felt an intense need to explain herself to him. She bit her lip in an attempt to halt the barrage of words that were forming but it wasn’t enough to hold it back.

“It was just a bit of fun. It didn’t really mean anything to me. I didn’t sleep with him. He stayed on my couch and he got up and left for Florida this morning. I’ve slept with him before but I didn’t this time because it’s not that simple anymore and I’m not likely to see him again and I really didn’t think you’d show at Marty’s anyway because it got so late oh my god stop me from talking, I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.” She rambled, her cheeks beginning to grow warm with embarrassment.

“You aint gotta explain.” He mumbled, his tone curt and bordering on irrititated. Anxiety clawed at her and she felt herself starting to panic.

“I feel like I do.” She admitted.

“Naw, you don’t.” He said.

“Why?”
“Cause we’re just friends.”

Selene felt a stab of sadness and she had to admit she was growing increasingly tired of hearing the phrase ‘just friends’ when all she really wanted was for them to be much more than that.

“All of the guys hate him. But none of my other friends stormed out like you did.”

He stepped back under a dimmed light on the wall and it illuminated the puzzlement on his face. He had no idea what to say. In the silence, a long time passed and the only movement between them was the small, white clouds created by their warm breath in the cold air. Selene accepted that she may not get an answer and decided to give up and go inside. She turned and went to reach for the handle on the door.

“Whatever, I’ll see you around.” She snapped.

“Alright.” He called out. “Yeah. I was pissed.”

She stopped and walked back to him, standing around two feet away from him and crossing her arms.

“Why?” She demanded.

Daryl wasn’t sure how honest he should be but he did know that he didn’t want to lie to her. More than aware that this conversation could well mean the end of their friendship, he wanted to hold back and try to avoid things going any further, but she wanted answers and judging by the tone of her voice, she wasn’t going to give up a second time.

“Because he doesn’t give a fuck about you” He uttered.

“I know. I didn’t do it because I thought he cared. Like I said, I did it for fun. It didn’t mean anything.” She reiterated.

“Yeah, to you maybe.” He muttered under his breath.

“What? This really sounds like jealousy, Daryl.” She shot at him, her voice now raised.

Irritation prickled at Daryl’s skin.

“Ya damn fuckin’ right it’s jealousy” he snapped “Ya think I like seein’ some prick with his hands all over you like that?”

She flinched slightly at his words and dropped her hands to her sides, winding them inside her jacket sleeves, confusion flickered across her face.

“It’s not really any of your business. Why are you jealous?” she wanted to know.

“Think ya know why” he grumbled as he began to pace about in front of her like a lion parading across its territory.

“No, I don’t. You need to tell me.” She pushed.

“You can do better than him” He said, continuing to stalk back and forth and being reluctant to disclose

Selene was making progress but her direct and revealing questions were making him highly uncomfortable and she knew that pushing him like this could well have consequences. Daryl had
already told her he wasn’t great with words and being made to stand and talk to her about such a
delicate subject was not sitting well with him as had become apparent in his physical behaviour.

“Better… like you?” She suggested.

“No. Not like me.” He said quickly.

“Why?”

“C’mon Selene.” He pleaded.

“Why, Daryl?” She continued.

“I ain’t good enough for you either.” He stopped and glared at her, his expression pleading.
Pleading to be able to remove himself from this situation.

“What if I said I think you’re wrong.” She uttered.

“I’d say you’d lost ya mind” He scoffed, his hands flapping against his pants leg on each side. She
narrowed her eyes at him.

“You’re incredibly frustrating, y’know that?”

He grunted and resumed his pacing, now creating a path in the gravel under his boots.

Selene hesitated for a long time while she tried to decide what she wanted to say. The desire to just
lay her cards on the table now stronger than ever she thought back to what Ritchie had told her,
should she just tell him and figure everything else out later?

“Angelo isn't a patch on you, Daryl. There's not even any competition. I would never have kissed
him if you’d kissed me first.” There it was. The point of no return. It had been said and now all she
could do was wait.

He stopped walking and raised an eyebrow as he shifted his stance to the side. Running a hand
over his chin, he glanced up at her, quirking the corner of his mouth up into the smallest, blink and
you’d miss it smile.

“What?” He whispered, his voice laced with pure surprise.

“You heard me.” She responded.

Now, he smiled properly, dropping his vision to the floor as he let it sink in. Selene found herself
smiling back at the sight of him bashfully coming to terms with the idea that she did, in fact, want
him to kiss her.

“Look, I’m kinda confused. Thought ya wanted us to be friends.” He said.

“I did. But there’s been something between us since that night in the alley and you know it. You
had the perfect opportunity to kiss me at the wedding and you didn’t take it. So, I assumed I could
have a little fun, especially since I thought you weren’t going to show.”

Not used to being put in this situation, Daryl was stumped and each response he gave seemed to
take him forever to gather in his mind. Selene was being patient enough and watched him with a
faint smirk.

“I didn’t think ya liked me like that.” He mumbled.
Selene laughed a little and ran a hand through her hair.

“Daryl, I three stepped you on a dance floor in front of 200 people.” She grinned

He cleared his throat and took a step back, trying to gather his thoughts. He had thought at the time that she was flirting with him for a reason, but he had assumed that reason was because she wanted to have a bit of fun and that there was no serious intent in her actions. As much as he had enjoyed her flirting with him, he had no choice but to refrain from thinking too much into it.

“Thought ya were just playin’.” He admitted.

“I was, because your hands were around my waist and I was looking into your eyes and stroking your neck and everyone was watching and don’t you get it? You’re not a friend to me, Daryl. You’re more than that. I like you. I really, really like you.”

His demeanour suddenly changed and he turned his body away from her, the smile dropping from his face. Selene felt a flash of worry and instinctively stepped forwards.

“Don’t.” He snapped, shaking his head.

“What?”

“Don’t say that to me. There ain’t no point.” He told her.

“What are you talking about? Of course there is. If this is mutual. We have something here.” She reasoned.

“We don’t. I mean, we can’t.”

“So, it’s not mutual? you don’t like me like that?”

“No. I mean, yeah, I do. But I can’t.”

“Why? Am I not good enough for you?” She hit out sarcastically.

Then, something in Daryl snapped.

“C’mon, Selene. Don’t come at me with that shit! You can have whoever ya want and ya standing here in front of me, wonderin’ why I ain’t made no moves on ya. I’m a broke Redneck who lives in a shack in the woods with my lowlife brother. Last weekend was the first time I used more than one knife and fork to eat a damn meal. You got successful a business, good friends, a brother who would kill anyone that looked at ya wrong, you’re smart and classy as hell” He trailed off, pacing a couple more times before stopping and looking up at her again. “You’re so fuckin’ beautiful. You don’t want me.”

Her face flushed and her cheeks turned pink. She lifted a hand to her face with her Jacket sleeve pulled over her fingers and tried to hide her shyness. His honest words had taken a while to emerge but when they did, they brought with them a surge of excitement for Selene. He did like her, and he thought she was beautiful.

“Fuck you” She whispered.

“What?” He asked angrily.

“You made me blush.” She continued to hide behind her jacket sleeve and looked to the side in an attempt to stop him from seeing her reddened cheeks. But just like that, his anger dissipated and all
he wanted to do was grab her and kiss her. But he couldn’t.

“I do want you” She squeaked. “I don’t care. I don’t care that you’re broke or about where you live or with who. I don’t care if you’re uncultured or fucking feral. What I care about is how you make me feel and I don’t know how you do it, but when I’m with you, it’s like I’m a priority. *Your* priority.”

“You are” He rasped.

“Obviously not.” She exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air.

“Look, ya aint never asked where I work.” Daryl mentioned.

She screwed her face up in confusion and squinted at him.

“What the hell has that got to do with anything? You’re a mechanic.” She wanted to know.

He stared at her, his head low but his eyes narrowed and locked with hers through the front of his hair. He knew he was about to ruin everything, but he had to tell her the truth.

“Yeah, at Rocket City Auto Repairs.”

Her mouth fell open for a few seconds before she laughed in frustration and nodded.

“Right. You work for my father. Of course you do. I should have known. It all makes sense now. That’s why I’m your fucking secret.” She fumed.

“Yeah. I told you he ain’t my biggest fan. We can’t be any more than friends. I’ll lose my job, so will Merle. Amongst other shit. Ya don’t wanna be with me anyways, like I said, you can do better.” He reiterated.

“That’s for me to decide.” She spat “Has he threatened you? Actually, let me re-phrase that. Has he sent one of his minions to threaten you?”

He nodded, remembering the three suited men that arrived at the door, all with guns. “Got a visit this mornin’ at home”

“That fucking asshole!” She hissed.

“Selene, I wouldn’t care if it was just me. But Merle’s on his last strike with ya ol’ man. I can’t risk this. He’s my brother.” He explained.

“Last strike?” She questioned.

“Yeah. Three strikes and ya out.”

“Out as in fired? Or something else?”

“Think ya know the answer to that.”

“Yeah. Figures.” She huffed sarcastically as she backed up to the door. Her expression morphed into sadness as she took in the sight of him, probably for the last time.

“M’sorry” he offered.

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine. I should have stayed well away from you. I’m sorry you were
threatened.” She said, her voice noticeably cracking.

“Can still talk, be friends.” He suggested.

“Ray, Axel, Ritchie, Bear, even Marty from the bar- they can all tell that we’re more than friends. If they can tell, so can my father and his spotters. I don’t owe your brother shit, but I’m not willing to put you in the line of fire. We can’t be friends, Daryl. We can’t be anything. My father has stepped in and crossed a line by threatening you. It’s too risky. Thank you for a nice night and for always being a perfect gentleman with me. You’re going to make some girl real happy someday. Take care of yourself.” Feeling her eyes well with tears, she turned and gripped the handle on the door.

“Wait. Please.” Daryl called out. She paused but remained with her back to him.

“I don’t wanna not see you.”

She didn’t respond straight away, giving herself time to answer without giving away how upset she was. “We don’t have a choice”.

Once again silence filled the air and Daryl felt like he was losing the battle and was clinging on by his fingertips.

Tell her. She needs to know. Say it.

“I think about you all the time”

It was the truth, but it was also a desperate attempt to get her to stay. The thought of never seeing her again providing him with the shove he needed to tell her how he felt. Selene closed her eyes and fought with everything she had not to cry.

“OK, um… I wasn’t ever gonna tell ya this, but I guess it don’t matter, seein’ as we ain’t gonna be seeing each other no more.” He started.

“Tell me what?” She asked as she slowly turned around. He noticed her bloodshot, glassy eyes and his heart lurched.

Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.

“I don’t wanna sound like a stalker or some shit. I ain’t. But, I park across town for where I work, just so I can walk past this place every mornin’. Sometimes I see you at ya desk. Or in the coffee shop. Sometimes I don’t. But the chance is worth it. Seein you, even just for a minute… it’s the best part of my day.”

She raised her gaze to him and tears began to escape from her eyes, trickling down her cheeks.

“I’ll walk away. If that’s what ya want.” He backed up towards his truck, seeing her angrily bat a tear from her face and sniff loudly. He stopped for a moment, pulling his keys from his pocket.

“Ain’t nobody like you, Selene. You’re amazin’. Be with somebody that ain’t ever gonna forget that.”

She wanted to call to him, to tell him not to leave and that she would miss him more than he knew. She wanted to tell him that they could figure it out together. That she thought about him all the time too, that she loved seeing him and she had noticed him walk past the studio. But he was looking out for a member of his family, someone who didn’t deserve it but was all he had. She
wanted to be with him more than she’d ever wanted to be with anyone but she couldn’t stand the thought of him getting hurt because of her. Her stomach was heavy and her throat constricted while she stood there and watched him start the engine. As the truck pulled away, a loud and uncontrollable sob heaved from her chest and she whirled around, grabbing the handle of the door, unlocking it and charging inside.

****

Her cellphone lit up as she stabbed at the button. With her legs curled up under her and a box of Kleenex beside her, she sat up on the bed and scrolled through her contacts, looking for Brads number. Usually, she would turn to Ray, but at that particular moment, she needed her big brother. Tears still rolled down her cheeks and she grew more and more annoyed with herself by the second at the thought that she felt a lot more for Daryl than she had anticipated. The notion that she would have to break contact with him for good made her feel sick to her stomach.

She pressed Brad’s number and brought the phone to her ear, at the same time dabbing at the running, black mascara under her eyes. The phone rang out and she cursed and checked the time. Past midnight. She hit redial. Eventually, Brad picked up.

“Hello?”

“It’s me. Can you come over? I need you.”

“Selene? Are you crying? What happened?”

“Please, Brad. Just come over.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

****

Daryl stopped the truck before leaving the lot and climbed out of the cab, now sitting on a bench and lighting a cigarette. He tried to think clearly, to organise his thoughts somehow so that everything made sense. But it didn’t and it wouldn’t, not without her. He hoped that she’d come running back out into the lot, telling him she’d changed her mind and they could stay friends. Or, even better, that she’d spoken to her father and by some miracle he’d let it slide. But no such thing would happen and he had resigned himself to sitting in the parking lot alone and imagining what could have been.

A red pickup sped into the lot and kicked up a huge cloud of dust as it turned harshly and came to a stop in a space on the other side to where Daryl was sitting. Brad quickly exited the truck and did a double take when he noticed Daryl smoking in the corner. His face immediately became stony and angry and he curled his fingers into fists as he stormed towards him. Rage flared in his chest as he assumed this had to be the reason Selene was crying.

Daryl didn’t care. If he was going to hit him, he was welcome to. He figured maybe a little pain would help him feel something and it meant he didn’t have to go to a bar and pick on the first guy he saw as a distraction from everything that was going on inside his head. As much as he tried to deny he was anything like Merle, they did share some tendencies and blowing off steam with, beer, drugs or a good, old fashioned fight was one of them.

“Yo, Redneck. Any idea why my sister is calling me this late at night, crying and wanting to see me?” He raged as he came to a stop in front of him.

“You should go ask her.” Daryl mumbled, motioning to the door with his cigarette.
“I’m asking you!” He shouted. Again, Daryl did nothing, not even a blink. He slowly looked up at Brad.

“Your father threatened me. Found out I been spendin’ time with Selene. Warned me off”

Brad instantly seemed to calm in the knowledge that his sister hadn’t been physically harmed and that Daryl hadn’t intentionally hurt her. He had been somewhat prepared for this due to his previous conversation with Selene before she’d left for the movies but wasn’t expecting such dramatics at such a late hour.

“Jesus.” He sighed “there anything going on between you two?”

Daryl huffed in sarcastic amusement and shook his head, flicking his cigarette into a nearby plant pot.

“No. Could have. But it won’t. She just told me we can’t even be friends. Doesn’t wanna risk it. Neither do I, Merle’s a shithead but I gotta think of him too. Either of us pisses ya ol’ man off and we’re both in a lotta trouble.”

“Then why you still here, Dixon?” Brad demanded.

Concluding that his night couldn’t possibly get any worse, he chose to just be straight up.

“I dunno. Thought maybe she might change her mind or some shit. I don’t wanna not see her at all.”

Brad studied his expression as he spoke, keeping his head low. Daryl completely avoided his gaze but sensed his anger gradually dissipating. He could also tell he was saddened by what had happened and that it had meant his little sister had been left devastated.

“I don’t like you.” Brad stated “or your scumbag brother.”

“You and everybody else in this town.” Daryl mentioned, rolling his eyes.

“But you saved my sister in that alleyway. Stopped her from getting hurt. You came to Shorty’s wedding… I know you did it for her. You even danced with her. I see the way you look at her, like she’s precious. I also saw how you reacted when you saw her kissing that jackoff in the bar last night. Everybody saw. I know you care about her.”

Now Daryl looked up. Brad was glaring right at him.

“I do.” He agreed.

“She’s my little sister, y’know? Don’t wanna think of her with anyone, let alone a Dixon. But I’llma go talk to her. If there’s a way around this, we’ll figure it out. You should get outta here, if he’s threatened you, you’re being watched. Not doing yourself any favours being here.”

Daryl sat up straight and began rummaging in his pocket, finding his movie ticket from earlier and unfolding it. Turning it over he looked down at the blank space on the back of it.

“You got a pen?” He asked

Brad felt the outsides of his pockets and dug into one of them. He handed him a tattoo marker, not bothering to ask any questions. Daryl scribbled something on the Ticket and folded it in half.

“Just give this to her for me. In case I don’t see her no more.” He proposed, holding out the ticket.
Brad glanced down suspiciously at the ticket, making a mental note to check what it said once he was out of view, before snatching it from his hand and thumping over to the door.

“Get outta here, Dixon.” He called over his shoulder.

*****

Brad spoke to Selene well into the night, curled up next to her on the bed between making cups of coffee and eventually opting for whiskey to take the edge off. He could see by her obvious sadness that she liked Daryl a hell of a lot more than he had first thought and after their chat in the parking lot, he could also say the same about Daryl’s feelings for Selene.

She had tried to come up with a million and one ideas, ways she could see Daryl without a threat hanging over them but Brad had been sceptical about each one, reminding her that their father would go to the ends of the earth to keep a hold of his control on her, especially since Brad had walked out of his life and she was the only one left.

Admitting that Daryl was actually starting to win him over had made things worse and caused her to cry even more and he scolded himself for not knowing the right thing to say at the right time. He suggested she speak to Ray, an idea which was shot down immediately because simply wouldn’t understand. He wasn’t from their family, Brad knew firsthand what they were dealing with.

Brad shuffled off the bed after three hours and told her he was heading home to catch some sleep before he had to be back again at 9am. He kissed the top of her head and picked up his jacket, shoving his hands in the pockets. His fingers brushed against something small and papery when he remembered the movie ticket Daryl had given him. Taking advantage of the fact that his back was turned to her, he opened up the small piece of card and read what Daryl had written.

Sighing loudly, Selene had noticed his preoccupation.

“What is it?” She questioned.

He grit his teeth and closed his eyes for a second. He wanted to withhold it from her, to tell her it was nothing and spare her more tears. But it wasn’t his place. So, he turned and stepped back over to the bed, holding the ticket between his fingers.

“I ran into him in the parking lot when I got here.”

“He was still here?”

“Yeah, he asked me to give you somethin’. I wasn’t going to, didn’t wanna make you cry more, but it’s not right if don’t. So, here”

He held out the ticket to her and she quickly scrambled across the sheets and plucked it from his grasp. He was sure he had never seen her move so fast.

“I love you, Selene. But I can’t see you cry no more tonight. So, I’m gonna shoot.” He said sadly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She smiled up at him with her best attempt at genuine thanks even though she was drained and her emotions had left her exhausted.

“Thanks, big brother. I love you too.”

Brad clicked open the door and stepped outside, leaving his sister alone with a crumpled movie
ticket that was going to mean much more to her than she was expecting.

She slowly unfolded the ticket, seeing words scrawled in purple tattoo marker. Her eyes filled with tears once more and she pressed her fingers to her lips. Her heart thudded and her stomach knotted.

‘You look pretty in red’. 
As far as father-daughter relationships went, Selene and Bill’s was incredibly strained and almost at breaking point but he refused to let go of her after having his son disown him. Bill thrived on power and control and as long as Selene was still in his grasp, he felt as though everything else would fall into place. She visited from time to time to make sure he was still alive and taking his meds. Something which she now knew she was likely to cease doing in the future.

She was fifteen when he walked in on her kissing a boy from high school in the living room and ever since then had defied her to ever see another boy in a romantic capacity again. Such a thought drove him to insanity and the more she pulled away from him, the tighter he held on. Bill wasn’t stupid, he knew that Selene loved him because he was her father, but she didn’t like him one, little bit and as she had grown into a strong and capable woman, his need to keep her away from men had only strengthened. Owning and running a successful strip club, among other businesses, had meant Bill was painfully aware of the nature of men, how they treated women and their thought process. But over everything else, he had a firm hold of everything in his life. His income, his army of staff, the luxuries he afforded himself and his daughter. Or, so he thought.

Even the staff Selene employed had all been checked out and were monitored on a daily basis to ensure they posed no threats. Not even Ray was safe from Bill’s stalking after frequently spotting the same truck outside his apartment for the last few years.

Selene hated living under her fathers dangerous and unpredictable shadow. Living in a fishbowl was becoming tiresome and frustrating and she often wondered if she should try to follow in Brads footsteps and disown him altogether, but she knew it wouldn’t be that easy, he would never let her go without a fight and there was always one thing that stopped her. He was her dad. Her blood.

She traced spirals in the wet patch on the surface of the bar with one finger. She had waited for over an hour to see him, his henchmen telling her he was out and that someone would come and get her when he returned. The bartender was a plastic enhanced, hard faced woman that had worked there for the last three years. She was always pleasant enough to Selene, on this occasion, complimenting her corset and telling her that the three beers she’d ordered were on the house.

A tall, peroxide blonde woman took up the seat next to her and gently placed a well manicured hand on Selene’s wrist. She looked up and smiled.

“Why so glum, Selene?”

Delilah. Veteran of the Velvet Rabbit and the woman who first taught Selene how to apply nail polish and Make-up like a pro. Not only was she the longest serving member of the Rabbit, she was also a high-class prostitute and had been for as far back as Selene could remember. She had always liked Delilah and had many fond memories of her babysitting her in the dressing room when her mother was working late and her father was in his office, not wanting to be bothered by small children. Brad was always looked after by the security guys, who sat him in front of computer games all night. By the age of ten, Selene had seen enough breasts and vaginas to bore her to death.
and after a while, she thought nothing of it.

“Do you know Daryl Dixon, Delilah?” She replied quietly as she looked down into her beer glass and flicked it back and forth over the shiny bar top.

Delilah leaned forwards, knowing better than to let anyone overhear their conversation now she had name dropped.

“I surely do. He’s a good one. Unlike his brother. Why?” Her looks hadn’t changed in all the years Selene had known her, she seemed to get better with age and for someone that had been around the block a few times, Selene still considered her to be very beautiful, especially under all of her make-up. Although, one thing she had never got used to was Delilah's perfume being so strong, it stung the back of her nose.

“We’ve gotten close recently. Obviously, head honcho doesn’t like it. Warned him off.” She sighed.

“Oh, honey. I shouldn’t talk bad about the boss but as close as we are… he is a grade A bastard sometimes.” Delilah admitted.

Delilah and Bill had always had what they thought was a secret relationship, a partnership that was kept under wraps mainly because he wanted it to be. Selene had realised that her father had fallen for Delilah shortly before her mother died and it served as a partial explanation as to why he was so absent all the time. Never one to tell lies or fabricate the truth, Delilah was the most honest whore Selene had ever met and so when she held her hands and promised her that she never touched Bill before Selene’s mother passed away, Selene believed her. She had gone on to become a kind of stepmother figure but her choice of career was never lost on Selene and she often wondered if she would ever give up being a working girl. So far, she hadn’t, claiming that the money was too good and she was simply comfortable with her life.

“You got that right.” Selene agreed.

“I known Daryl for a while. He was comin’ in here with Merle when he shouldn’t have been. Was underage but me and the girls, we kept it to ourselves. He’s always been alright to be around. Only ever acted up when he was lit. When you say y’all got ‘close’, how close we talkin’?” She probed.

Selene took a large gulp of her beer and took a deep breath, thinking over her reply. They’d been as close as they could be without having stepped into relationship territory.

“We like each other. I took him to a wedding last week. His first one.” She smiled at the thought, recalling their dance and sharing a room together. “He slow danced with me, said I looked beautiful. It was amazing.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised. I knew he had it in him. He’s a complicated soul but he’s a good guy.” Delilah grinned.

“But my dad would fire him and Merle and probably hurt them if it goes any further. That’s why I’m here.”

“You gonna call him out on it?” Delilah said, surprised.

“I don’t know, Maybe. I’ve never felt so miserable before. It’s been a matter of days and I really miss him.” She confessed. Her trust in the ageing, kind and thoughtful stripper had never wavered and she was as honest with her as she was with Ray and Bear. To Selene, it didn’t really matter what she did for a living, she was one of the most upfront and decent people she had met and she
could honestly say that Delilah had been a better parent than her father had by a long shot.

“He was in here last night” she disclosed warily. Selene’s head snapped up and she stared at her. “Lit as fuck. On a school night too. Very unusual for him. He’s usually a weekender. Was the first time I seen him in a while”

“Was he OK?” Selene wanted to know.

“Looked about as down as you do. Didn’t talk to nobody, just sat over yonder at the bar and drank himself stoopid all night.” She stated. “I tried to check in on him, but he just waved me off. Could barely stand when he left.”

“My dad see him?” Selene wanted to know. She was aware that her father had a number of CCTV cameras around the place, all linked up to a central point that was situated in a small room on the side of his office. He could see everyone in the club at all times.

“Probably. He didn’t come down last night so I don’t know for sure. Maybe he saw him up there though, from his little birdy perch.” She mused, referring to the large, glass panel in the side of her father’s office that looked over the club.

Selene shifted her barstool closer to Delilah and leaned in, catching her eye.

“What can you tell me about Daryl?” She whispered.

Delilah’s eyes lit up at the question. “It’s amazing how much you can tell about a person just from seein’ em in a titty bar, honey.” She grinned. “He’s been coming here since he was young. You wouldn’t have seen him though, what with ya always being out the back when ya visited. He’s a decent guy, not like his brother. He’s had a few fights in here, couple of ‘em with Merle but he’s only ever caused trouble when he’s had too many drinks. The girls like him, he’s respectful and quiet for the most part. Never pays for private dances or even pays the girls much mind unless Merle hassles him ‘bout gettin’ laid. He ain’t into no kinky shit neither. Straight up sex but he gives a damn ‘bout ya, if you catch my drift.”

Selene sat open mouthed and gawping at Delilah, she was not expecting anywhere near as much information as she had been given let alone the surprising and personal nature of it.

“Daryl’s slept with the prostitutes here?!?” She hissed through her teeth.

“Only two. And we never charged him. We always charge Merle, usually double. I don’t care if the sommbitch is staff.” Delilah said casually.

“We-What?! Wait… You have slept with Daryl?!” She stammered.

“Just the once. It was a mutual understanding between friends. Same with the other girl. A lot of ‘em like him and gravitate towards him because he’s safer than that asshole brother of his.” Delilah explained “forgive me for being so graphic but it was nice to have sex with a guy that gave a damn if I enjoyed myself or not.”

Selene blinked at her in disbelief, aside from the fact she was an experienced prostitute, she was also at least fifteen years older than him. He had been present when Selene was attacked in the alley at the side of the club, so she knew he frequented the place, but hearing about his escapades with the strippers and working girls was making her see things in a whole, new light.

“You ever see him with someone that isn’t a stripper or a whore?” She asked. Delilah didn’t even flinch at the W-word, having heard it so many times it had now lost its meaning.
“Not that I recall. He’s kind of a lone wolf.” She replied, picking up Selene’s drink and taking a sip from the glass. She didn’t bother to stop her, somehow seeing it as a kind of payment for information.

“You know I have to ask what he was like.” Selene said under her breath as she cleared her throat.

“At sex?” Delilah asked innocently.

“No. At baking class. Yes, at…that!” Selene cried before quickly realising she had increased the volume of her voice and attracted the attention of the barmaid. She signalled that she wanted another beer in the hope that it would keep her occupied enough for a few minutes.

“Well, most guys… they’re all about the wham, bam, thank you ma’am. They’re there playin’ marathon man and it’s no good. That ain’t no fun. It’s just a recipe for a numb vagina. It’s all a means to an end. But not Daryl. He’s withdrawn, y’know? Not big on affection and nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, but he has this real gentle and sensitive side to him and that’s the golden ticket, right there. If he was nervous with me, he’s gonna be damn near terrified with a gal like you.” She paused and shot Selene a sly smile. “He’s real good with his hands.”

“Yeah, he fixed my pipes.” Selene smirked.

“He fixed mine too” Delilah added with a chuckle and a nudge of her arm. “He knows what he’s doin’ for someone that’s so antisocial and those arms…mm….mm…mm. De-licious.”

Selene giggled subtly and nodded a thanks to the barmaid when she placed another glass of beer in front of her and wandered off to the other end of the bar. Before she could take a sip, the glass was back in Delilah’s hand and she was throwing down a huge gulp. Having not paid for a single drink, Selene couldn’t exactly complain and so left her to it.

“Can’t believe you had sex with the guy I like.” Selene mused, exhaling and blowing upwards, sending the flyaway strands in the front of her hair billowing above her.

“I slept with most of the guys in this town. It’s my job. I’d be a crappy whore if I hadn’t.” Delilah pointed out to Selene who was shaking her head in amusement. “Never know, you might get your turn with Daryl.”

“Like that’s ever going to happen now.” She mumbled to herself. “I kissed another guy too. I was drunk and confused and I was kinda pissed that I’d invited him somewhere and he hadn’t showed. Only he did, he was just late. Saw the whole thing, lost his shit and stormed out. Even if my dad wasn’t an issue, that could be.”

“We all make mistakes, Selene. Don’t be arrogant enough to think ya any different.” Delilah pointed out “You want my advice?”

“When have I ever not wanted your advice?” Selene smiled.

“I know him. I’m willing to bet money that if he falls in love with somebody, he’s gonna love them for the rest of his life, no matter what happens. If you really like him, and he really likes you, you should fight for what you want. Don’t just accept this. Just explain about the other dude, say sorry. As for ya daddy… he’s wrong, Honey. He’s gotta let you be happy.”

The tapping of her finger on the bar told Delilah that Selene was mulling over her words as she always did when offered advice, even from a stripper.
“Y’know what?” Selene said. “You’re right.” She stood from the barstool, took a long drink, slammed the glass on the bar and made tracks to the door.

“Where ya goin?” Delilah called after her.

“Home to think. Thanks Delilah.” She said, turning around and forming a heart shape in front of her with her thumbs and index fingers.

*****

A day had passed and Selene had done nothing but sit around and think, merely going through the motions at work as her friends and colleagues exchanged worried glances with each other. Ray had invited her over to the coffee shop with him at lunch in the hope that she would open up and talk to him. But she sat opposite him and stirred her coffee over and over absent-mindedly while staring out of the window and willing Daryl to walk past just so she could see him for a few seconds. Ray watched her, unimpressed that he’d been sat talking to himself for the last twenty minutes and she hadn’t heard a single word he’d said.

“You want me to get you another coffee cup? Since ya wearin’ that one a little thin.” He quipped, half expecting her not to have heard him.

She tore her eyes away from the street outside reluctantly and raised her eyebrows at him.

“Sorry, what?” She mumbled.

“Lord above, woman! Look, Bear told me what happened with Daryl, but you aint said nothin’ to me. I thought I was your main bitch. You cheatin’ on me?” He enquired, leaning over the table at her.

On top of everything else, now she felt guilty. He was right, she usually did tell him everything and this time should have been no different. But she had been so wrapped up in her own thoughts, she had pushed everyone away and assumed they wouldn’t understand. She looked up sadly into Ray’s eyes and it was as if he could sense how she felt. He slid a hand across the table and placed it on top of hers.

“I miss him, Ray” She whispered.

Emitting a slow sigh, Ray squeezed her hand and lifted his coffee cup to his lips with the other. Swallowing hard, he set it back down and nodded.

“I know.” He said “I hear you guys did some confessing on your Birthday.”

“Yeah” She grunted.

“You tell him you like him?”

“Yep.”

“And he likes you too?”

Selene remembered exactly how he had told her. The words and phrases he’d used and she smiled in her daydream at the memory.

You’re so fuckin’ beautiful. I think about you all the time.

“He does.” She uttered.
“Well, no prizes for guessin’ that one.”

Ray had seen Selene cry many times before and he didn’t think he could hate anything more. When she cried, he wanted to cry, but instead he was always a shoulder for her to lean on or someone for her to rant to. Having shared such a close friendship since childhood, it drove him crazy to see her so sad and distracted.

“I went to the Rabbit yesterday. I was going to confront my dad. He wasn’t there. I spoke to Delilah instead.” She told him.

His face lit up and he gave her a look of approval just as a tall, dark man wandered through the door of the coffee shop behind her. Momentarily, his focus was drawn away and he watched the handsome stranger breeze in and stop at the counter. His eyes flickered back to Selene, who looked completely unimpressed at being told off for not sharing her problems, only to be given half of her friend’s attention. Ray did a double take at her and realised what he was doing.

“I haven’t seen Delilah in a while. How she doin?” He asked.

Ray and Selene were practically joined at the hip as children and he would often accompany her in the strippers dressing room of the Velvet Rabbit. Ray had always said since that he was sure it was how he ended up more interested in men. He had seen enough female body parts to last him a lifetime and still had many fond memories of dancing around and being taught dance moves by the strippers.

“She’s good. Hasn’t aged a day, as usual.” She answered.

“That bitch.” He scoffed “Swear to god she’s sold her soul to the devil to stay that young.”

“She knows Daryl.” Selene mentioned. “Turns out she even knows him in the biblical sense.”

Ray smarted at Selene’s sentence and gawped at her with wide eyes. His hands flat and sliding back across the table as he slowly sat back in his seat.

“You’re tellin’ me that a guy that looks like Daryl, has to pay whores to get laid?! What fuckin’ shit is this?!” He cried.

A woman on the next table slapped her hands over the ears of the young boy sat beside her, who happened to be well within earshot of Ray, and huffed to herself at Ray’s disinterest in keeping his language clean in front of children. Ray looked right at her and grinned. Selene knew what was coming, Ray was never one to back down from confrontation and she was sure he actually looked for it sometimes.

“Well shit! I’m fuckin’ sorry!” He exclaimed loudly. Almost everyone around them stopped and looked over, including the handsome stranger at the counter. Ray beamed at the woman, only to receive and angry stare before turning back to Selene, who shrugged one shoulder up as if it were nothing. She had seen this a thousand times before.

“She told me he’s never paid for anything. They don’t charge him. He’s only slept with her and one other girl. Both times it was just friends helping one another out. Said he rarely shows any interest in the strippers too, only in front of Merle.” She explained.

“I wouldn’t charge him either. In fact, i’d pay him.” Ray mused, seeing Selene laugh. “She say anything else?”

“Yeah. She thinks my dad is wrong and that if I like Daryl and he likes me, that I should fight for
him. I know that I want to, I just don’t know how.”

Ray stroked his chin as he reclined and thought for a moment.

“I might have an idea.” He offered.

“Really?” She questioned.

“Mmhmm. Good friend of mine, managed to be rid of his overbearin’ father. Think you might know him.” He hinted, flashing her a sneaky smile.

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Upon her second trip to the Rabbit, she didn’t waste anytime stopping to ask the doormen for entry. She slinked past them, hurled open the double doors and stormed inside, striding from one side of the club to the other along the long, raised platform above the stage. Delilah was sat at the bar in the same spot as the previous day and looked up when she heard the commotion of two men following her across the walkway and speaking in code into their walkie talkies. Selene, who’s rampage was made even more dramatic by the black, flowing dress and heavy boots she was wearing, held up a hand in a wave and was given a wink right back.

Reaching her Father’s office door, she bashed on the handles with both hands, sending the doors flying open and seeing him flinch and get up halfway from his chair. He sat back down again when he realised it was his daughter stood in front of him, flanked by two breathless security guys with panicked expressions.

“Call off the dogs.” She demanded, flicking her head in their direction.

Bill scanned each person in front of him with his eyes as he picked up a pen and began tapping it on some paperwork on the desk in front of him.

“Leave us” He grunted to the men, who dutifully left the room and gently clicked the door shut. Selene didn’t say anything at first, choosing to gradually pace back and forth thoughtfully in front of his desk.

Bill was a short, morbidly obese man with a balding head and an air of importance about him that everyone else seemed to be able to sense but Selene. He had provided her with a few hereditary traits that she always used to her advantage when visiting him. Among them was her gusto and determination. Two things she was about to make great use of.

“How are you.” It was more of a statement, her need to monitor his health status becoming less and less as the days went on. She found it hard to care about him, when he was so hellbent on ruining everything good in her life and as she intermittently glanced up at him, her hatred for him grew each time.

“I’m well.” He replied. “You’re angry.”

“Nicely observed” She spat.

“I take it you’re here about the younger Dixon brother.” He mentioned.

“Why do you hate him so much?” She questioned.

“He’s no good for you. He’s a savage, just like Merle. There’s a reason why Merle is employed to do what he does. His younger brother is cut from the same cloth, I won’t have you with someone
“I could be with someone who won a Nobel peace prize and he still wouldn’t be good enough to you. No one will ever be good enough.” She argued.

“Selene, that boy is no good for anyone. He’s scum. All the Dixon’s are. Dead or alive. I only employ them because it’s cheap labour and they’re used to getting their hands dirty.” He expressed, clasping his hands in front of his oversized stomach which strained against his button-down shirt beneath a badly tailored suit.

“Daryl has treated me better in the last few weeks, than you have in my entire life. He cares about me and he respects me. He has never touched me, or made any kind of move on me because he is a good person that hangs out in your seedy strip club because his dumbass brother makes his life hell if he doesn’t.”

She stopped in her tracks and glowered at him, noticing how he refused to meet her eye every time she tried. Selene could have tried to beg and plead with him, appeal to the family man in him, but she knew he was long gone and she would have been wasting her breath. So, she had to resort to desperate measures. Approaching his desk, she reached into her back pocket and retrieved a folded piece of paper. She carefully unfolded it before slamming it on the desk in front of him, making him jump slightly.

“What’s this, dad? Tell me what it is.” She growled.

His eyes lowered to the document.

“It’s your birth certificate.” He stated.

“What’s my name?” She whispered.

“What are you doi-”

“What’s my name?!” She yelled.

“Selene Taylor.” He muttered.

“That’s right. Selene Taylor. My last name belongs to you. I want you to think about that the next time you send one of your goons to ‘deal with’ somebody who’s pissed you off. The next time you take a percentage from Delilah’s earnings, along with the other girls while saying that you’re not a pimp. Think about it when your signing paperwork for yet another illegal business deal. You call Daryl scum, but you’re even worse. He was born into a life of violence, even if he was a ‘savage’ as you called him, at least he has an excuse. What’s your excuse, dad? You were brought up in suburbia with a good family. You’re just greedy and selfish and hellbent on making me miserable under the façade of caring about my welfare.” She raged, looming over him with her finger planted firmly on her name on the birth certificate.

“I only ever have your best interests at heart. You’re my little girl.” Bill tried, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. Selene suspected this was more due to his unhealthy lifestyle than worry about her confronting him.

“No. I’m not your little girl. I’m an adult. It was my birthday on Sunday and you forgot. Again. This is the fourth year in a row. You don’t love me, you love the power you have over me. All you’ve ever loved is power and control. Now, I’m taking some of that back. I’m going to continue seeing Daryl. I might even start a relationship with him. Y’know why? Because he makes me happy. Not that you’d give a damn about that. You’re not going to fire him and you’re not going to
fire Merle, nor will you hurt either of them. You’re also going to call off the spotters, I don’t need babysitting. If you deceive me or fuck this up, I will change my last name to Mom’s last name and I will disown you. Just like Brad did. When your overeating and alcohol problems finally kill you, the only person stood at your grave will be Delilah.”

Bill leaned back and his chair creaked loudly under the pressure, he crossed his arms and chuckled to himself at Selene’s display of authority. She certainly was her father’s daughter. He was almost proud, had she not just been giving him an ultimatum and threatening him. Never the less, he considered her proposal, finding some semblance of respect for her under his rage at being knocked down a peg or two by his own offspring.

“They can keep their jobs and I won’t touch them. But the spotters stay.” He offered.

“No” She barked.

“The spotters stay.” He reiterated, this time raising his voice even louder than hers and putting his foot down. His fist collided with the table as he spoke in an added effort to ram the point home. “I won’t have him hurting you.”

She leaned closer to him, staring right into his face.

“You’re more likely to hurt me than he is. Just like you are, right now.” She hissed. “Give me your word that their jobs are safe and you won’t hurt them.”

He tilted his head back slightly regarding her with an air of irritation.

“You have my word.” He said through his teeth.

She snatched up the paper, accepting that she had two out of three promises and that was as good as it was going to get. She retreated and reached for the door when she heard him speak.

“I love you, Selene.” He uttered.

She slowly turned to him, her veins on fire with an intense wrath.

“Sometimes I really, really wish we could choose our families.” She told him before opening the door and leaving the room.

Bill let out a loud sigh and leaned forwards, bracing himself on the desk with his elbows and covering his face with his hands. A soft knock on the door almost made him jump, not because he was nervous or uneasy, but because he was expecting Selene to bash the door down if she were to double back with something else to throw at him. But he knew that knock. It wasn’t Selene.

“Come in.” He ordered.

Delilah slipped through a small gap as she opened the door and closed it behind her. She glided up to the desk in her short, pink skirt and white button-down blouse, the first three buttons open to show off her best, moneymaking assets. She wore various thin, gold chains and her long, blonde hair extensions swayed across her back as she moved.

“Go on, you can say it.” Bill grumbled, waving a hand at her.

“I told you so. That girl is a badass, Billy. She gets it from you.” Delilah told him.

“I wish she didn’t.” He commented.
“I know” She said, sitting sideways on the edge of his desk and picking up a framed photograph of Selene and Brad when they were children from in front of him. “But if she just rolled over and let everybody else make decisions for her, like you want her to, folks gonna end up takin’ advantage of her n’ you don’t want that.”

“It had to be Dixon, didn’t it?” He fumed.

Delilah set the photo frame down again and clasped her hands in her lap.

“He’s not so bad, Billy. I know he screwed up in the past, but it sounds like he really likes her. You were right to give him a chance.” She assured him.

“This pains me, Delilah. I only did this because of you and your persuasive nature.” He mumbled.

She grinned and reached across the desk, taking hold of his tie and smoothing her fingers over the silky material.

“Maybe you should listen to me more often” She smiled “If you’re that bothered, maybe you should get Daryl in here, talk to him. I don’t mean threaten him, throw money at him or bury him in the woods. I mean talk to him, like a reasonable human being. Because You will find he’s just misunderstood.”

She tugged on his tie, encouraging him to sit up and lean into her.

“You think you can do that?” She purred, connecting his forehead with hers.

“I can try. No promises” He offered.

Delilah grinned to herself. A job well done. Using what god gave her was her speciality. Not only did it keep her paid, it also meant she got her own way while using her feminine charms to persuade even the most stubborn of men to come around to her way of thinking.

*****

The barista tapped the take away coffee cups into a cardboard holder on the counter and passed Selene her bag of donuts with a warm smile. She thanked him and whisked everything away in an excited swoop as she barrelled out of the coffee shop and set off on the walk across town. The street was quiet and she found herself scanning the parked cars and trucks, knowing that she was bound to see one of her father’s employees at some point.

People can usually tell when they’re being watched. That strange, niggling feeling that you’re not alone, that your every move is being noted and observed and the urge to keep looking around takes over. Paranoia sets in. Something just isn’t quite right. Maybe it’s your imagination. Maybe it’s not. The noiseless witness gains satisfaction from not being discovered.

Selene’s observer may as well have been stood on the street corner in a clown suit. She caught sight of him straight away and lifted a coffee from the cardboard holder in her hand. She knew he was here, somewhere. It had just been a matter of finding him. Her father was getting predictable in his old age. Her emotions were a bizarre mixture of amusement and anger as she approached the truck and slapped a hand loudly on the roof.

The man inside had been texting on his cell phone, totally unaware of Selene appearing beside him at the open window. He jumped when she bashed on the top of the truck and his cell tumbled from his hand and ended up in the footwell. The dark brown eyes of the Italian male in the driver’s seat peered up at her.
“Good afternoon, Luigi!”

“Oh, Selene. Hi.” He replied nervously in his thick, Venetian accent.

“Don’t you ‘Oh, Selene’ me you lying sack of shit” she grinned before handing him a coffee through the window. He looked completely bemused but accepted the beverage with some trepidation. “Thirsty work, stalking the boss’s daughter.”

Luigi took a sip of the coffee and set it down into the cup holder beside his seat. He cleared his throat and flashed her his best, fake smile.

“I’m waiting for a friend. I’m not stalking anyone.” He told her.

She chuckled to herself, flicking her hair over her shoulder and wondering just how stupid he thought she was.

“Right. Right. Like when you were waiting for a friend outside my tattoo parlour for four hours this morning. Or, like you were waiting for a friend when I saw you outside the store, I went in to buy tampons. They’re on special by the way, I have a coupon if you want one.”

He stared at her, his smile vanishing and being replaced by a look of concern, as he were a child being scolded for being caught red handed doing something he’d been told not to.

“You can follow me as much as you like, Luigi. But you're going to be very choosy about what you report back and if my father orders you to hurt Daryl or you even consider touching him, I’ll go straight to the cops and tell them about the time you murdered the man you caught your wife cheating with and how I had to live out the rest of my childhood drawing pictures in chalk on the patio you buried him under.” She threatened.

Her voice was chirpy and confident, her demeanour casual as she tossed a serious and grave warning his way. She leaned on the open window of the truck, her wavy, black hair blowing in the breeze and the studs on her leather biker jacket glinting in the light.

“Oh, and you might want to get a more inconspicuous truck, this heap of junk can be spotted ten miles away by a blind mouse.” She smiled, tapping the roof again and turning on her heels.

Rocket city Auto Repairs was the most well-known Auto Repairs place in town. It had a flawless reputation and Selene’s father had originally purchased it as a failing business when Selene was still in school. He had built it up to greatness and invested a lot of money into it, as he had with all his other business ventures. All of its employees were aware that they worked for Bill Taylor and not the manager that locked the doors every night.

Selene marched confidently across the forecourt, spotting a motorcycle outside the main building with parts and tools scattered around it. She wandered past it and up to a shocked looking, rotund man with what had to be the worst comb over she had ever seen.

The workshop was full of cars and more were lined up, ready to be worked on outside the building. She could see at least 6 different men all immersed in their tasks, some singing, some yelling obscenities at each other and some gawping right at her just like the comb over that stood in front of her.

“Afternoon” She grinned. “I’m looking for Daryl.”
The man raised a hand and sloppily wiped his nose with the back of his wrist, leaving a black, oily smear across his face that Selene didn’t bother to point out.

“Wait here, Ma’am. I’ll go get him.” He instructed.

He waddled to a door at the back, from which she could hear him bellow at the top of his voice.

“Dixon! You got a visitor!”

Her eyes gradually fell upon another two men who were looking her way, one holding a spanner and the other peering up from under a car, only his head and shoulders were visible from the front of the car he was working on. She awkwardly showed them a palm in a feeble wave and gave them a half smile. Not knowing if they were looking at her because she looked completely out of place, or because they knew she was their boss’s daughter. Either way, she felt the need to back up, step out of the workshop and slowly walk back and forth across the forecourt while she waited.

When Daryl appeared, his brow furrowed instantly and he glanced around him, seeing most of his colleagues’ curious stares. He started towards Selene and she could see the surprise and near panic etched on his face. His branded, black shirt was the next thing she noticed, so much cleaner than everyone else who was covered from head to toe in oil and muck, some of them even missing buttons and sporting rips in the fabric.

*He looks good in that.*

As he neared her, he grabbed her arm and steered her a few feet away from the workshop, aiming to be out of earshot.

“What are you doin’ here?! Are you crazy? Someone’s gonna see us.” He hissed.

She couldn’t help it. She smiled at him and it wouldn’t go away. She had missed him and his blue eyes. Even the way he was short and cold with her when he was irritated.

“They already have. Guy sat in the blue truck down there, that’s Luigi. Shall we give him a wave?” She jested, throwing a hand in the air. Daryl was rooted to the spot, completely stunned as his eyes moved from her to the guy in the car across the street.

“Hi Luigi!” She called out.

From his truck, Luigi was in the middle of gulping down his free coffee she had given him when he heard her shriek his name. He turned his head slightly to see her making a huge point of his presence and cursed her very existence under his breath. He flicked the fingers of one hand up briefly in response but didn’t face her. She always had been a handful, even as a child.

“OK, what the fuck?!” Daryl spat, his voice louder and more demanding.

She turned back to him and held up the paper bag in her hand and the two coffees in the holder with the other.

“I brought coffee and donuts. Have you got ten minutes to talk to me? Please?” She asked.

“You shouldn’t even be here. Your dad owns this place.” He said, ignoring her question.

She met his eyes and saw his shoulders drop, as if he had already given up pretending, he didn’t want her to be stood in front of him after missing her every single day since their conversation in the parking lot of the tattoo parlour.
“It’s fine, Daryl. Trust me.” She whispered, urging him with her eyes to just give her a chance. He dipped his head and scratched at the back of his neck as he thought it over, his vision breaking away from her for no longer than a couple of seconds before it found its way back. Eventually, he took hold of one of the coffee’s she held and lifted it from the cardboard.

“Yeah, OK.” He agreed. “But not here. These nosey assholes are listenin’ in.”

He motioned with his head for her to follow him further down the forecourt. She trailed along behind him, looking over her shoulder and noticing some of the other guys now engrossed in conversation and shooting glances their way. Daryl stopped and leaned against some metal railings, taking a sip of his coffee. Selene positioned herself in front of him, closer than he had anticipated, but he wasn’t going to say anything. She set the bag and his drink down on a box next to him.

“I need to ask you something and it’s going to be forward and direct. Just warning you.” She started.

“OK”

“If there was no threat to your job, or your life. If my father wasn’t an issue and you had the choice to see what happened between us… would you want to?” She questioned, picking nervously at the edge of the plastic top to her coffee cup.

Daryl was unable to control the mild smirk that had appeared on his face and he rubbed at his hair with one hand. Selene was playing with her lip rings, flicking at one then the other with her tongue in what he assumed was some kind of anxious ritual.

“You don’t know the answer to that already?” He asked.

She took a deep breath and seemed to rock back and forth on her boots.

“Uh… I have an idea but I don’t know… for sure. I don’t wanna assume anything.” She expressed.

He tilted his head to the side, thoughtfully admiring her in the now fading light of the early evening. Her lips were dark as usual, her jacket drawn around her and partially zippered. She wore tight, black pants and chains on her studded belt. For someone with such a conspicuous style, she couldn’t have looked more nervous.

“Course I would.” He answered.

Her eyebrows raised in response and she let out a relieved rush of air.

“Me too. I would too.” She nodded. “I spoke to Delilah at the Club.”

“Delilah?” He startled at the mention of her name, it being both unexpected and concerning.

“Yeah. I’ve known her for a long time. She used to babysit me. And Ray. In the dressing room. I know that you know her too.”

A shot of alarm flashed through him. Did she know about his past tryst with the older woman? It wasn’t something he wanted to have to explain, least of all to her.

“Um… I do, Yeah.” He affirmed.

“Well, she gave me some good advice, as usual. So, I took it and gave my father an ultimatum.”
She informed him with a pained expression.

Daryl froze for a few seconds and blinked at her in disbelief.

“Wait, ya did what?!” he cried. His voice cutting through the quiet forecourt and rousing the attention of everyone inside. He hadn’t expected it to echo, the sound spiking more irritation in his mind. Selene held her hand up in submission.

“Right. OK. So, before you freak out, you’re safe. Everything’s fine. I told him that I’m going to spend time with you if he likes it or not and if he tries to stop me, if he fires you or has you hurt, I’ll change my last name to my mothers and I’ll never speak to him again. Just like Brad did.” She explained quickly. Her words were too fast and Daryl struggled to understand at first, needing a second or so to let everything settle and make sense.

“What’d he say?” he croaked.

Thinking back to her rage fuelled rant and threatening behaviour, she figured she couldn’t have learned it from anyone but the master himself. She hated how similar it made her seem to him. How he bargained and schemed his way through life at everyone else’s expense, ducking the law and thinking he was invincible. But on this one occasion, Selene had been willing to embrace her similarities with her father and use it to her advantage.

“I was very persuasive. I’ve never stood up to him like that before. He’s agreed that I can see you but he’s having me followed. Luigi, over there? He taught me how to play poker when I was eight years old.” She said, quirking the corner of her mouth up in a matter of fact gesture.

“I don’t understand” Daryl mumbled, crossing his arms.

She didn’t like how he was closing up in front of her, his body language untrusting and suspicious. But she couldn’t blame him.

“What don’t you understand?” She queried.

“Why’d you do this, Selene? He’s your ol’man. Ya aint gonna just walk away from him like that. ‘Specially not for me.” He pointed out.

She threw her head back and closed her eyes for a moment, evaluating just how honest she should be with her reply. She owed him the complete truth.

“He’s my blood, but he’s not my dad. He hasn’t been for years. He’s just a power-hungry bully and today, I walked right into his office and proved to him that the power he thought he had over me, it’s a smokescreen. It’s doesn’t really exist. I asked myself, over and over, would I miss him if he wasn’t there? Does Brad miss him? I don’t know the answer to those questions but I’m willing to risk it. Ray, he gave me the idea. Asked me why I’m not just doing what Brad did and I couldn’t give him a decent reason why.” She paused to survey his reaction, seeing him leaning against the railing, statue still and eyes locked on her. He was listening to every single word. “You’ve proved to me that you’re worth it. I think about you all the time too, Daryl”}

Deliberately repeating what he’d said to her that night in the parking lot, she hoped that she had done enough to convince him to at least give things a try and that she wasn’t about to get him and his brother killed. Daryl dropped his head and fell quiet for a long time. At least a minute passed and Selene swirled her coffee in its cup and gulped at it, wishing it was neat vodka. When she put it down beside him, she looked up at Daryl to find he was watching her.

“I care about you.” He started “Ya know I like you. But I gotta look out for Merle. He’s a prick but
he’s the only family I got” He said sadly.

She was now wringing her hands, hating every minute of this awkward and difficult conversation. Her rings rotated around her fingers and she tugged and pulled at them.

“I might have told him that he’s has to leave Merle out of this too.” She mentioned.

He did an obvious and shocked double take at her.

“Really?!” he exclaimed.

She just nodded.

“Again, Why? Like ya said ya don’t owe him nothin’.” He reminded her.

Selene was starting to find herself exasperated with her inability to convey to him just how far she was willing to go for him.

“Because of you. Because you beat someone up for me. Because you looked after me when I was trashed. Because you went to a fancy wedding with me, because you slow danced with me, because you still took me to the movies after I kissed another guy. Don’t you see? It’s always you doing shit for me. Now, I’m doing this for you. Delilah told me that if I liked you, I should fight for you, so I did. Because I want you.”

When the last sentence left her mouth, he saw her stamp her foot in frustration in what he had come to realise was like her trademark move and he loved how vulnerable it made her look when she was really just trying to express herself. She growled loudly and threw her hands up.

“And…” She continued. “And you told me I look pretty in Red.”

“You do.” He confirmed, levelling his gaze at her. What had started as a simple occurrence of eye contact had soon progressed into an intense and sexually charged stare and Daryl knew there and then that he couldn’t let her walk away without knowing he was going to see her again. Her lips parted and he could tell she was trying to say something, but her breathing had deepened and she looked as though whatever was on the tip of her tongue had the potential to change everything.

“I really fucking like you, Daryl.” She breathed.

“I really fuckin’ like you too.” He replied without even having to consider it. “You sure he’s gonna back off?”

“If he doesn’t, I have a plan B. But let’s hope it doesn’t have to go that far.” She said, reaching out and tickling over the back of his hand. He looked down and turned his arm, taking hold of her fingers lightly and closing his hand around hers.

“So, I guess I’m right here, if you wanna see where this goes.” She whispered, taking a risk and leaving the ball in his court. Behind her, she could hear whispers and giggles from Daryl’s colleagues, no doubt they had seen her holding his hand. He hadn’t let go and she could only assume that was a good sign. His grip on her tightened and he laced their fingers together properly. She peered up at him with the same intensity as before, the exact same look she had given him on the dance floor at Shorty’s wedding.

“You three steppin’ me right now?” he asked.

“Mmhmm. Just haven't figured out number three yet. I guess you kinda threw me off my game”
She said, still engulfed in his eyes and how blue they looked in the light.

“Better get to it, I aint got all night.” He smiled.

She let go of his hand and swiped up the bag of donuts, delving inside and handing him one. He accepted it and took a huge bite, chewing messily and never breaking eye contact with her as she munched through hers.

“You got sugar on ya” He told her.

She lifted a hand to her face “Where?”

He reached out with a thumb, wiping it on the tip of her nose and coating it with a sticky, sugary mass.

“Right there” He chuckled to himself as she recoiled and began frantically brushing it off. She said nothing, only looking at him with a beaming smile that he thought was probably the best thing he’d seen all week. He threw the rest of his donut into his mouth and collected his coffee.

“I gotta get back to work.” He told her. “Before one of the guys snitches on me”

“OK” She squeaked, still not knowing where she stood. “But you haven’t let me do step three yet.”

She stepped closer to him so there was barely two inches separating them and gazed up at him.

“My father missed the part where I grew up. He forgets he can’t tell me what to do anymore. I don’t like being told what to do. Because what I really, really want to do…is you.” She whispered.

He blinked rapidly at her and stepped back, hiding his grin with a hand over his face as he rubbed at his lips and chin. The tips of his ears burned bright red and his cheeks darkened to a shade of pink. Selene laughed felt a surge of pride at her own bravery.

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself.” She grinned, picking up her coffee.

Daryl knew he still had to answer her. But the truth was, he’d decided that all he wanted was her as soon as she told him she had confronted her father. She didn’t need to convince him, but he had let her and enjoyed every single minute of it and after spending almost a week trying to forget her and cope with the void that she had seemingly left in his heart, he felt like he deserved at least a little fun. Knowing what Selene stood to lose if it all went wrong meant he also knew she deserved the truth.

“Liked you since the alley.” He uttered.

“You too.” She replied.

“I was never gonna say no to bein’ with you. But I aint done the relationship thing before. So, I don’t wanna run in head first and fuck it all up.” He confessed.

She took his hand again, gripping it tightly and holding it up to her chest.

“No pressure. No rush.” She offered. “I promise.”

“Alright.” He agreed. “I really gotta go.”

In what had been one of the most revelatory conversations he’d ever had, he was about to walk away as a guy that was actually seeing someone for the first time in his life. But it wasn’t just
someone. It was Selene and what he wasn’t going to tell her, or anyone else, was that he hadn’t liked her since the alley. He’d liked her since high school.

“Enjoy the rest of your day.” She smiled.

Choosing not to take his hand back, he moved closer to her, positioning himself so his lips were close to her ear. She held her breath at their close proximity and the fact that he had initiated it.

“You’re somethin’ else, y’know that?” He growled. “You show up here too big for ya britches and givin’ this bunch of idiots something nice to look at. Ya give me coffee and donuts, tell me ya wanna be with me…” He stepped even closer, her hair now tickling his chin as he spoke into her ear “…n’ that ya wanna do me. My day ain’t gonna get much better than that.”

Selene almost melted as she held onto his hand, her palm becoming sweaty and her mouth dropping open.

“G- good. You wanna stop by and see me after work?” She stammered.

“Stupid question” He rasped.

She knew she was possibly taking things too far when she slid one hand over his shirt to his bicep. But the idea was just too tempting to ignore. He stiffened and she could tell he was holding his breath. She gently kissed his cheek and squeezed the toned muscles of his upper arm.

“See you later, hottie.” She purred, grinning at him as she pulled away.

Daryl watched her as she strutted off down the forecourt to the gate, seeing her stick her middle finger up to Luigi. He laughed to himself and turned on his heels to see all the guys in the workshop disperse from their gathering as if someone had dropped a grenade in the middle of them all. Some of them picked up tools and one whistled, while another pretended to be dishing out orders to everyone else. He started back inside only to be stopped by the comb over that Selene had first spoken to. He stepped out into Daryl’s path, a sly grin on his face.

“Didn’t know you had a girl. She’s damn fine, man. Who is she?” He asked.

Daryl had a choice. He could correct the guy and simply tell him she was a friend and not his girl. He could say it was someone he was seeing. Or, there was option three that was now on the table thanks to Selene taking matters into her own hands.

“The boss’s daughter.” He said confidently as he skirted around his open-mouthed colleague with a sense of pride and satisfaction.
Bear, Axel, Ritchie and Ray were all sat on the chesterfield sofas, opposite each other in the waiting area of the tattoo Parlour. Their last appointments had left for the day and the cleaning up had been done, much to the delight of Ray, who had barked orders at them all until the surfaces sparkled and everything was back in its rightful place. He had gathered them together to announce a new rule that he had thought up but hadn’t yet run by Selene. She had hardly spoken to any of them in the days since her conversation with Daryl in the Parking lot and the atmosphere and been strained and at times, downright awkward. Ray figured if she hated his idea that much, she could just scrap it. But as Assistant Manager, it was his job to keep the wheels turning, even when hers had fallen off.

“OK, I’ll have to run this by Shorty when he’s back from his Honeymoon and Selene aint squared this but I’m running with it for now. I’ve decided we need to build up our Social Media presence a bit more.” Ray started

“You gonna ask Axel to get his nipples out on the ‘gram?” Bear chuckled.

Ray’s face dropped into a stern expression and he tilted his head to the side, glaring at Bear for interrupting him.

“All you have to do is ask. I’ll do it.” Axel shrugged.

Ritchie sniggered from behind a tattoo magazine and swapped an entertained glance with Axel. Ray, unimpressed, scanned them all one by one and leaned over to Ritchie, snatching the magazine from his hands. He rolled it up and whacked Bear across the head with it.

“Pay attention, all of y’all or I’ll snitch on ya to Selene and we all know with the mood she’s in she’s likely to push ya’ll in a lake with rocks tied to your legs.” He snapped.

Throwing one skinny jean clad leg over the other, he narrowed his eyes at them all to make sure they were listening. Ritchie smirked and began playing with one of his dreadlocks. Axel sat back and crossed his arms over his chest and Bear fiddled with the zipper on his jacket.

“We all take photographs of work we’re proud of and post it online. But from now on we’re gonna be takin photographs of everything we do, and of the creative process that comes before it. Rich, I spose that part that doesn’t really apply to you. A hole is a hole.” He said, flicking up a hand at him in dismissal.

“That’s real romantic, Ray. I thought we had something special. That what you tell all the guys?” Ritchie quipped.

Axel couldn’t help himself and burst into a loud fit of laughter, soon followed by Bear’s booming chuckle. Axel held a hand out to Ritchie who high fived him, much to Ray’s annoyance.
“Honestly, like lookin’ after a bunch of kids. You’re the first one goin’ in the lake, spaghetti head.” Ray fumed. “Anyway, I want photographs of designs, step by step and the finished result with every tattoo you finish. Save it all on the system and we can use it for daily posts to get more footfall.”

Shorty nodded in approval “I always take pictures of my shit.”

“You can get arrested for that, dude.” Axel told him.

More laughter rang out between them and even Ray joined in this time, perched on the arm of the sofa in his tight, black T-shirt.

The door swung open and Selene walked into a chorus of sniggering and grins, which was exactly what she’d hoped for after the dramatic and taxing day she’d had. Ray stopped laughing and held out a hand to Selene, who shrugged off her biker jacket and hooked it on the coat stand by the door. She glided into Rays arm and he wrapped it around her waist. Ritchie’s eyes locked on her and he instantly fell silent while Axel and Bear continued to swap jokes with each other before offering Selene a couple of wide grins.

“Hey queen bee” Ray hummed, peering up at her from the arm of the couch. “I spy with my little eye…a smile. I’ll be damned.”

“Yeah” She whispered. “Thank you for earlier. Lunch…and your idea.”

“You did it?” Ray asked.

Selene’s eyes quickly checked Bear, who was looking at them both quizzically. She concluded she may as well explain herself to all of them while she had them all in the same room.

“Brad, Ray asked me something today and I couldn’t give him a decent answer. So, it got me thinking. He asked me why I haven’t disowned dad, like you did.”

Brad said nothing, only shifting to the side slightly to allow Selene to sit next to him on the couch’s arm, opposite Ray. Unsure of how to proceed, she thought it best to just get to the point.

“I gave him an ultimatum. I told him I’d disown him like you did unless he let me see Daryl.”

Ritchie looked away and let out a sigh behind his hand, which obscured his tight jaw and maddened manner. Brad, instead of flying off the handle like everyone expected him to, took hold of Selene’s hand and sat quietly, thinking about what she’d said.

“You must have it bad for him.” He mumbled.

“I do.” She said without hesitation. “Dad accepted it. Reluctantly, but he did and then I went to see Daryl. I told him and we’re going to see how things go. Dad sent Luigi to watch me. He refused to call him off. So, I threatened him with what I know about our patio in the old house. Told him to be careful what he reported back”

Brad huffed and looked up at her, letting her take her hand back. “Luigi aint gonna be a problem. I’ll just find something shiny to distract him with.” He suggested, seeing his sister give him a grateful smile. “You happy, sis?” He asked her.

“Yes, I am.” She confirmed.

“Then so am I. But my promise still stands. He hurts you, and I’ll tear him apart.” Brad affirmed.
“We all will” Axel added, catching Ritchie’s eye who nodded in agreement.

“I’ll watch” Ray chimed in. “Dixon’s hot, I don’t wanna be responsible for ridding the world of a fine specimen like him. Plus, I don’t wanna break a nail.”

Selene giggled and watched her friends as they began to chatter and make arrangements to go out for drinks. When she first opened the Ink Cabinet, she had never expected in her wildest dreams to have been blessed with such a close group of friends. They were all so different but all had one thing in common, their loyalty to her.

“I’m going to head upstairs, Daryl will be here soon.” She announced. “Enjoy your night at the bar. Don’t get too wasted. You all have work tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, what’s that, now? Oh yeah, pot callin’ the kettle black, honey!” Ray shot at her, throwing the rolled-up magazine her way as she walked to the stairs. It collided with the doorframe and landed on the floor. She let out a small giggle and disappeared from sight.

*****

Ray remained at the Desk in the studio when the others had left to go to the bar, telling them he had a few things to post online before he was able to join them. When Daryl knocked on the door, he got up from the desk and collected the huge bunch of keys from the drawer. Daryl wore his leather vest with the angel wings over his work shirt with rolled up sleeves. Ray knew how cold it was outside, yet Daryl never seemed to look like he felt it. He unlocked the door and stood aside, beckoning him inside with a sweeping gesture of his hand.

“Entrez s’il vous plait.” Ray grinned.

“What?” Daryl replied.

“It’s Fren-never mind. Come in.”

Daryl stepped inside and scanned the room. No sign of Selene. In his hand he held a six pack of beer bottles.

“She’s upstairs. Sit ya fine ass down a minute.” Ray told him as he locked the door and walked past him, sitting back down at the desk and sliding his glasses on. Daryl leaned against the backrest of the couch, his arms crossed in front of him.

“She told us what she did. All of us.” Ray told him. “Just wondering what your thoughts and feels are about it.”

Daryl knew he was only digging for information with Selene’s best interests at heart. Not knowing just how much he was willing to disclose, he decided to humour Ray and give him a chance after remembering their conversation at the wedding and how he tried to help him out by urging him to make a move on Selene, which he now knew would have been well received.

“Still havin’ a hard time believin’ it.” He answered.

“Well, believe it, buddy. She really likes you.” Ray stated as he peered at Daryl over the top of his glasses.

“Yeah, that’s the part I don’t get.” He admitted. “She can have anyone she wants.”

Ray leaned back in the leather chair and threw his hands in the air theatrically. Daryl wasn’t used to
being around such a melodramatic person. In fact, Ray was the polar opposite to him, yet he couldn’t say he disliked him at all. He could see why Selene trusted him with so much and loved to be around his vivacious and lively personality. Such people usually put Daryl off and sent him running for the hills, or more specifically, the woods, to his introverted paradise. But not Ray. Ray had something about him that everyone seemed to like. He just hoped that Merle never got anywhere near him, his bigoted and homophobic views bound to cause a problem.

“Give me strength! You, Mr. Dixon, are too hard on yourself. You got shit goin’ for you. Think ya know by now that I would not kick you out of bed. You are hot as hell and you aint got a damn clue which is both rare and a massive turn on. You also treat her like the queen that she is. Hell, you’ve done more for her in the last few weeks than I have and I’m her fuckin’ slave! She doesn’t want nobody else, biceps. She wants you…and I don’t blame her.” Ray explained before opening the desk drawer and retrieving a can of energy drink. He cracked it open and glugged most of it down in one go. The nature of his frank and direct comments not bothering him in the slightest. Selene usually shared his need to avoid tiptoeing around, although she had done nothing but that in recent weeks with Daryl.

Daryl felt incredibly awkward but there was also something else at the back of his mind. He was flattered. He had never been graced with such wild compliments before and to hear them from a gay man was something quite different altogether.

*I can’t ever let Merle hear him say shit like that.*

“Thanks, Ray.” Daryl mumbled.

“Ahh it aint nothin’. Take it you aint kissed her yet?” Ray enquired without a single care about asking such a personal question.

“Uh, no.” Daryl muttered.

“Aint nothin’ like a first kiss. They’re addictive, that’s why I have so many of ‘em.”

“Right.” Daryl grunted with a small smile.

“Anyways, I’ll let you get on to it. Take yaself upstairs, knock on the door at the top. That’s her apartment.” Ray informed him.

Daryl stood up and headed for the stairs.

“Daryl” Ray added. “If you make her regret what she did to her father today, don’t expect to be around for your next birthday. You’re playin’ with fire, just don’t underestimate the flames and ya won’t get burned.”

“Aint got no plans for that.” Daryl assured him. “See ya”

Ray waited for Daryl to reach the second set of stairs, listening for his footsteps to grow faint before jumping to his feet and getting ready to join the others at Marty’s. Now he had said his piece, the night was his own again.

*****

Selene had been home all of an hour and in that time, she had cooked a meal, cleaned the entire apartment and managed to change her clothes. She was wriggling into a tight Jack Daniels top and a short, skater skirt when she heard a knock at the door. On her way to answering it, she scooped up her discarded clothes, deposited them in the laundry basket, stopped and checked her eyeliner in
She was used to being stared at, whispered about and judged. Being a confident and self-assured person meant she rarely cared about the opinions and assumptions of others. Standing out from the crowd in the way she did meant that she had spent a number of years growing as a person and learning to let go of the person everyone else expected her to be. Selene was comfortable with herself. But as she stood behind the door with her hand clasped around the handle, she was more nervous than she had ever expected.

She had seen Daryl less than two hours before and on occasions before that had spent a lot of time getting to know him. Since they had expressed their feelings for one another and Selene had gone to extreme lengths to make sure they had the freedom to turn their friendship into something else if they wanted to, everything had changed. It occurred to her that she had actually never been in this situation before. All of her previous relationships had been short lived and secret and she had never been rendered as anxious and skittish as this.

She quickly glanced around the room, making sure everything was in its place. Wanting to make a good impression of how she lived, she felt the unfamiliar gnawing of worrying about what someone else thought. But this wasn’t just someone else, it was Daryl.

“Pull your fucking self together” She uttered under her breath before pulling the door open.

Daryl was leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs, one hand shoved into his jeans pocket and one leg bent.

*How the hell did he just get more attractive?*

He held up the beer in his hand “Brought supplies” He said.

Selene smiled and took the bottles from him.

“I’ll be inviting you around more often if you’re going to bring beer every time.” She commented as she wandered into the kitchen and opened up the fridge.

“Countin’ on it.” Daryl murmured as he took in his surroundings. His eyes perused the walls, all decorated with black frames and obscure yet obviously very deliberately chosen artwork. Her furnishings were all black and gray. Her bed super-king sized with black lamps glowing from each nightstand. Slowly, he began a circuit of the room.

Selene pottered around in the kitchen, cracking open two beers and opening cupboards and drawers. She chatted away and switched the oven on, turning to see him skimming over her DVD collection on a shelf.

“Are you even listening to me?” She questioned.

Her voice seemed to snap him out of browsing mode and he looked up at her. Suddenly, with a stab of worry, it dawned on him that she had been talking and he hadn’t heard a single word due to his fascination with the world in which she lived.

“Sorry, what?” He asked

“I wanted to know if you’d eaten yet, because I have food.” She repeated.

“Oh, yeah, I’ll eat. Thanks.” He replied, going back to reading the titles on the spines of the DVD’s. Selene did a double take at him over her shoulder. It was just like watching him in the
hotel room of The Renaissance. She noted how he felt the need to touch things, to pick them up and turn them over in his hands, to investigate everything. His curiosity overruled any qualms he had about seeming like he was intruding or being nosey. She had grasped that there were some things Daryl did with great interest, things he immersed himself in more than she expected.

“I like your place.” He offered as he approached the black bookshelf, on which stood the framed butterfly that Ritchie had bought her for her birthday.

“Thank you. It’s small, but it’s home. It’s just me so I don’t need ton of room.” She reasoned as she slammed the oven shut with the food inside to warm and padded over to him, offering him a beer. He caught her eye when he wrapped his fingers around the bottle, his skin brushing hers for a brief moment. Her bright, blue eyes with the hint of brown stirred something in him like they always did.

*I love that damn two-tone eye.*

Turning back to the bookshelf, he noticed the butterfly. His mind flashed back, the image of the same butterfly on her thigh, below her shorts. The hotel room at the wedding. Bright blue and realistic, almost 3d. It had been forbidden to look at it at the time. Unsaid. His own rule. But a rule he stuck by all the same. Almost.

“Blue Morpho” He mentioned. He knew butterflies. He knew about most wildlife having spent most of his childhood and adult life so far in the woods. He knowledge wasn’t just restricted to the species of animals and insects found in Georgia, if someone mentioned a name of something, he more than likely would know something about it.

“They’re my favourite.” Selene hummed. “They’re so pretty.”

“Ya know how their wings are so blue?” He asked.

“No, I don’t” She replied.

Daryl picked up the frame and held it under the light of a lamp next to the bookshelf. He tilted it back and forth and Selene saw the shimmering iridescence of its wings as it moved.

“They aint actually got any blue in ‘em. No pigment. The colour is ‘cause of the scales that make up their wings. They got all these different structures in ‘em. When the light hits ‘em, it bends and reflects and makes the blue or green. That’s why it looks different from every angle. See?” He explained as he moved the frame under the light.

Selene took the frame from his hand and examined the wings up close, impressed by his knowledge of the subject. She placed it back on the shelf at gazed up at him.

“How do you know that?” She wanted to know.

“Know a lot about animals, insects n’ reptiles. Growin’ up in the woods does that.” He shrugged.

“Those butterflies are from South America” She stated.

“Yeah. Um, I read a lot of stuff when I was a kid.” He shrugged, moving on and coming to a set of drawers containing a photograph of Selene outside the Ink Cabinet. A huge, black ribbon was strung across the door behind her and she held a pair of scissors in her hand. She was laughing with her father, who stood on the other side of the door. She wore a tight pencil dress with heels and her hair was shorter, the front of it dyed bright red.
“The day I opened the Tattoo parlour.” She told him.

She had already accepted that Daryl wasn’t the type of person to probe too much into someone’s life and ask a string of questions. But he was a curious person and any information he gained about someone else almost always had to be volunteered.

“I bought it with the inheritance my mother left me. She set me up for life. Died of cancer a few years ago.” She volunteered.

Daryl examined the photograph for a few seconds more before sipping his beer and turning his attention to her.

“M’m sorry. ‘Bout ya mom.” He said quietly.

“I’m sorry about yours too. I remember when it happened. We were young.” She mused.

It had spread around the town like wildfire that a woman had burned to death in a housefire caused by a cigarette. Selene could remember being no more than ten or eleven years old at the time and hadn’t realised it was Daryl’s mother until she had seen him get into a fight in high school after another kid had made a comment to him about it. She remembered secretly hoping that Daryl had hit the kid hard enough to cause some long-lasting damage to make him pay for his insensitivity and callousness.

“Yeah. I don’t pay it no mind no more.” He shrugged.

Wanting to breakaway from the heavy subject matter, Selene spun around and shuffled across the floor to the oven, lifting out a weighty pot and sending a cloud of spicy, delicious smells barrelling through the apartment. Daryl’s stomach growled. Aside from the donut she’d given him earlier, he’d not eaten since the morning, having skipped lunch and opting for more cigarette breaks instead.

“Get comfy, it’s ready.” She called out.

Over the next hour, they sat in front of the TV, watching a game show and attempting to guess the answers to a series of questions of varying subjects while stuffing their faces with chicken wings and rice. Selene knew most of the art and film related questions, while Daryl was good at the natural history side of things. They both shared triumph when music was the subject choice, even high fiving once or twice when they guessed correctly.

The sound of both of them laughing and discussing answers was one that Daryl could see himself getting used to faster than he had anticipated. In all his years, he had never sat on a couch with a pretty girl, eaten good food and soberly and playfully argued about the answers to questions on a game show. It was a simple premise, yet it had already been one of his favourite moments ever.

When the show finished, Selene switched the TV off and began scrolling through her phone and making a playlist of songs for background music. After asking him multiple times what she should choose, he offered her no ideas, repeating that he liked pretty much everything she did judging by her extensive band T-shirt collection and autobiographies on the bookshelf. She got up and began collecting the plates only to find Daryl held out a hand to stop her and took over without a word.

“You’re a guest, you don’t have to do that.” She tried.
“You cooked. Shut up and choose some damn music.” He shot at her. His teasing making her grin as she collected her cell from the arm of the chair and began to circle the coffee table. Eventually deciding on a collection of music consisting of hip hop and metal, she continued to search through the tracks, adding more and more as she went along. Eventually, Daryl finished loading the dishwasher and returned to the couch with a second beer each for them. She stole a quick look over her phone at him, catching him staring at her thigh. Knowing what he was looking at, she inched closer and stood in front of him.

“You want a closer look?” She asked. He almost jolted at the realisation that she had seen him and he sat back for a moment, clearing his throat.

“It’s fine” She whispered, positioning herself so that one thigh was between his knees. He reached forward and nervously slid her skirt up her thigh, it seemed to take forever but he memorised every single second of it, revealing her ultra-realistic Blue Morpho tattoo. His eyes examined every inch of the tattoo and he sat forward, needing to see it clearer.

“That is fuckin’ amazin’.” He said under his breath.

“Thanks. It’s the only coloured tattoo I have.” She told him. “Axel did it for me.”

“Really?” He questioned.

“Yeah, he’s got a real talent for realistic stuff.”

“Sure has, looks like a damn photograph.”

Daryl had pushed his luck a little, taking the opportunity to leave his hand where it was on the top of her thigh, her skirt gathered under it. He knew it would stay where it was if he lifted his hand, but he wasn’t about to do that when he had the chance to touch her. His gaze moved up, now fixed on her face.

“Why Blue Morpho’s?” He queried, his voice quiet. She quirked the corner of her mouth up into a flirtatious smile and he was sure her eyes were sparkling in the low light of the room. Selene passed her cell into one hand and slid her fingers over the back of his hand on her thigh. A brief hint of surprise passed behind his eyes but she caught it and he remained peering up at her.

“They’re wish granters” She uttered. “Served me well so far.”

She’s three stepping me again.

Feeling brave, Daryl decided to take an out of character and most unexpected move. He slipped his hand down, leaving her skirt pinned under her hand and very slowly smoothed his palm over her tattoo, savouring every delicious moment of the contact and chance to caress the silky soft skin beneath his fingers. Grasping that this was a very deliberate move, Selene tried to hide the astonishment on her face and released a jagged breath as her skin lit up, prickling with pleasure under his touch. Nerves probed her mind, setting her heart racing and making her imagine how anxious she would be if or when they had their first kiss. Judging by Daryl’s out of the blue bout of confidence, it was very likely to happen at some point. She tried to think of an occasion in her life where such a simple and brief encounter had left her feeling like her legs were weak and she couldn’t focus. There wasn’t one. Daryl had managed it in a matter of 30 seconds. There were so many things she wanted to do if she wasn’t so nervous and was sure it wouldn’t scare him off. She wanted to straddle his lap and kiss him, to feel him dragging his hands up and into her skirt.

Daryl’s hand left her skin just above her knee and he sat back on the couch, his chest falling as the
air left his lungs in a deep sigh.

“What?” She breathed.

“Nothin’.” He replied.

_Shit. I can’t tell you... but I want you to straddle me. You’re in the perfect position for it. Sit on my lap and let me put my hands up that damn skirt._

She stepped back, her skirt falling back over her legs. Leaving her cell on the table, she sat beside him and scooted round to face him.

“I have to run something by you” She said, picking up their beers and handing him his. She took a quick sip. “You might already know it, so stop me if you do.”

“OK” He agreed, clueless as to what she was about to say.

“Delilah told me you guys had sex.”

Daryl froze with his beer bottle half way up to his face, his eyebrows raised.

_For god sakes._

He lowered the bottle and focused on the label around the bottle, tracing a thumb over the ridges in it.

“She did, huh?” He mumbled.

“Yeah.” She affirmed “How long ago was it?”

“’Bout four years now.” He said.

“What happened?” she asked.

Daryl wrinkled his nose and threw her a confused and slightly freaked out look.

“Ya want the details?!” He questioned.

“NO. Oh god, no. I mean, how did it happen?” She corrected.

Now, he took a few gulps of his beer, needing the courage. He drank three quarters of the bottle before he stopped and took a deep breath.

“I known her for years. She sat with me at the bar one night. She was kinda quiet. Sad. So, I asked what was wrong. She said she’d had some kinda fight with her boyfriend. I didn’t even know she had one. Said they split up. So, I bought her a drink and she asked me if I’d go home with her. I said no first. Thought she was just tryin’ to get a client. Then, she tells me it’s more for her than for me. That she needed me to help her out. I hadn’t gotten laid in like, forever so I agreed. That’s it really.”

Selene was listening closely, engrossed in what he was telling her. It matched with Delilah’s story, not that she had expected it not to.

“I didn’t pay her.” He quickly added. “I don’t pay for sex. Never have.”

“Can’t imagine you have to.” Selene purred, winking at him and getting a shy half smile in return.
“So, this was four years ago? She ever tell you who her boyfriend was?”

“No.”

Selene bit her bottom lip and inhaled deeply.

“He still is her boyfriend. She told you the truth, they did split up, it was for three months and then they got back together. They’re still together now. I thought it was the Rabbit’s worst kept secret. Turns out it’s not.” She considered.

“What are you talkin’ ‘bout?” He wanted to know.

“Delilah’s boyfriend is my Father. They’ve been together since my mom died. You had sex with my daddy’s girlfriend.” She said with one raised eyebrow.

Daryl’s face gradually twisted into sheer bafflement and shock. He leaned back and gawped at Selene before finally, starting to laugh.

“Damn” He chuckled “Aint that some shit.”

Selene shook her head and giggled to herself. “Delilah is a high-class prostitute, all the guys in the Rabbit have had sex with my daddy’s girlfriend. What you have over my father is two things. One, you didn’t pay her. It wasn’t a business transaction. She wanted to have sex with you and that is going to piss him off to no end. And two, you went on to date his precious daughter. Congratulations, bad boy.” She grinned.

“Ray was right, I am playing with fire.”

“I didn’t know. Jesus.” He huffed, rubbing his face with his hand.

“He can’t ever know, about Delilah. They have an arrangement. She sees her clients and takes her clothes off on stage but aside from that she doesn’t touch anyone else. But she did with you. He won’t care that they weren’t together at that point.” She warned him.

“I aint got no plans to tell him.” Daryl confirmed.

“Me neither.” Selene nodded. “While we’re talking about things I found out about you. I know you slept with one of the other girls from the club. Delilah told me that too.”

Daryl threw his head back on the couch and sighed loudly in frustration. He made a mental note to have a conversation with Delilah the next time she saw her and scold her for broadcasting his past encounters to a girl he actually liked for the first time in his life.

“Woman can’t hold her own damn water.” He grumbled. “Yeah, Amy. Again, just the once and I-”

“-Didn’t have to pay her, yeah. I know” She interrupted, placing a hand on his knee. “Let me guess, she chose you too?”

He nodded shyly “Yeah. I dunno why”

“Mr. Popular.” She hummed, slowly dragging her fingernails up his arm to his shoulder, his head shot down as soon as she touched him and he watched her hand move up, willing himself not to tense up because she would surely notice it. “Can’t think why. I’m sure there’s two very, toned and muscular reasons.” She feigned confusion and gazed up to the ceiling thoughtfully, hearing him scoff.
“OK, Stop it.” He muttered.

She took her hand away and placed it back on his leg, shifting closer to him. He wasn’t going to move away or ask her to remove it, no matter how awkward he felt.

“Seriously though, I don’t blame them. They have nothing but nice things to say about you and you are very nice to look at.” She beamed.

“So are you” He shot back at her with a slightly blushed face.

Daryl had stayed until past midnight, drinking and watching Selene talk about a myriad of topics. Being more of a listener than a talker, he could have sat there for hours more, just watching her laugh and chatter. She touched him with every opportunity she got and at one point he wondered if he should just do the same to her. Rest a hand on her leg or take her hand, trace his fingertips in patterns on her forearm just like she had done to him. Being touched was usually non-negotiable to him, he hated it and only allowed it to happen in situations where it was unavoidable, like being in an intimate situation or when he was with Selene. He knew he would get nowhere with her unless he relaxed the boundaries somewhat and tried to adapt. Holding her hand, enduring a hand on his knee or arm was fine but anything more would be risky and he had no idea how she would react. Making skin on skin contact with her tattoo was a huge deal for him and it had been a last minute, impulsive decision that he hadn’t allowed himself too much time to think about. It had paid off and along with being able to unzip her dress at the wedding, he considered it to be just a little taste of what was to come.

He had checked the time and told her he really needed to get going or Merle would start asking questions. She went with him to the door at the back of the building and he took another quick decision to find her hand which hung by her side and tickled his fingers across her palm.

“I’m assuming my father is keeping his cards close to his chest about you and I. I doubt he’s told many of the staff. Do you think Merle knows about me yet?” She pushed.

“Maybe, if he does, he aint said nothin’. Don’t really want him knowin’.” His fingers wound further into her hand and she clung to him. “He fucks up everything good in my life. He aint havin’ you.”

Selene’s body rushed with affection and the desire to push him against the door and kiss him.

Oh my god. She thought Oh my god. Master of the subtle one-liner.

“I’m not going anywhere unless you want me to” she told him.

“I don’t want you to.” He whispered.

She moved closer, holding his hand tighter and gently nuzzled at the size of his face, kissing his cheek. Daryl didn’t tense or flinch, he didn’t freeze up or want to pull back. He simply stood there, closed his eyes, turned his head so he could feel her face against his and let her do as she pleased which had resulted in a surge of lust and desire thundering through his veins which he had to fight to stop from appearing on the surface. His tensed jaw was the only tell-tale sign.

“Goodnight, Daryl” She purred into his ear before stepping back and letting go of his hand.

He opened the door after fumbling with the handle behind him and stepped outside into the night. Turning to walk away, he heard her say his name and stopped in his tracks.
“Wait. Before you go” She called out “I need to apologise to you.”

He whirled around in surprise, his brow furrowed.

“What? What for?”

“Angelo.” She stated, locking eyes with him.

“Naw, you don’t. Just forget it.” He brushed off.

“I can’t.” She said firmly. “I was drunk. I got drunk because I was pissed you didn’t show. I made a mistake with him. I’m sorry you had to see what you did and I’m sorry that I even did it in the first place. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me” He corrected “You made me realise somethin’.”

“I did?” She questioned.

He paused for a few moments, his vision still on her and he didn’t want to tear it away.

“Yeah. I didn’t know you liked me…like ya do...uh...I aint so good at this.” He tried, irritation at his own inability to express himself becoming apparent in his long pauses between sentences. But Selene waited, leaned against the door frame in silence.

“I hoped ya did but at the same time, didn’t think there was a point. So, I kept quiet. We were-we were friends. Then I saw ya with him. I hated it. I aint gonna lie to you. I fuckin’ hated it.” He admitted.

“I’m so sorry” She cut in.

“No, don’t. I aint finished.” He said, holding up a hand and willing himself to get to the point. “Yeah, we weren’t…me and you…like, together or anything. But I was awake all night thinkin’ about it. Then ya dad’s suits showed up and threatened me. It was like everythin’ was tellin’ me to just stay the fuck away from you. But y’know what?”

“What?” She uttered with a stunned expression, her lips parted and her eyes wide at his honesty.

“I told ya I’d take ya to the Movies for ya Birthday and I was damn well gonna do it.”

“Daryl-” She tried to say only for him to hold up his hand once more.

“Walkin’ into Marty’s that night. All it did was show me that I wanted to be around you. I still wanted to see you. Even if it meant seein’ you with somebody else someday.”

Selene waited, making sure he wasn’t going to say anything else. He shortened the gap between them and nibbled on his thumb as he peered at her worriedly.

“You understand what I’m sayin’?” He asked.

She broke into a smile and nodded quickly.

“Yes, I do.” She squeaked. After such a taxing and difficult admission, she felt as if she owed him something in return. She stepped down onto the gravel, her bare feet and painted, black toenails appearing dainty and delicate on the harsh gravel beneath. Daryl lunged forwards at the sight of her step outside with bare, tattooed feet and she quickly held both her hands up to stop him. He took a step closer but didn’t reach out to steady her or help her, accepting her request to be left. She
stopped in front of him and lifted a hand to the side of his face, lightly rubbing her thumb over his cheek. He closed his eyes and snuggled his head against her hand, feeling nothing but a kind of still peace in his heart.

“You’re the only guy I’ve ever met that has treated me like I was so precious.” She informed him.

He opened his eyes and wrapped his fingers around her wrist, taking her hand away from his face and leaving a gentle kiss on the back of it.

“You are.” He said.

Is this guy for fucking real?!
She thought That was so romantic and sweet, I think I just DIED.

Not giving him the option to say no, she pulled him to her and draped her arms over his broad shoulders. Her embrace was intoxicating to him. The smell of the shampoo in her hair, her perfume, and her skin as he lowered his head and pushed his face into her neck. His hands gingerly settled on her hips and she threaded her fingers into his hair at the back of his head.

“I took you for granted when I kissed him.” She whispered, holding him tightly to her. “It should have been you.”

He lifted his head and she dropped her arms, stepping back. The urge to grab onto her and keep her where she was had proved to be so overwhelming, he had to turn to the side. He rubbed his chin and remembered she was stood on loose gravel in bare feet.

“I gotta go.” He reminded her before wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her from the floor. She giggled and held onto his shoulders while he walked her back to the doorway and placed her on the cold floor tiles inside. It would have been so easy. So easy for her to just hold onto his shoulders and kiss him right there, especially because he hesitated in front of her for a fleeting moment before pulling away and striding into the parking lot, his angel wings getting further away in the darkness.

“Night!” She called out.

“Night, pretty girl.” Came the reply.

*****

Axel swapped a suspicious glance with Bear as they watched Ritchie open drawers in the kitchen and attempt to make a coffee. His movements were exaggerated, as if he had too much energy and didn’t know what to do with it, his stance was rickety and his eyes were sunken. He looked exhausted, like he’d been up all night and he had the unmistakeable smell of Meth as he walked through the studio to the kitchen.

Ray also watched from the front desk, peering over the top of the frames of his glasses. Axel waited for Ritchie’s back to turn to them before signalling to Ray with a wave, he jutted a thumb over his shoulder at Ritchie and mouthed the words ‘He’s fucking high!”

Ray inhaled slowly and pursed his lips thoughtfully, contemplating what he should do about the situation while Selene hadn’t started her shift yet. Rising to his feet, he rounded the desk and met Ritchie just as he was about to take the stairs to his studio, coffee in hand. Ray stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

“Uh uh. You aint goin anywhere near piercing needles today, buddy.” He said quietly, trying not to cause a scene in front of Axel and Bear, who were already stood behind Ritchie expecting the shit
to hit the fan at any moment. Ritchie shrugged his backpack further up onto his shoulder and pressed his eyes shut, screwing up his face for a few seconds and shaking his head.

“I’m fine, I just had a lot to drink last night at Marty’s. I’m good man, I’m good. Just let me up—”

“Oh, hell no.” Ray snapped, slamming his hands on the doorframe either side of him to avoid Ritchie swerving past him. “You smell like a fuckin’ Meth lab. Get the hell outta here.”

“No, no. I’m—I’m not, I don’t. Let me up there, man. I haven’t had anything. Just some joints, just some weed. I’m fine. Really.” Ritchie rambled while he rapidly shifted his weight from one foot to the other and slurped on his coffee.

Ray raised his gaze to Axel.

“Go get Selene” he told him. Axel surged forwards and Ray lifted an arm to let him pass and take the stairs. As Axel entered the doorway, Ritchie slid his coffee mug onto a nearby shelf and attempted to push past Ray by grabbing at his arm and trying to shove it out of the way. Ray, who’s hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of his clothes at his chest, lost his temper and switched. Bear jolted and went to intervene but Ray held his free hand up, flicking it at him and signalling for him to move back.

“Oh, you don’t wanna be startin’ this shit with me, tweaker. I will kick your fuckin’ ass” Ray hissed.

Being gay had never defined Ray’s capabilities and ability to protect himself. He was not one to be trifled with. Not only did he have a tongue as sharp as a razor, he was physically strong and skilled enough to hold his own in a fight. From the age of twelve, he had trained in Mixed Martial Arts in order to defend himself against playground bullies and later in life, those who chose to attack him for being different.

“No. I aint. I aint. I just need to—” Ritchie went to say before throwing a punch at Ray’s face. Seeing it coming a mile off, Ray swerved the fist and caught Ritchie’s arm as he lowered it, bringing his other arm up and colliding it with Ritchie’s nose with a sickening crack. He stumbled backwards onto Bear who was holding his hands up in front of him in an attempt to show Ritchie that he was causing this violence by himself. But he spun around and made the terrible decision to try and hit Bear too. He clumsily threw a fist out and Bear caught it in his hand as if he were catching a tennis ball for a dog, holding it there while he looked up at Ray and gave him a bemused look. Ray reached around Ritchie, grasping both his wrists and holding them behind him as he wriggled and growled a string of inaudible and saliva laden curse words.

Selene was getting dressed in her apartment. She had just fastened the button on her black jeans and leaned over the bed to take hold of her bra when the door flew open and Axel appeared. For a split second, they both froze in shock and stared at one another before Selene shrieked at the top of her lungs and grabbed a cushion, holding it in front of her.

“Jesus fucking Christ Axel!” She yelled.

“WOAH! Oh my god! Shit! Sorry, Boss!” Axel cried at the same time.

He held both hands in front of his eyes, but they both suddenly felt far too small to cover his vision. He was sure his hands weren’t that small before. So, instead he lifted the bottom of his Ink Cabinet T-shirt up at the front, exposing his washboard, tattooed abs and covering his face with it. It
stretched over his head and did the trick perfectly.

“I didn’t expect the door to be unlocked!” He tried to explain

“But you still tried it anyway?!” Selene exclaimed

“I um, Yeah. I did. I’m sorry. Fuck.”

“What the hell do you want?! Why are you in my apartment when I’m half naked, Axel?!” She demanded as she edged towards the headboard of the bed and rapidly swapped the small cushion in her hand for a pillow that covered more of her modesty.

“Oh, yeah! Ritchie’s downstairs, high as fuck and I think he’s fighting with Ray.” He said through his T-shirt.

Selene took a moment to let the words sink in.

“Ritchie’s fighting with Ray?!” She asked.

“Sounds like it. I mean, I don’t know, I’m up here with a T-shirt stretched over my face.” He shrugged.

“Axel! What is going on?!” She demanded.

“Ritchie turned up all fucked up. He smells pretty weird. Like chemicals and weed and shit. He was trying to get up to the piercing studio and Ray stopped him and now it sounds like they’re fighting. Which proves Ritchie has his head up his own ass because even I wouldn’t fight with Ray, he’s spiteful as shit.” Axel tittered away to himself in the doorway.

“Axel. Get out. I’ll be there in a minute.” She instructed. “Don’t let them fight in my Tattoo parlour.”

“Yeah sure” He said, pulling his T-shirt back down. Selene was still stood there with a pillow held in front of her and Axel shot a hand up again. “Damn. Sorry. Uh…I’m going. You uh, shouldn’t be embarrassed, you- you look good!”

“GET OUT!” Selene shouted.

Axel scurried down the stairs as fast as his legs could carry him and Selene was finally able to retrieve her bra.

When she appeared downstairs in the studio three minutes later, Ritchie was being pinned to the floor by Ray, who was sat on top of him, clamping his arms to his back while he screamed at the top of his lungs. No one could make out anything he was saying and a pool of saliva and blood from his nose was forming on the shiny floor under his face. He only quietened when he saw Selene’s shiny, heeled boots stand next to his head.

“Stand him up.” She ordered. Ray shuffled back and Bear took hold of one of his arms while Ray kept hold of the other. They hauled him up and his head lolled before he threw it back and saw her stood in front of him, so furious he wasn’t sure if he had ever seen her look like that.

“Selene” He panted. His head was coated with sweat that was dampening the roots of his dreadlocks and the strong odour of chemicals filled her nose. His lips and chin were covered in
blood from Ray's punch, but his nose didn't look broken.

“Bear, Ray, you’re going to take him upstairs to my apartment. Axel, lock the front door please.”

No one spoke a word as Ray and Bear dragged Ritchie up the stairs, Axel joining them and helping to hold his kicking legs after locking the door. Selene followed on behind them, her face still stony and enraged. In her heart, was nothing bad sadness and disappointment at what her friend had done to himself.

It took around ten minutes for the guys to get Ritchie into Selene’s apartment. They stood him in the middle, still not willing to let him go while Selene’s heels clicked over the wooden surface and onto the rug. She stood before him, arms crossed and back straight, looking down her nose at him. His eyes were now half shut and he seemed to have lost his fight. Exhaustion now setting in.

“If Bear and Ray let go of your arms, I need you to promise me you won’t try to hurt anyone.” She informed him.

He nodded slowly, his breathing now noticeably slower and strained.

“Ritchie, say it. Promise me. No more fighting.” She said angrily.

“N-no more F-fighting” He mumbled.

“Think he’s startin’ to crash. He’s gonna need to sleep.” Ray announced.

Selene nodded to her brother and best friend and they released his arms. He slumped forwards and she caught him and steered him to her bed, sitting him on the edge and sinking down next to him. His dreads hung in front of his face and he fiddled with his hands in his lap. She reached onto the nightstand and plucked a Kleenex out of the box, using it to wipe the blood away from his face.

“Ray, I need you on the front desk, Axel, Bear, you two must have appointments soon. I’ll keep him here with me until he can go home.” She said.

Bear didn’t like the idea of his sister alone in her apartment with a drug addict who had just tried to punch two guys that were a hell of a lot bigger than him and for no reason. She could see the concern on his face. He had never been good at hiding it.

“We’ll be fine. He’s not going to hurt me. Are you, Ritchie?” She asked.

“Would never hurt you.” Ritchie slurred from beside her.

“Just call out if you need us. We’ll leave the door open.” Bear said as he backed up and tapped Rays arm. “C’mon, let’s go. I’ll bring his bag up later on” All three of them left reluctantly. One they were out of sight, she sighed deeply and dropped her hand over his, which he was still wringing in his lap. He instantly stopped moving them and began to tap his leg instead. She worked her hand between his, pushing his fingers apart and holding onto him tightly. With her other hand, she tenderly moved his dreads from his face and hooked her index finger under his chin, lifting his head up so she could see him better. His eyes were bloodshot, filled with tears and his pupils were still huge.

“What have you done to yourself?” She uttered under her breath.

“It’s for when…when it’s quiet. I think-I think too much.” He stammered.

Fighting back her own tears, Selene withdrew her hand and climbed onto the bed, she threw back
the covers and kneeled behind him, tugging his hooded jacket from his shoulders and throwing it on the floor. Underneath, we wore a plain white vest and Selene could see how thin he’d become. When she first met Ritchie, he weighed a lot more and was healthy enough. A keen skateboarder, he burned a lot of calories in his spare time but never looked as thin as he did sat on her bed and messed up by Meth.

“C’mon, lay down. You need to sleep.” She cooed, guiding him by helping him back with her hands under his arms. He shuffled back as best he could and stopped, slowly turning his head to make eye contact with her. Her skin prickled from his sinister presentation, when underneath it all, he was just terrified and exhausted. A single tear escaped her eye and she flicked it away as soon as she felt it dampen her skin. She held an arm out over his shoulders, applying light pressure on the top of his arm and lay back, bringing him with her and settling his head on her shoulder.

They lay there in silence, Ritchie’s breathing soon settling back to normal and his eyes falling shut. He had curled his legs up beside her, replicating the foetal position, all the while never leaving her shoulder.

Selene hadn’t moved for hours. Her shoulder had gone numb and she was starving but she refused to leave him. Even when Ray had climbed the stairs to check on them. She had tried to wave him off and pressed her index finger to her lips, motioning for him to be quiet. She had fallen asleep herself for a couple of hours and awoke when night had fallen.

Ray opened the door for Daryl after staying late again. Not wanting to leave Selene alone with Ritchie, he intended to stay as long as possible and was relieved when Daryl had wandered past the front window.

“Thank god you’re here.” He proclaimed as Daryl stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Everything OK?” Daryl asked.

“Not really.” Ray sighed, rolling his eyes as he locked the door and breezed past Daryl, back to the desk. “Ritchie showed up this morning, out of his mind on Crystal. Started throwing punches at me and Bear. Had to restrain him. What a dumb ass.”

“Where’s Selene?” Daryl wanted to know before anything else.

“She’s in her apartment with him.” Ray said.

“What?!” Daryl snapped. “The guy’s been brawlin’ and he’s up there with Selene alone?!” Aiming for the stairs, he surged past Ray, who held out an arm, stopping him from going any further.

“Hold ya damn horses. Relax.” He scoffed. “She’s fine. He would never hurt her. He calmed right down when he saw her. He’s been asleep since this morning. She just didn’t wanna leave him.”

Daryl tried to force his worries about this situation away but they gnawed at his conscience. He knew Ritchie and had done for around a year.

“I can stay with her if ya wanna go on home.” He offered.

“Allrighty” Ray said without argument, stooping below the desk and hoisting his bag up onto his shoulder and passing Daryl the keys. “Lock up behind me.”

Daryl followed him to the door, the cold breeze sweeping in as it opened and Ray left the building.
“Before ya go up there, just remember they’ve been friends for a long time. Don’t pitch a fit and get ya drawers in a knot when ya see ‘em. He’s sleepin on her shoulder, that’s all.” Ray explained.

“Alright” Daryl nodded. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem. I’ll be back early in the mornin’ to bring her breakfast. Toodloo!” He sang as he waved flamboyantly and headed down the street.

Daryl leaned against the frame of the open door to Selene’s apartment with his arms crossed. He wasn’t angry, or concerned about their closeness from first impressions. In fact, what he was witnessing was an example of how far Selene would go for those she considered to be her family. Ritchie was still curled up tightly against her body, her arm still threaded under his neck and her hand on his shoulder. His face was nestled into her neck and she held a book out in the opposite direction in her free hand, her head turned away from Daryl. She hadn’t heard him arrive so he knew he had to tread carefully to avoid startling them both.

“Hey” He said quietly.

Her head turned quickly towards him and her face lit up. She dropped the book on the bed and beckoned him in with one finger. Being careful not to make any noise, he crept across the wooden floor to the rug at her side of the bed which muffled his footsteps.

“Ray told me. How’s he doin’?” He hushed.

Selene went to answer him but it soon occurred to her that she needed to free herself from Ritchie’s restraint so she could go and pee. She held up a finger to Daryl and mouthed the words ‘One minute’.

Turning back to Ritchie, she brushed the dreads away from his ear with her partially numbed hand and leaned over him, pulling him into a hug and gently brushing her fingers over his face.

“Rich” She soothed

Daryl had mixed feelings about seeing her so close to someone else. It was glaringly obvious to him that Ritchie had feelings for Selene, whether he had said anything to her in the years he had known her, he didn’t know but watching her holding him and tenderly caressing his face had taken him aback and stirred jealousy in him after all. He hadn’t expected to feel it, but Ray had and all of a sudden, his warning made much more sense.

“Ritchie, I need my arm back. I need to pee. I’m just going to move you, OK?” She told him.

Daryl had seen Merle crashing from Meth on more than one occasion and had to drag him to his bed so he could begin the long process of sleeping it off once his body had decided it just couldn’t take anymore. He knew that if Ritchie did wake up, he would just go right back to sleep again with no problem. The question was if Selene actually wanted him in her bed all night as well as all day. He retreated and crossed the apartment, opening cupboards and eventually finding a glass which he filled with water and set on the side as he waited for Selene to escape. If she had been laid beside him for the entire day, she was likely to be dehydrated and hungry as hell.

She tried to tug her arm from under his neck but he held on, wrapping his hand around her upper arm and holding it down.

“No” He complained.
“I’m going to piss myself If you don’t let me go.” She laughed quietly into his ear and seeing his eyes flicker open. She scooted further down so she was more level with his face and smiled at him.

“Hey, sleepy head. How are you feeling?” She beamed.

He blinked at her blearily and grunted before looking right into her eyes.

“Selene.” He tried through his dry throat.

Daryl moved closer so he was within earshot, feeling the need to be able to hear whatever he was saying to her. He lifted his head slightly, trying to see her over Ritchie’s shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s me. You OK?” She asked.

“Selene” He said again. “I’m in love with you.”
Hi All! Slight similarity here with one of my other stories. Like I said in my introduction, I'm not scared of a bit of repetition if it works and fits with a character/storyline.
Thank you all so much for the feedback and for bothering to read this ridiculous little story of mine! ;)

Axel finished up his beer and raised a finger at Marty, sweeping it back and forth in front of him and Bear who sat beside him at the bar. Marty set about getting them two more. They had been there for an hour and what had initially been arranged as a relaxing drink after work, was now showing signs of turning into a sorrow drowning session.

“I knew something was off with him. I told Selene a few weeks back.” Axel expressed as Marty placed two more glasses on the surface of the bar and threw a cloth over his shoulder. He nodded to the empty bowl of pretzels between them and Bear shoved it towards him and nodded. He took the bowl away, soon returning with a full one.

“Yeah, me too. I know she tried to talk to him” Bear Replied, picking up a pretzel and throwing it into his mouth

“Can’t believe he tried to punch you, dude.” Axel mused, his eyes wandering around the bar and not focusing on anything in particular.

“I know, right?! I’d have squashed him like a little bug if we weren’t at work.” Bear fumed before calming slightly and sighing. “Well, I wouldn’t, ‘cause it’s Rich, y’know?”

“Guys got problems, man.” Axel pointed out as he sat back on the tall chair he occupied and collected a handful of pretzels from the bowl, cupping them in his hand and crunching down on them one by one.

“Yeah, we all know what is main one is.” Bear scoffed before taking a sip of his beer.

“We do?” Axel asked with a mouthful of food.

Bear looked sideways at him with his eyebrows pulled together, how could he have not noticed for all this time? Bear had assumed it was common knowledge although no one was really willing to acknowledge it for fear of Selene’s wrath and damaging Ritchie’s pride, not that there was any of that left now.

“C’mon, you been living under a rock for the last five years?! He’s got feelings for Selene.” Bear told him.

“Really? He does?!” Axel exclaimed, his body twisting to face Bear in his seat.

“Axel, open your fuckin’ eyes, man. You saw him at Shorty’s wedding. He was wreck when he danced with her and he kept looking at Daryl like he wanted to shoot the guy all night. You not see his face in the morning too? When he saw Selene and Daryl walk across the lawn giggling n’ shit?
That was when he realised, she’d shared a room with him, dude looked fuckin’ broken. Sometimes I really think that it’s you that’s the dumb one and I’m the escapegoat.”

Axel sucked both lips into his mouth and tried his hardest not to laugh at this most inappropriate of moments. Just when Bear was trying to prove he had the upper hand at something, it had bombed and he had no idea.

“It’s scapegoat, dude.” He said quietly and quickly.

“Oh, right. Thanks” Bear answered, shrugging a shoulder up.

“I guess I just don’t notice some things.” Axel suggested, picking up a couple more pretzels.

“No, you were too busy at the bottom of a whiskey glass.” Bear chuckled “And trying to hold the bar up.” His laugh echoed slightly in his beer glass as he tried to take another sip through giggles.

“It was a wedding, that’s what I was supposed to do.” Axel established.

“You threw up in the lobby, Man. I could still see that cheesecake.” Bear reminded him with a wrinkled nose and a disgusted expression.

“At least I didn’t get high!” Axel shot at him.

Bear rolled his eyes and threw another pretzel in his mouth, briefly peering into the bowl and wondering where they’d all disappeared to so rapidly. Axel munched contentedly next to him.

“I took two drags of that thing. Then I realised I was doin’ drugs with Ritchie at Shorty’s wedding. That aint me. So, I came back just in time to see you bringing up your cheesecake on the carpet surrounded by a bunch of pale-faced, posh folks in suits”

Axel considered his words for a moment before shrugging and taking a gulp of his drink.

The door to the bar swung open and Ray walked in, his bag slung over his shoulder and his cell in his hand. He glanced up and whistled to Marty who didn’t need to be told what drink to make. He settled down beside Bear and Axel and threw his cell on the counter as he slid his jacket off, keeping his Ink Cabinet hoodie on. The front of his hair had worked its way out of the thick layer of gel he usually used to keep it under control. But it had been a long day and after a scrap in the middle of his workplace and staying late after hours, even his super strength hair gel was starting to give up.

“Ladies” he sighed.

Marty brought Ray’s drink over, a tall glass filled with yellows, oranges and reds. In the top, he placed a small, bright pink umbrella. Ray winked at him and made a click with his mouth, Marty shook his head and left them to it.

“She alright?” Bear asked

“She will be. Daryl turned up, offered to take over. I gladly let him, my mouth is drier than Gandhi’s sandals” He complained, picking a straw from a box on the counter and dropping it into his drink. Axel watched the liquid in the glass drop rapidly and wondered what the hell was in it and why Ray couldn’t just have a simple beer like everyone else. He looked at his beer, almost half empty, better order another one soon.

“Who is Gandhi and why does he have dry shoes?” Bear questioned innocently.
Axel almost choked on his drink and saw Ray level his gaze at bear in an expression that screamed ‘Really?’

“Never mind, Bear.” He said, patting his huge, football players arm. His vision swept over the people also sat at the bar, stopping on a girl sat on her own who he instantly recognised to be Skye, the client Selene had tried to set up with Ritchie. She sat alone, stirring her drink with a black cocktail stirrer. Ray followed her gaze, shocked to find that she was staring right at Axel who was now leaning over the bar and calling Marty’s name, the empty Pretzel bowl held out in front of him.

“Axel” Ray said. Axel sat back and looked at him. “Don’t look now, play it cool. But there’s a girl at the other end of the bar. Blonde Dreads. She’s Ritchie’s client. Selene gave her his number and told her to text him, she tried to set ‘em up. I dunno if she ever contacted him but right at this very second, she’s on her own and she is eye fucking the hell outta you.”

Axel froze and his eyes widened. “She is?! I really wanna look.”

“Don’t look. Not yet.” Ray instructed, giving a highly amused Bear an irritated look for laughing almost hysterically next to him. “What the fuck do you find so funny?”

“He is just the most unobservant person I know.” Bear chuckled.

Ray rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Skye, who had picked up her cellphone, her silver-ringed thumbs darting across the screen and typing.

“Now. You can look now.” Ray muttered under his breath.

Axel’s eyes shot up and observed her tapping away at her cell, her eyes still fixed on the screen even when she moved her head to the side, taking hold of the straw in her drink with her lips. He smiled smugly.

“I remember her.” Bear chimed in

“She’s real hot. But I’m staying away if she’s in contact with Ritchie. Bad enough he can’t have Selene so it’s not like I’m going to ruin this for him too.” Axel reasoned.

Ray got to his feet and swiped his drink from the bar.

“What are you doing?” Axel called after him, receiving only the flick of a hand in his direction.

Ray sauntered past the packed bar and weaved his way in between Skye and the man stood beside her.

“Good evenin’ ma’am.” He declared, holding his drink up. Skye looked up and grinned at him, recognising him immediately.

“Hi! You’re the guy from the tattoo place.” She mentioned.

“That’s me. Name’s Ray. You are Skye if I remember rightly.” He stated.

“Yep!” She chirped, picking up her glass and clinking it against his.

“So, you hear from our Ritchie?” He questioned, getting straight to the point.
Her face dropped and she picked up her cell again, pressing icons before holding it out and showing him the screen. Ray could see one single message from her to him that had been opened and read but not replied to. Ray’s heart dropped.

*Ritchie. You fuckin’ idiot.*

“Ahh, I’m sorry, sugar. Ritchie’s brain rattles about like a BB in a boxcar. He aint a bad guy, he’s just a little…preoccupied at the moment.” Ray tried, not wanting to make Ritchie out to be the kind of guy that ghosts girls on the regular.

“Well, I’ve been single a while, I don’t have the patience for that kind of thing anymore. He either likes me or he doesn’t. So, as cute as he is, I’m going to let him go.”

Ray couldn’t blame her, knowing that he would have done the same if he were in here situation.

“That why you been undressing my ‘action man’ friend with those pretty eyes of yours?” Ray purred, giving her a wink. She giggled bashfully and clutched her drink in her hands, her index finger and thumb guiding her straw to her lips as she stole a quick peek of Axel, who was sat bolt upright with one hand around his beer glass on the bar, gawping at Ray. Bear was copying his positioning exactly, making them both look completely ridiculous.

“Ah hell. He looks like one half of a pair of bookends right now, but he’s a fine specimen. His name is Axel. Single too.” Ray told her.

“Oh, yeah, but he wouldn’t be interested in me. He’s too…beautiful.” She dismissed, placing her glass back on the bar and bringing a dreadlock over her shoulder so she could play nervously with it. Ray draped an arm around her shoulder and gently pushed her around in her seat to face Axel, he lowered himself so he was level with her and spoke into her ear.

Axel cleared his throat and looked at Bear. Despite his model good looks and his muscular, tattooed frame, that often caught the attention of many women, Axel was no expert on the opposite sex, often finding he gravitated towards women that took the lead and left him with very few decisions to make. He was also prone to bouts of self-doubt, which Ray often took great pleasure in putting right, reminding him on more than one occasion that he was the definition of ‘his type’ and that it was a shame that he was straight. Much like he had done with Daryl, over and over again.

“Why the fuck am I friends with him?” He asked.

“Because he’s funny as shit and he’s about to get you laid, you ungrateful son of a bitch” Bear laughed loudly, slapping Axel playfully on the back. “Looks like Ritchie passed up his chance.”

“I can’t talk to him. He’s way out of my league. He’s a ten and I’m like a… I don’t know, like a 6.” Skye argued.

Ray recoiled and placed his hand over his chest, a look of pure horror on his face

“Well that makes about as much sense as tits on a bull. I take it you don’t own a mirror. We got some in the studio, you should come by and take a look at yaself from time to time.” He said, patting her shoulder. “You’re damn fine, honey and I’ll have you know that Axel has already made it known that he think’s you’re ‘real hot’. So, hush your mouth with that shit.”
Her mouth dropped open before her face lifted into a bright smile.

“He said that?” She asked.

“Uh huh.” Ray replied “Sit tight, let me work my magic.” He strutted off and headed back to Axel, instead of taking up his seat, he walked straight past whirled around and leaned back on the bar, crossing his arms in front of Axel.

“Go talk to her.” He demanded.

“I can’t do that. What about Rich?” He questioned.

“He ghosted her. Was busy bein’ a Meth head. Go over there, and talk to her.” Ray instructed.

Bear nudged him in the ribs with an elbow.

“Go on, man.” He encouraged.

“Axel, she thinks you’re a ten.” Ray stated.

Axel’s eyebrows went up along with the corner of his mouth.

“Really? I thought I was more of 8. Selene says I’m pretty though. You think she thinks I’m pretty?” He mused.

“Axel” Ray growled. “You scared that Johnny won’t come out to play or somethin’?”

Both Bear and Axel stared at ray open mouthed before Bear began to chortle loudly again, jabbing Axel in the ribs.

“I’ll have you know, Johnny has no issues.” Axel hissed through his teeth. “Fine, fine.” He conceded with his hands up in front of him. “But if she’s a psycho I’m gonna beat your ass.” He threatened as he grabbed his drink and headed over to the pretty girl with the blonde dreadlocks and the new lip piercing.

“Let’s hope she is a psycho. I’m overdue a little action.” Ray smirked as Bear shook his head in disbelief.

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Daryl watched Selene as she leaned closer to Ritchie, his hands curled into fists at his sides and his chest puffed out, his head was tilted back and he was glaring down his nose at Ritchie after hearing what he had told Selene.

“No, you’re not, it’s the drugs talking” She soothed, rubbing his arm affectionately.

“It’s not.” Ritchie argued.

She glanced up at Daryl, who was gritting his teeth

Yeah, it’s not the drugs talking, Selene.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” She assured him before looking back down at Ritchie.

“Go back to sleep.” She told him as she slid her arm out from under him. This time, he let her go and she shuffled off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.
Daryl slowly walked around the bed and peered down at the sleeping, dreadlocked junkie, laying in the bed belonging to the one woman he cared about more than anyone. It didn’t sit right with him, especially after his attempt to confess his love for her, even if it had been brushed off. When Selene returned, she met Daryl in the kitchen and he handed her a glass of water.

“Drink this, ya gonna be dehydrated.” He said.

She sipped at the water, touched by his observation and desire to make sure she was OK and leaned against the counter next to him

“I’m sorry. About this. I guess you turned up to see me and this is what you were met with.”

“S’ok. I’m still seein ya.” He pointed out.

She glanced over at the bed, completely torn about the situation. Ritchie was a close friend of hers, but he was now encroaching on her chance to progress things with someone she really liked. But her friends had been with her through thick and thin, and she wasn’t about to throw Ritchie out on the streets.

“I don’t know what to do with him. I’ve never had to deal with this before.” She confessed.

“He just needs to sleep it off. Merle sometimes sleeps for days when he crashes. I just check he’s alive from time to time and leave him to it.” He paused, seeing the sad and conflicted look on her face. “I can take him home. If you want ya bed back”

Selene was still surprised by Daryl’s willingness to put himself out for her, to go to great lengths to ensure her happiness and while it made him undeniably endearing, it left her feeling guilty.

“That’s really good of you to offer. But I was just going to leave him and sleep on the couch. It opens up into a double bed.” She told him.

“Alright, if you’re sure.” He said.

She closed her eyes and toyed with an idea. A risky one. But one that was very tempting regardless.

“Would you… actually, forget it. Never mind.” She said, changing her mind at the last second.

“What?” He queried.

“It’s ok.”

“Selene, just ask me.” He pressed.

“Would you mind staying? If he freaks out again, I won’t know what to do. I don’t know anything about meth.” She admitted. It was a genuine reason, although not the only one. The opportunity to spend more time with him also playing a big part in her request.

“He won’t freak out again. His body’s too exhausted. But yeah, I’ll stay if ya want me to.” He responded as casually as possible.

“Thank you.” She smiled.

“S’fine. Ain’t like I don’t get nothin’ out of it.” He said without thinking.

“What do you mean?” She grinned
You walked right into this smartass. She’s going to make you say it.

He fidgeted on the spot, sliding his hands in his pockets momentarily, until he removed them and tried to find somewhere else to put them. Finding nowhere, he leaned back on the kitchen countertop, placing them on the edge either side of him. His nervous shifting hadn’t gone unnoticed by Selene and he internally scolded himself for speaking a sentence that should have stayed in his head.

“Get to share a bed with you again.” He mumbled.

Selene released a subtle laugh and felt her cheeks warm. She hadn’t expected to feel as shy as she did but she was starting to see the Daryl was the only one that had ever managed to provoke such a response in her with a simple sentence or just a look.

“Thought you weren’t rushing?” She asked.

“I ain’t.”

She glanced at him knowingly.

“Shame” She whispered.

“Stop.” Daryl scoffed, his hands ending up in his pockets again.

She winked at him and padded over to the couch, taking the cushions off. Collecting his thoughts for a few seconds, Daryl sprang to action and helped her pull the mattress out and set up the rest of the bed. Ritchie hadn’t moved an inch and as he lay on his side, Selene could see the gentle rise and fall of his side as he breathed.

Daryl took off his boots and vest and settled down on the bed as Selene flicked the TV on and threw him the remote. She walked into the kitchen and put a pot on the stove, boiling some water. Daryl unbuttoned his work shirt and discarded it on a nearby chair, underneath he wore a black vest that Selene noticed immediately. She leaned against the countertop and admired his strong arms, his hand positioned behind his head, as she sipped her glass of water.

I need to find the strength from somewhere to exercise some self-restraint.

She wanted to kiss him so badly. To just climb on top of him and push her hands under his vest. She knew he would kiss her back. Everything was in place, the way it should be between them. Except Ritchie was in the room and Daryl might feel it was all a bit too soon.

“Is he likely to need anything when he eventually wakes up? I mean, what will he be like?” Selene asked, endeavouring to steer her attention away from her thoughts about climbing on top of him.

“Water, food, he ain’t gonna wanna eat but he’s got to. Maybe some painkillers. He’s gonna be real anxious for a while so he’ll probably bolt as soon as he wakes up. Depending on how much he took and when, he might go straight out n’ score again. Or he’ll end up doin’ something real weird. I found Merle butt naked in the woods once. Hopefully, he’ll just go home.” He explained.

“OK. Thanks” She nodded, only really hearing half of what he had said due to being fixated on his arms the whole time.

She collected a glass of water, Tylenol and put together a sandwich, leaving them on the nightstand for Ritchie in case he woke before them and continued to prepare food for her and Daryl, remembering the grumbling protest in her stomach after not having eaten all day. She felt weak and
tired but it was nothing a big bowl of pasta couldn’t solve.

Stealing a few secret glances her way and finding the way she sang along to the jingles of commercials amusing, Daryl shifted over when she brought the food over and handed him a bowl. She sat beside him and crossed her legs under her on the mattress.

The way he ate caught her attention. With such eagerness, the desire to taste every single scrap and enjoy it. He didn’t care about looking polite or clean, he just went for it. Nodding in approval at his empty bowl when he had finished and thanking her for the meal. Of course, she had seen him eat before but had never really watched him properly until now. Her mind began to race with the prospect that there could be other things that he did with such enthusiasm. He caught her smirking at him.

“What?” He questioned.

She reached out, removing a spot of pasta sauce from his chin with her thumb. He sat statue still, letting her touch his face.

“Nothing. I just like looking at you.” She uttered.

He didn’t reply, he only smiled shyly at her, slightly uncomfortable with being observed so closely by her, but also experiencing a strange smugness and satisfaction that she liked looking at him. She finished her food and headed off to the bathroom to get changed.

Black satin. A lace neckline and straps so thin he could barely see them. Small, shiny shorts that matched and showed her tattoos. Had she chosen this deliberately? Daryl fought with himself not to ogle at her but there was so much to look at, so much to admire. The fabric left very little to the imagination yet still held onto the mystery, clinging to her curves and leaving him unable to think of anything but the first time he would be able to smooth his hands over her body. A thought that he was now allowed to have and an experience he couldn’t wait for.

She switched a lamp off, leaving one on by the bed and took the remote from Daryl’s lap. Taking up her spot next to him in the bed, she flicked through the channels and stopped on a comedy horror movie. Her eyes grazed over him, noting his jeans. She used one, pointed foot to gently tap Daryl’s thigh.

“Can’t sleep in jeans. Take ‘em off.” She ordered.

Yes Ma’am.

“Um… ok.” He stammered.

He swung his legs off the mattress, standing up and unbuckling his belt. He popped the button and pulled the zipper down while Selene kept her eyes firmly on the tv until the urge overtook her and she gave him, clocking his tight, black boxers and raising an eyebrow.

“Damn. Anybody ever tell you that you have a great ass?” She blurted out, holding her hand across her face in shock at her own comment. Daryl sat down and threw the covers over his legs. His ears slightly pink and she knew she’d embarrassed him.

“They have now.” He grunted.

“Sorry. Too forward.” She apologised, feeling a sting of shame for being unable to keep her mouth
in check. She was aware that Daryl wasn’t like her and such directness was only likely to leave him uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“S’alright. Just ain’t used to it.” He reasoned.

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I go to say something like that.” She said, using it as a round about way of apologising.

As much as Daryl was left feeling out of sorts at her honesty, she had piqued his curiosity.

“Naw, just say what ya want.” He said.

Selene giggled and tapped him on the arm.

“Ooooh believe me, you don’t want me to do that.” She told him with a lingering look.

“Should be able to tell me anything.” He said seriously.

Selene checked over her shoulder that Ritchie was still asleep and shifted closer to Daryl, who turned his body to face her without even really knowing why. She held his gaze and gave him a flirty smile, while running a finger up and down his forearm. He let her touch him, soon becoming used to the sensation.

Three step. Again.

“I have spent a lot of time around you, holding back and not being as forthright as I usually am. I couldn’t because of my father and because I know you’re not like me. So, I’m asking you, are you absolutely sure you want me to just say whatever I want?” She asked.

Aware he was getting himself into a potentially tricky situation, his curiosity got the better of him and he nibbled on his lower lip and nodded at her. He told himself he would figure out a way out of this once he’d heard what she had to say. Cross bridges when he came to them. If that was how all this worked. In truth, he had no idea what he was doing. He was going into this blind and through trial and error. He just hoped this wasn’t an error. She leaned close to him, keeping her voice just above a whisper in case Ritchie woke and heard her.

“Your black wedding suit… made me wanna do very bad things to you.” She stated.

He cleared his throat and bit down on his lip. Her finger continued its journey along his forearm, ticking into his palm and then back up to the crook of his elbow. His mind jumped to a million and one conclusions as to what she could mean and he felt his body flush with warmth.

What the fuck do I say to that?!

“It’s not a question, so you don’t have to say anything. I Just wanted you to know.” She grinned. As if she could read his mind.

Try as he might, he couldn’t not rid himself of the smile that was fighting to emerge on his face. Unable to fathom how a woman like Selene would ever see him in that way, he thought for a moment that he could actually be dreaming. Not wanting everything to be so one sided, he figured he had got himself into this situation and now it was only fair to her that he at least tried to give something back. But what he should say was lost on him. He wanted to ask her what bad things she meant exactly, but such graphic detail was likely to land him in more trouble and so he searched his mind for something subtler. Something easier to get out.
“Know what ya mean…what ya wearin’ right now.” He mumbled.

“Really?” She asked, a hint of surprise in her voice.

“I’m quiet, not dead, Selene.” He joked.

She laughed quietly, a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. The noises from the TV served to drown out some of their partially whispered conversation. She stopped tracing lines on his arm and settled her hand on it instead. He hazarded a peek at her to see her big, blue eyes looking right back at him.

“There’s so much I want to say to you.” She told him.

“Then say it.” He urged.

“You sure?” She checked, seeing him nod.

She moved even closer, brushing her cheek against his and levelling her lips with his ear. His breathing became laboured as he tried to focus his mind and stop it from creating all manner of sexually suggestive images.

“I know we have to take things slow. But I am so tempted to climb onto your lap, push my hands under that vest and kiss you.” She purred.

Daryl’s lips parted and he held his breath for a few moments as he struggled to comprehend how direct she was. He was the total opposite, but knew he was going to have to get used to his kind of thing if he was going to be with her. It was fine by him, he always adapted and would find few problems in doing so if it meant he could get his hands on her. She slowly moved back and surveyed his unsure but faintly smug expression.

“If he wasn’t here…” he said, tilting his head in Ritchie’s direction. “Maybe you could.”

“Oh my gooood.” She groaned, sinking further down the bed next to him. “Maybe I should have let you take him home.” She chuckled.

“I did offer” he mentioned.

“God, I should have said yes.” She sighed “You watching this?” She asked, pointing to the TV.

“Naw. Too distracted now.” He admitted.

“Me too, I’m going to switch it off and try and get some sleep. I’ve sat in the same spot all day, it’s weird how tired that makes you.”

“Ya did a good thing. Just hope he appreciates it.” Daryl pondered.

“He will.” She mumbled to herself as she switched the tv off and slid down in the bed, leaving one single lamp on in the apartment, should Ritchie wake up and need it. Daryl lay on his back looking up at the ceiling. His arms above his head on the pillow. Selene was on her side, her eyes taking in every inch of him. After a while, she closed her eyes and sleep consumed her. She really had been surprised how exhausting sitting on a bed all day had been.

She awoke to a pleasant, tickling feeling across her forehead. As her eyes opened, she saw Daryl next to her, brushing her hair from her face with the tips of his fingers. She smiled hazily at him
and hoped she hadn’t been dribbling or snoring during the night. Daryl’s hair was messy, and his face slightly puffy from sleep, he looked like he had just woken up himself.

“Mornin’, pretty girl.” He uttered.

She didn’t feel pretty at all. Without a scrap of make-up on, she actually felt like a swamp creature, but appreciated Daryl’s kind compliment nevertheless. The sound of it had sent a jolt of excitement through her.

*He’s making a thing out of that. I like it.*

“Hey” She croaked. “What time is it?”

“A little after 6.”

He had woken and managed to lean down and rummage around in his jeans pocket to find his beaten-up cell phone and check the time. Ignoring a text message asking where he was from Merle, he stuffed the phone back into his pocket and rolled over, deciding to try an affectionate gesture and see how it sat with him. She had looked so peaceful and beautiful and he hadn’t intended to wake her, he just needed to touch her, even with the lightest of feathery touches across her forehead.

“Did you sleep ok?” She asked with a husky voice.

“Yeah, eventually.” He replied

“Eventually?” She queried.

*Do I tell her the truth? Why didn’t I just say yes?! What the hell is wrong with me?!!*

His mouth opened but the words wouldn’t seem to budge from the tip of his tongue. He sighed in frustration, accepting that he was going to have to just say it. Selene waited, already anticipating that whatever he was trying to say was difficult for him for one reason or another.

“You kinda…wound me up” He confessed. Having to lay there next to her in her silky nightwear after she’d been so outwardly flirtatious and tempting had meant he had to force his mind elsewhere. To try and quell his erection and the fire that raced through his veins when the image of her exiting the bathroom flashed through his imagination. It had taken a while, but he had managed it in the end.

“I’m sorry.” She grinned, biting her lip “at least I know I can.”

He shot her a disbelieving glance.

“Fuckin’ kiddin’ me? Ya only gotta look at me.” He informed her.

“Like right now?” She probed, her eyes meeting his. The blue of his Iris’s illuminated and even brighter than usual in the light that beamed through a gap in the drapes.

“Like right now.” He affirmed.

“You drive me crazy” She wanted him to know.

“Know the feeling.” He uttered.

Daryl was thankful for the heavy covers that obscured his lower half and wasn’t planning on
moving anytime soon. Part of him hoped that she would stop saying things that turned him on, while the other half wanted her to do exactly what she wanted.

“Can I touch you?” She asked.

Panic shot through him. She never usually asked. What did she mean exactly? The rule not to rush things was a tough one to follow, especially in his current situation and he hoped that she wasn’t about to test the boundaries because he knew he wouldn’t have the strength to stop her.

“Touch me like…?” He asked.

In that moment, he hated that he’d had to even ask. Her willingness to step things up so much had astounded him and he couldn’t say he disliked it. But physical affection wasn’t something that came easily to him, and his need to clarify her intentions was to calm his own anxieties.

“Can I move closer and put my arm over you?” She suggested.

“Yeah, sure” He agreed.

Relax. Don’t freak out. Just let her.

She slid closer, pressing herself to his side and resting her arm on top of his body. His heart was thudding so much she knew she could tell; her hand was right above it. The sensation of her against him meant he was now one hundred percent sure he couldn’t leave the bed until he had calmed down and thought of something that wasn’t her breasts against his arm or her leg flush with his. He lifted one hand and placed it on top of her forearm and she snuggled against his shoulder.

This was all new to him. By all accounts, Daryl was not a cuddler. Having never had the opportunity before or knowing touch in his childhood to be anything other than violent or detrimental.

Selene sighed deeply and closed her eyes, relaxing against him and knowing that she could most certainly get used to this. She could feel him gently rubbing his thumb back and forth in the same spot on her arm. The temptation to reach down further was strong, so was the urge to roll over and pull him over her, devouring him and squeezing herself against him. But she refrained, her knowledge that a half hug and an arm rested on him was already pushing it.

“By the way, Ritchie left” Daryl said.

Selene sprang up and whirled around to look at the bed. It was empty. The water, sandwich and painkillers she’d left him also gone. In the Ritchie shaped crater on the mattress, he’d left a note. Selene spotted it and scrambled to her feet, jumping off the bed and snatching up the note. She slowly wandered back while unfolding the paper and climbed back into bed, sitting close to Daryl she held it on her lap so he could read it too.

‘Selene.

I am so sorry. I am ashamed about what I did. I will need some time off work to check into rehab. Thank you for being there for me, for holding me for hours and making sure I didn’t die. I don’t know why I do this to myself. I just feel empty and sad all the time.

About what I said- it just came out. I was still High. I’m sorry if I made things awkward between you and him. I will apologise to Bear and Ray at some point. But please tell them I was out of my mind and didn’t know what I was doing. I don’t know why I tried to hurt them. They are my friends. I hope you don’t hate me. I couldn’t go on if you hated me. Please, forgive me.
Love, Ritchie.’


Selene folded the paper back up and left it on the side table at the end of the couch. She played with her hands in her lap anxiously.

“I’m glad he’s going to rehab” was all she said.

‘You and him’ man, he really fucking hates me.

“If he goes” he shrugged.

“What?” She questioned.

“Addicts, they say what they know you wanna hear. Gets folks off their backs. Gettin’ off Crystal is hard. Merle’s been through it a few times. Three months was his best effort. Then it all went to shit again. Ritchie might go, but the chances are, he won’t. He won’t even think he’s addicted yet. Still got his teeth and his job.” He explained.

“In that case, I can only hope he goes.” She mused. “Don’t you have work today?”

“Naw, got the day off.”

“Oh, well, don’t feel rushed to leave. It’s nice having you around” she smiled.

The door flung open and Ray wandered in, much to Daryl’s surprise until he remembered that he said he would be bringing Selene breakfast. He instantly began to fret, still sat in bed next to Selene and wearing a vest and his boxers with an erection that refused to go away. If anyone was going to make a comment about that, it would be Ray

“Holy cow! Are you guys fucking because I’ll leave?!” Ray cried, having not expected to see Daryl and Selene slouched on the pull-out bed together and not entirely fully clothed.

Selene laughed and threw a decorative cushion at him. “Come in, we’re not fucking!” She giggled, catching Daryl’s eye. “Sadly” she whispered quickly and quietly enough for him to just catch it.

“Well good because I don’t wanna be responsible for spoiling nothin’. Now, I got pancakes. Lots of ‘em. Good job you’re here Daryl, you can help. I’m ‘sposed to be watchin’ my figure. Here” Ray rambled in his usual feminine but southern drawl as he handed him a box and a knife and fork followed by Selene. He plonked himself at the kitchen table and began shovelling large pieces of pancakes and syrup into his mouth.

“Where’s the tweaker?” He asked, pointing to the bed with his plastic fork.

“Got up and left. No idea where he is now.” Selene informed him.

“Ahh shit. I was hopin’ he’d stick around. I wanted my apology.”

“What did he do to you?” She wanted to know. She knew there had been violence but had seen very little of it at the time.

“Tried to give me a fuckin knuckle sandwich when I stopped him from going to work. Then he turned on ya brother. So, I pinned that motherfucker to the ground. Managed to scratch my face
somehow in the process. Ya see that? Right there?"

Both Daryl and Selene squinted at the tiny, barely there mark on his chin. “No, sorry.” Selene shrugged.

“You blind or somethin’?! I almost had to take myself to the Emergency Room!” He exclaimed. Selene gave him an unimpressed look at his massive exaggeration and he chuckled and shoved another piece of pancake into his mouth.

Daryl was busy munching his way through the contents of the box Ray had given him, not paying their conversation much attention and still wondering how he was going to get dressed with Ray in the room. Selene, he didn’t mind, she had just about managed to convince him of her appreciation of him by now. But Ray’s leering would only leave him uncomfortable. Selene still sat beside him and moved to face him with her back to the arm of the couch when Ray got up to make coffee. She bumped her foot over his leg under the covers and subtly pushed her toes against his inner thigh, fanning them out and tickling him with the tips. She saw him still and stare down into the box, fork midway to his mouth. Then, he gradually looked to his side at her. She was chewing slowly with one raised eyebrow.

Yeah, I’d rather have you for breakfast too. But Ray is here. Quit it.

“What are you doin’?!” He whispered to her.

“Teasing you.” She hushed back, moving her foot up higher and smirking as he recoiled away from her and checked Ray wasn’t watching. She removed her foot and Daryl flashed her a small, shy smile.

“Oh, Selene. That girl ya tried to set Ritchie up with? He ghosted her. Poor gal. She was in Marty’s last night, undressin’ Axel with her eyes. So, I sprinkled a little fairy dust on that shit and they left together.” Ray said as he waved his fork around in the air.

“Oh” Selene grunted under her breath “Ritchie…you idiot.”

“Anyways, I’m done. There’s coffee on the side. I’mma leave you two love birds to it, I feel like a third wheel and the sexual tension in this room is suffocatin’! See ya downstairs, kids.” Ray announced as he got up and wandered to the door.

“Thank you for breakfast!” Selene called out, hearing the door shut behind her and the room fell into silence. Her and Daryl stared at one another.

“I really should get up and get ready for work. I’m supposed to be opening today but I guess Ray’s going to do it now. With Ritchie MIA I’m going to have to take all his appointments and shove metal through peoples body parts all day” She rambled “So, if you want you can just take your time and leave when you’re ready because y’know, I’m around and I kinda had a lot to say that I couldn’t say in front of Ray and I really cannot stop looking at you, you are just so fucking nice looking. So, I’m…yeah…I’m going to take a shower and I’d invite you to come with me but that’s rushing, right? I mean, we haven’t even kissed yet. It’ll have to wait. Another time. Jesus. I’m-I’m going. I’m going.”

Daryl laughed at her inability to stop herself from talking once she’d started. It was a rare thing, almost unheard of that a woman would compliment him, let alone in the way that Selene did. He loved hearing how much she liked him but what he liked even more was her vulnerability around him and how bashful she could be without being able to mask it.
Her feet thudded onto the floor at the side of the couch and she lifted her hands, running her fingers through her thick, black hair as she stood up. Daryl didn’t bother looking away, he intended to savour every moment of the view.

The Tattoo Parlour was quiet that morning, much to Selene’s delight. After recent events the last thing she wanted was to be run off her feet, even if it meant takings were slow too. Axel had finished up with his first client while she sat at the desk and replied to emails. He shook his client’s hand and booked him in for a second sitting before bidding him farewell at the door and slumping down on one of the chesterfield couches.

“Ray tells me you went home with Skye last night.” Selene said nonchalantly from the desk, the end of her pen clamped between her teeth.

“Yeah. Well, we left together, I walked her home. Nothing else happened.” He corrected.

“Why not? Ritchie missed his chance, Axel.” She pointed out.

“Oh, I know. She seems like a nice girl. I kinda like her. So, I’m taking her out tomorrow night.” He said.

Selene beamed at him from the desk.

“Axel and Skye, sittin’ in a tree, K-I-S-S-” She sang

“Stop it! God sakes.” He complained. “Before you start making fun of me, you going to tell me about Daryl staying with you last night while you played rehab worker?”

“Not much to tell.” She stated “Ritchie got up and bailed in the middle of the night and I spent the entire time trying not to jump Daryl’s bones. I did well. I don’t think I’ve ever been this frustrated in my life.”

Axel began to chuckle from the couch and threw one leg over the other, balancing his ankle across his knee.

“Patience is a virtue, Selene.” Axel told her.

“Virtue schmirtue” She scoffed.

Their conversation stopped at the right moment when Daryl appeared in the doorway to the stairs, shrugging his leather vest on and checking his pockets for his keys and cell phone. Selene smiled up at him adoringly and Axel watched their exchange.

“I’mma head home. Merle’s pitchin’ a fit at me.” He told her. She cradled her chin in one hand as she leaned on the desk, gazing up at him like a lovesick teenager. Axel smirked at her and pretended to pick up a magazine and read when she gave him a stern glare.

“Thanks for staying.” She said.

“No problem.” He wanted to say ‘anytime’ but thought it a bit presumptuous. “Um, you wanna do somethin’ tomorrow night?”

Axel watched over the top of the magazine he now used to mask his facial expressions as he listened to Daryl and Selene.
“Y’know what, that sounds like a date.”

Daryl looked over at Axel, who quickly looked away and raised his magazine.

“Course it’s a date” He huffed. “Pick ya up at around seven?”

She pushed herself back in the wheeled chair and stood up, stepping out from behind the desk and walking to the door with him. As they passed Axel, he held up a hand to Daryl, who took it and accepted a masculine handshake.

“Later, dude.” Axel called out while he got up and joined Ray, who was now peering around the partition wall in case he missed any decent gossip.

At the door, Daryl wound his fingers into hers and she moved closer, kissing his cheek before dropping back and resting her forehead on his shoulder. He stroked a hand over her hair and she looked up at him, letting go of his hand and opening the door.

“See you tomorrow.” She said quietly.

“See ya, pretty girl.” He replied, leaving the building and wandering down the street. She waited until his angel wings were out of sight before she turned to see Ray and Axel flinch and pretend to be working. She growled at them in irritation and placed her hands on her hips. Ray did a double take at her and conceded defeat.

“Alright, fine. We were watchin’. You two are sickeningly cute.” He said, pointing at her with a stack of paper towels.

“I know.” She said smugly, heading back to her desk.

*****

When night arrived and Selene and Ray were the only one’s left in the studio, they spent time uploading and posting images on Social Media due to the result of Ray’s idea going down a treat. Website traffic had increased as did the number of people reached on their social media accounts. Selene had also noticed a lot more people emailing and the phone rang more often, not that anyone but her actually bothered to answer it, all the artists preferring to do their communicating via email.

She had thought about nothing but Daryl all day and Ray had snapped his fingers in front of her face a few times to try and snap her out of her daydreams about how he felt when she was pressed against him. She thought about the touch and smell of his skin, his piercing blue stare and how he insisted on calling her ‘pretty girl’ as almost a pet name. She was happy. He made her happy and she wanted to spend every waking moment with him, but would have to wait until the next night so she could resume wondering when, where and how they would have their first kiss.

As her attention waned once more, her eyes shifted from the computer screen over to the window. Ray, scrolled through the business tablet at the desk beside her, selecting images and chattering away about how they needed to have a word with Bear about his photography skills. Selene’s focus fixed on a figure wandering along the other side of the street and she slowly reached a hand across and placed it on top of Ray’s arm. He stopped talking.

“Is that Ritchie?” She asked.

The figure was shrouded in darkness, keeping close to the buildings so the streetlights wouldn’t reach. A hood obscured his face but Selene could see the unmistakeable sight of Ritchie’s dreadlocks hanging out of the front.
“Yeah, it is. Thought he was in Rehab.” Ray offered.

“So did I.” She whispered.

Ray jolted back when she shot up from her seat and plucked Ray’s jacket from the back of the chair.

“I need to borrow this. Wait here. I’ll be back” She told him as she slinked out from behind the desk, flicked the hood up and walked to the door.

“Selene, what are ya doin’!” Ray called after her.

“Following him.” She muttered as she left.

The night was freezing and she wished she’d put her own jacket on under Ray’s as she silently crept along the sidewalk, keeping a good distance between her and Ritchie so she could duck out of sight should he turn around. He walked with intent, as if it were urgent that he got to his destination soon. His hands were hidden in his pockets and when he took a sharp right, she found herself having to speed up so she didn’t lose him. Her breath billowed out in white clouds and she quickly zippered the jacket up to the top, pulling it up over her chin and mouth and hiding her hands in the sleeves. She had to tread carefully, the empty streets amplifying the sound of her boots hitting the floor. When she took the corner, she saw Ritchie cross the street and vanish into a dark alley.

Great. An alley. I don’t have much luck with those.

She followed on, determined to find out what he was doing and when she came to the edge of the alley, she crouched behind a pile of boxes and hazarded a peek around the edge. Rooted to the spot with disbelief, confusion and panic at what she saw.

Daryl leaned against the wall and finished his smoke when Ritchie turned up, hood up and sniffing wildly in the cold. He groaned with annoyance when he saw who approached.

“Ya gotta be kiddin’ me.” He muttered under his breath.

“Hey.” Ritchie grunted at him, stopping in front of him.

“Dude, the fuck are you doin’ here?” Daryl snapped.

“Same as last week.” Ritchie replied, dragging his sleeve across his nose.

“No. No way. I aint sellin’ to you no more. Get the fuck outta here.” Daryl spat, turning his back on him.


Daryl whirled around, rage filling his eyes. “I aint sellin’ you nothin’ after the shit you pulled at Selene’s place. Rather take the hit.” He raged.

At the shock of being told no, Ritchie suddenly switched and became defensive and irate.

“Don’t make out you’re some kind of saint, Dixon. You haven’t even told her that you sell to me. You don’t deserve her.” He growled. “You’re just a scumbag dealer.”
Daryl saw red, his temper fraying. He snatched hold of the front of Ritchie’s sweater and threw him against the brick wall beside him, holding him up so his feet barely scraped across the floor.

“Watch ya fuckin’ mouth. Remember you owe me, asshole and I aint never gonna forget it. I put my ass on the line for you. You think I don’t know she can do better than me? She fuckin’ can. But for some reason, she wants to be with me and I sure as hell aint gonna pass that up. Ya think she’d be better with the likes of you? Some fuckin’ tweaker that sucks cocks to get money for Meth. Yeah, alright.” Daryl shot at him.

Ritchie was scrabbling against the wall, trying to get Daryl to release his strong hold on him.

“The answer is no” Daryl continued to hiss in his face. “I can’t do that to Selene. I don’t know why, but she cares about ya so ya gonna have to take ya meth-head ass someplace else to score. I’m gonna tell her when the time is right. I ain’t got nothin’ for you no more, ya got that?”

Ritchie nodded frantically as he began to tire and gradually stopped fighting to be put down. Daryl released him and he slid down the wall, adrenaline thundering through him and making him out of breath.

“Come at me like that again and I’ll beat the shit outta ya.” Daryl threatened.

Selene crouched behind the boxes, her nails digging into the cardboard in a stunned and desperate involuntary reaction. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Daryl had been selling drugs to her friend. Instead of springing out of the darkness and yelling at him, she tiptoed backwards and ran as fast as she could back to the tattoo parlour. The freezing air stung her face as she ran and tears began to well in her eyes.

Ray stood up when she bundled back through the door, red faced and watery eyed.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I lost him. It’s freezing out there.” She panted, the lie tumbling out of her mouth before she’d had time to register it.

“OK, well I finished up, everything’s posted for today. I’mma get on home. See ya tomorrow sweet cheeks.” Ray said, collecting his back and giving Selene a peck on the cheek as he passed.

“Yeah. See ya.” She mumbled, lost in her own thoughts, the searing disappointment of what she’d just witnessed sitting like a brick in her stomach.

*****

The next day saw Shorty’s return from his honeymoon and Selene had to push her worries aside and sit him down for a meeting to catch up. When he walked in, Ray had scoffed and flicked a hand at him, complaining that a week in the tanning booth hadn’t made him look anywhere near as bronzed as Shorty was after a honeymoon in Hawaii.

Sat in the piercing studio upstairs, Selene crossed one PVC booted leg leg over the other on the leather chair while Shorty leaned against the countertop and crossed his arms.

“So, just make sure you take photographs of all your designs and save them on the system. That OK?” She asked.
“Yeah, no problem.” Shorty agreed.

“The next thing you need to know is about Ritchie. He showed up here the other day, high on Meth and throwing punches at Ray and Bear. I’ve given him some time off to get himself back on the straight and narrow. Just so you’re aware of what’s going on.” She explained sadly.

Shorty rubbed thoughtfully at his chin and began to pace about.

“Shit, that’s screwed up.” He muttered “can’t say I’m surprised though. He’s been getting worse for weeks. We did try and warn you.”

“I know you did, I know. Maybe I failed him, I don’t know.” She sniffed. Shorty stopped walking and glanced over his shoulder at her wiping a tear from her eye, her sheet of notepaper in the other hand.

“Hey, c’mon. You tried, Selene.” He offered.

“I didn’t do enough. It’s hard sometimes, being so close to you guys and being your boss. The line blurs. At the time, I felt like there was nothing else I could do but warn him it would affect his work. I tried to talk to him but he just denied everything and said he was fine.” She complained, swiping at another tear.

Shorty moved closer and threw an arm across her shoulders, bringing her into a comforting embrace.

“If he’s that bad, and it sounds like he is, he needs professional help and that’s way out of your remit anyway.” He assured her. “We just have to wait and see how he is when he comes back. If he’s still the same, I vote we rat him out to his mom.”

Selene smiled thinly “Ritchie’s mom is a dragon. Maybe I should have done that in the first place.”

“No point going over the should have’s now, Selene.” He said, squeezing her shoulder. She lifted her hand and rubbed over his tattooed knuckles in appreciation for his understanding.

“Little bird tells me there’s been progress with you and Daryl.” He grinned, taking his arm away and hoping the change of subject would cheer her up.

“That little bird a big, flamboyant, gay bird by any chance?” She asked.

“Yeah, Ray told me.” Shorty confirmed.

“We got close, yes. You’re wedding definitely helped with that. I really like him. Can’t believe he feels the same really. We’re just taking it slow.” She stated.

“S’all good. I’m happy for you guys.” He smiled. “Anything else I need to know?”

“I think we’ve covered everything. Welcome back.” She beamed “we missed you.”

She had almost cancelled on Daryl. In fact, she wrote out a lengthy text message and hovered her thumb over the send button, deciding at the last second that she should face him and that she really did want to see him after all. Not knowing where they were going, she has chosen shiny, black pants, platform heeled boots and a simple black button-down shirt with the first three buttons open. As she waited at the desk downstairs, she contemplated how to approach what she’d witnessed the
night before, or even if she should approach it at all. Something was scratching away at her faith in her relationship with him, a niggling doubt that told her; can you really trust this guy? He has been hiding something huge from you. What else is there that you don’t know?

Her heart jumped into her throat when he knocked on the door, she was unprepared for the amount of churning anger that she suddenly felt in the pit of her stomach. She got up and unlocked the door, letting him in and ignoring him when he greeted her, heading back to the desk and leaning back on the glass surface.

“Something’s wrong.” He stated, immediately picking up in being ignored and the frosty atmosphere. Selene wrapped her arms around herself, bringing one hand up and briefly nibbling in her thumb.

“I have to ask you a question and I don’t want you to lie to me, if you do lie to me, I’ll know.” She warned.

Daryl’s eyes flickered over her and shifted his weight into one foot, sliding his hands into his jeans pockets.

“OK. What is it?” He asked.

She braved eye contact, initially scared he could see her teetering on the edge of tears or losing her temper, which one exactly, she wasn’t quite sure.

“Do you sell drugs?” She questioned.

The air left his lungs and his face fell. Regret, shame and worry consumed him.

*Shit*

“Yeah, sometimes” he admitted, the words almost stinging as he spoke them.

“Do you sell drugs to my friend?” She continued, her voice cracking. They both knew she didn’t have to say his name. She was still glaring at him, keeping her eyes on his, but he shied away, turning away from her slightly and lowering his head.
Thank you all for the comments and kudos and bookmarks! I've been on a little vacation recently so there's been a bit of a pause in updates. But I'm back now with a slightly shorter chapter
More notes at the end of the chapter.

“I was gonna tell you.” He uttered.

“When? When we're you going to tell me, Daryl?! At his funeral?!?” She demanded, her voice loud and shrill.

“I dunno. I was waiting for the right time.” He told her.

Selene had to stop a sarcastic laugh from escaping her as she stood before him, flabbergasted by his reasoning.

“Not really sure there is a ‘right time’ for that. One of my closest friends has disintegrated in front of my eyes and it’s because of you!” She fumed.

“No. It’s because of him. He makes the choice to take that shit.” He said sternly, his hand raising and his finger pointing at her, correcting what he believed to be her incorrect observation. Selene only briefly raised an eyebrow and shot him an unimpressed look. She was not taking kindly to being spoken to as if she were some kind of idiot.

“Supply and demand, right?” She whispered knowingly.

Daryl backed off, realising that his argument was pretty much invalid. She was right, if the demand was there, he would supply. That was his job. He took a deep breath and tried to focus on what he wanted to say, his mind was crowded, jumbled and loud and the thought of his connection to her being severed over this before it had even been properly established, filled him with dread.

“You were so worried that being with me would lead to you losing your job. What do you think is going to happen when you’re caught? You’ll not only be fired, you’ll go to prison.” She mentioned, managing not to raise her voice anymore and keeping it at talking volume.

Daryl looked increasingly uncomfortable and pulled a hand from his pocket and ran it through his hair. His head was still low but now he looked at her.

“I um… get the stuff from ya ol’man.” He murmured.

Selene jolted at his admission, her hands dropping to her sides and her eyes widening. She almost asked him to repeat himself until the words finally sank in.

“What?!” She exclaimed.
“It’s part of workin’ for him. Some the guys, they’ve done it before. Me and Merle have. We sell it, your dad gets a percentage. Most of the drugs in this town come from him. This is not how I wanted to tell you.”

Her eyes had glazed over, her expression becoming blank and Daryl began to panic. She slowly moved around the table, her fingers squeaking against the glass as she dragged them along with her. She sat down in the leather chair and propped her elbows up on the desk, burying her face in her hands. The silence was deafening to him, it lay heavy on his conscience and guilt amassed in the pit of his stomach.

“Selene-“

“Shut up. Just… shut up for a minute. Let me think.” She snapped.

“No.” He replied curtly. She looked up through her fingers in surprise. “I need you to know that I told Ritchie I ain’t sellin’ to him no more. He’s gonna go get it someplace else but at least it ain’t from me.”

She sat back in the chair and glowered at him. She had heard it all herself, crouched beside a box at the end of an alley, out of sight but hanging on every word and wishing more than anything that what her ears were picking up on was somehow untrue.

“I know. I followed him last night and heard your little chat in the alley. Every single word.” She informed him. He nodded solemnly and rubbed a hand over his face, turning around and slowly thudding over the wooden floor in his boots.

“I don’t wanna be this way.” He sighed.

“What way?” She grumbled.

“Dealin’. This ain’t a choice.”

She dropped her gaze into her lap and began tracing her fingers over a crease in her jeans. She had always been the kind of person that rightly or wrongly believed that there was a choice for everything but not everyone had been brought up with the same opinion.

“How long have you been dealing drugs for my father?” She asked.

“Few months, a year maybe. Merle’s been doin’ it a lot longer.”

“And if you say no?” She wanted to know.

“Ain’t an option.” He stated.

“I should have known this was too good to be true.” She said to herself, peeking up to see a flash of anxiety cross his features.

“I stopped sellin’ to Ritchie, that’s all I can do, Selene.” He tried. Outwardly, he was now starting to present as extremely anxious. While Selene was masking hers behind a thinly veiled curtain of sarcasm and anger, Daryl was fiddling with the hem of his leather vest and chewing relentlessly on his lower lip.

“I’m sure he’ll be grateful one day.” She huffed sarcastically.

“I didn’t do it for him. I did it for you. Said ya heard every word, you should know that.” He
pressed.

She just stared at him, not knowing what to do or say. At an impasse. Could she be with someone that distributed drugs for her father’s highly illegal side hustle? Once again, her family ties were affecting her life and happiness and the only person that had the power to change it was her.

“I’ll understand… if ya want me to leave.” He offered, his voice raspy and laced with something akin to bitter disappointment. She exhaled slowly, black strands of her hair flickering out in the faint breeze of her frustration. She didn’t have to ask what he meant, she knew it anyway. It meant he would not only leave her tattoo studio, but he would leave her life as well.

“How do you want to?” She asked.

“No.” He replied straight away. “Alright, look. I was gonna tell you. I swear it. I guess I thought if I could stop sellin to Ritchie it would make things easier when I did. ‘Cause ya friend wouldn’t be a part of it. I’m already takin’ a huge risk. Can’t just pick n’ choose like that. M’sorry you found out the way you did. I get it, if you don’t wanna be with some asshole dealer then I’ll just go. But I really don’t want this to ruin shit between us, specially ‘Cause ya went so far to get ya dad to back off. Was a little out of my depth, but I thought we were doin good.”

She sat forward again, nodding and threading her fingers into her hair, stopping halfway, she leaned on her elbow and watched him fidget uneasily in front of her.

“We were.” She whispered. “I don’t want that to stop.”

“Neither do I. Really like you.”

She rose from her seat and slowly walked towards him. He was rooted to the spot, unable to move or even think straight for a few seconds. The notion that she could be about to end things before they’d even started making him feel slightly nauseous.

Selene allowed herself a long and detailed look at him. Her eyes sweeping over his face, down to his leather vest and then to his hand at his side, which was nervously tapping away at his leg. She reached for it, curling her fingers around his and making him freeze, motionless and laden with anticipation.

“Don’t leave.” She uttered. His chest wanted to heave with relief, but he held it together. “I threatened to disown my father for you, and I will, in a fucking heartbeat. I’m angry, I’m not going to pretend I’m not, but I do see the bigger picture here and that is this all comes from him. I like you too. I like you enough not to let him ruin this. There are so many good things about you that outweigh this shit.”

“Don’t know about that.” He mumbled.

She brought her body closer to his and looked straight into his crystal blue eyes.

“You’re not doing yourself any favours here.” She smiled. A fleeting exhalation of amusement from him did well to quell her worry. “I don’t like that you’re a dealer. I never will. I’m angry with my father and I’m angry at you for being partly responsible for fucking Ritchie up. But I appreciate you refusing to sell him anything else and I know you did it for me, I heard you.”

He chewed on his bottom lip as he thought. Usually, he would have loved her close proximity to him but this time it only made his guilty feelings worse.

“You’re worth it.” He finally said.
“I love Ritchie, Daryl. I love them all. They’re my family. I failed him when the guys first warned me about the drugs. I didn’t do enough as his boss or his friend. So, it feels awful that the guy I’m seeing has been making things worse this whole time”

“I didn’t want to. It ain’t intentional.” He pleaded.

“I know. I know that. I don’t wanna hear about you selling drugs anymore. Ignorance is bliss. I just want to pretend that I don’t know anything and I need you to promise me that you trust me enough to tell me anything else I should know about you. You have to be honest with me.” She reasoned.

“I promise. I trust you.” He said without hesitation “N’ naw, there ain’t nothin’ else… but ya gotta understand that I can’t just quit. It don’t work like that. It’s complicated.”

“Believe me, I understand that” she said. “I didn’t know he was paying people to do this shit. But I’m not all that surprised. All he’s interested in is money and power. Are you sure there’s nothing else? You didn’t bump off your ex and you don’t have any weird kinks that I need to know about?”

He smiled briefly and she felt a twinge of happiness return.

“Ain’t got no exes. Far as kinks go, guess you’ll have to wait n’ see.” He jested gently.

Selene, unable to disguise her amusement, giggled and tightened her grip on his hand, bringing it to her face and placing a soft kiss on the back of it.

“Still taking me on this date?” She asked.

In a totally unexpected and tender gesture, he reached out with his other hand and pushed her hair from her eyes with his fingertips, flicking it behind her shoulder. She swallowed hard, surprised at how daring he was becoming. It was slow progress, but it was progress nevertheless.

“If you’ll let me.” He uttered.

“I’ll let you.” She confirmed, much to his relief and delight

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The Capital Grill hadn’t been around long, the owner was an out of towner who paid an army of staff and managers to look after the busy and popular steak house and music venue. It was one of the very few businesses in town that Bill Taylor hadn’t managed to acquire and as a result, the atmosphere inside was different to that of most of the other restaurants and bars within a ten-mile radius. On this Particular night, Daryl had seen a flyer for an Open Mic night and decided that it might be the very thing that Selene would like. He followed the waiter to their table, leading Selene along behind him by the hand and was relieved to find they had been given a booth boasting black leather seats and high walls either side, providing them with a reasonable amount of privacy. The stage was on the other side of the room which meant they could still hold conversations without having to shout over the sound of the local musicians strumming away on their guitars and singing at the tops of their voices.

Selene found herself singing away to some of the songs after noticing they were covers and Daryl witnessed this display of comfort and ease in his presence with a sense of satisfaction and pride.

They ordered two steaks and several beers which seemed to loosen Selene’s initial quietness around him after their earlier conversation and Daryl had thought more than once how lucky he had been to still be sat opposite her after what she now knew about him. He tried his best not to think too much into her long, quiet spells in which she would prop her head up with her hand and
drift into a thoughtful daydream.

“You like sports?” She suddenly asked as she sawed through her steak and shovelled a large piece into her mouth.

“Nah. Merle’s always called me a faggot for that.” He replied absentmindedly. Pausing and glancing up at her in the realisation that he had just used a word that was highly likely to offend her. Expecting her to be angry at his choice of words, he felt the need to offer some kind of apology. “Sorry, didn’t think before I said that”

“It’s OK, believe it or not, Ray sometimes uses that word, he thinks being offended by it gives it power. Such a smartass” she grinned. “Anyway, I hate sports. I mean, I don’t know how these commentators can dissect a game for upwards of two hours on TV. Like, this guy did some good sportsing, but the whole team needs to sports better. It’s just blah blah fuckin’ blah to me.”

Daryl smiled at her endearing rant, he could watch her talk all night, especially about things he agreed with.

“Me too.” He said “some shit I just don’t get. Like golf. Where’s the fun in that?”

“Oh my god, I know! ‘Hit the tiny ball down the hole and then walk for miles sportsing’.”

He laughed, seeing a glint in her eye as she eagerly bit down on a French fry. “What do ya call tennis?” He questioned.

“Hit the ball with mesh and make sex noises sportsing.” She answered, no needing to think about it and pointing to him with her fork. Daryl watched her eagerly with his lips quirked up into a half smile. Selene avoided looking at him, noticing how he was observing her as if she were some heavenly being from her peripheral vision. His small smile and obviously awestruck expression distracting her and making her want to grab him and kiss him across the table. The image flashed through her mind and she smirked subtly at her vivid imagination.

“Surfin’?” He asked

“Walkin’ on water sportsing” she replied with the flick of French fry in the air before she threw it into her mouth and chewed eagerly.

He laughed, a little louder than he had expected and she felt a rush of satisfaction that she was able to break down his stoic and mostly stern and reserved persona. He was looking at her with such admiration that she felt herself blush a little. She was starting to see that he had that effect on her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. It made her feel giddy and excited and she found herself addicted to it. She turned her attention to her plate, quietly devouring the meal in front of her and enjoying every single second. Selene had always been a carnivore, her mother always mentioning her big appetite and interest in more savoury food items as a child and ever since she had always favoured meaty snacks and steaks.

Empty plates soon sat on the table in front of them along with nearly empty glasses and Selene delicately traced her finger around the rim of her glass as she sat back and listened to a girl singing with a guitar on the stage. Her angelic voice had the whole bar lulled into a quiet appreciation and everyone seemed impressed by her ability to take energetic, chart songs and turn them into slow, melodic, acoustic versions. Daryl seemed as impressed as Selene was when she took a glimpse in his direction and selfishly indulged in a lingering stare, her eyes taking in his relaxed positioning,
sat back in his seat with his hand drawing back and forth on the table. His attention was firmly fixed on the stage and it gave Selene ample opportunity to marvel at the shapely terrain of his biceps through his black shirt.

*Stop it. You pervert.* She thought.

When he took a quick glance sideways at her, he immediately noticed her focus on him and saw her expression change gradually. Her vision dropped to the table and she sighed loudly.

“When I said I heard everything you and Ritchie said in that alley. I really did. You mentioned what he does for money… is it true?” She probed reluctantly.

Daryl’s heart dropped. He didn’t have solid proof of anything, but whispers around town hadn’t gone unheard by him and at the time, stood in the alley with Ritchie, he had the perfect ammunition to throw in his face. Ritchie’s features had twisted into a grimace when he’d spat the words at him, but Daryl was all too aware that no matter how shocked he seemed, he hadn’t denied it.

“I don’t know.” Daryl mumbled sadly. “People talk. Shit like that, there ain’t no smoke without fire.”

She gave him a single nod and closed her eyes briefly as if she were gathering her thoughts. When she opened them, he thought he could see them glisten more than they usually did and he hoped he hadn’t upset her.

“I’d hate to think he’d got to that point.” She stated.

“He kinda has to. Or, at least get to a point where he’s forced to look at what he’s fucked up. No place to go but up once ya reach rock bottom.” He told her with every intention of trying to focus on something positive. Only it seemed to have just come out as a throwaway comment somehow.

“Y’know, his father was killed in a car wreck in Europe around four years ago” she started. “His parents were on vacation. His mom decided to stay in the hotel while his dad drove to the nearest grocery store. On the way back, he was killed. I was with Ritchie when he found out. We were in Marty’s, had been all night when he got this call. He just ran. Outside, onto the street. He was yelling. Actually no, it was more like this strangled wailing from deep in his soul. I had to pull him back away from the traffic. Then I just sat there with him on the sidewalk, with my arms around him while he cried and cried. We went to his funeral, all of us. Held his hand throughout the whole thing. Since that day, he hit the weed hard. Then the coke. Then acid. Now… it’s Crystal. I think sometimes he misses his dad so much it just bites him in the ass.”

Now, Daryl had a choice to make. Did he opt to keep things uncomplicated for Selene and keep his opinion to himself? Or, should he be honest, like he had promised to be and tell her what was going through his mind?

“Think there might be somethin’ else going on too.” He said. The sentence had left his lips involuntary and it was this that he saw as a sign that it was the right thing to do.

“Like what?” She queried.

He shifted in his seat, turning away from the stage and facing her across the table.

“What he said to you in your apartment… it wasn’t the drugs talkin. If anythin’ the Crystal just helped him say it.” He explained.
She froze for a few seconds and panic spiked in his veins. Was this the right decision? Eventually, her eyes lowered and she started to frantically shake her head, a feeble smile appearing in her face. Typical signs of denial, Daryl considered.

“No… that’s. No, he doesn’t. He’s—he’s not.” She denied firmly.

He let out a small huff, not knowing exactly what territory he was entering here or if he was even equipped to deal with an emotional outburst should she take it all badly. In an attempt to convince her of the way he saw it, he leaned forwards, dipping his head and catching her eye. He knew what he was about to say was not only going to be hard for her to hear, but also very revealing for him.

“Alright, listen. His ol’man dyin’ Yeah, that’s gonna be a huge deal to him. But maybe after the funeral, he started to feel somethin’ for ya. But he kept to himself. Over time, it gets worse. He starts to really care. He still doesn’t say nothin’ because what’s the point? He thinks you’re too good for him. He sees you interested in other guys. It hurts like a kick in the teeth, but he still stays quiet. He’s there for you, builds ya up when ya down, compliments you, he’s got ya back like he always has. You don’t know no different. Things change when ya meet someone that ya really like. He knows you’ve gone to extremes for a chance with this guy. He wants ya to be happy, so maybe he even pushes you to him. But it eats away him. He starts to get tired of feelin’ so worthless all the time. So, he steps up the thing that makes him forget, drugs.” He said.

She just gawped at him, any signs of a meltdown being kept at bay and he could all but see the cogs turning in her head as she processed his explanation. She blinked at him and he wanted to reach across the table and take her hand. He could have easily done it. But at a moment like that, he worried it would backfire.

“How the hell do you know all that?” She eventually asked.

Knowing he had to continue to be honest, he grit his teeth momentarily and took a deep breath.

“‘Cause it’s what I’d do. I almost did. With you. So, I get where he’s at.” He admitted.

Again, she blinked at him.

“Really?” She whispered.

A single nod was his response and he began to look uncomfortable. There was only so much emotionally taxing conversation he could handle and at that point he had just about filled his quota. Selene however, was just getting started.

“If I hadn’t told you I liked you in the parking lot that time and if my father wasn’t an issue, would you have told me how you felt about me?”

Ahhh shit. I should have known this would spiral.

“No.” He divulged quietly.

Her eyebrows knitted together and her features displayed a saddened and confused expression.

“Why not?”

Daryl was already tired of this honesty thing, having to talk about things he had never even had to consider before was proving to be difficult and frustrating. But he persevered for Selene’s sake, not about to shy away from giving her the answers to her questions.
“No point. Told ya before, didn’t think ya liked me like that. Way outta my league. Still are.” He muttered with a small, disbelieving exhalation. The rest of the room seemed to fall away when she slid her hand across the table and gently rested her fingers on top of his. She smiled at him and gradually leaned across the table.

“You want to know a secret?” She whispered, receiving a subtle nod from him. “I still can’t believe you like me as more than a friend. I think it’s you that’s out of my league.”

“C’mon, Selene.” He scoffed “don’t gimme that, that dog ain’t gonna hunt.”

“You don’t have to believe me. But I wouldn’t lie to you.” She shrugged, withdrawing her hand and sitting back with her arms crossed over her chest in defiance. “I was wrong to waste so much time, should have put my father in line sooner.” She pursed her lips and winked at him, causing his cheeks to redden and his ears to burn.

_Dammit, Selene._

“OK, seriously now.” She said firmly “I don’t know what to do about Ritchie. How long has he been buying that crap for?” She said, changing the subject and sparing Daryl any more blushes.

“First night we went to Marty’s, that’s when he switched up to Meth. I didn’t know he worked for ya at the tattoo parlour but I still didn’t wanna sell it to him. Hard to believe now but we used to get along. I’m with- Uh, I mean I’m seein’… we’re, y’know, you and me… so he fuckin hates me now.” He told her.

Her face dropped again and she picked up a few strands of her long, black hair, winding it absentmindedly around her index finger.

“What do I do?” She asked him “I broke his heart and then I failed him.”

“No. That ain’t true. This ain’t ya fault.” He offered. Genuinely believing that she would never have intentionally hurt Ritchie.

“I love him, Daryl. I love all of them.” She sniffed as she closed her eyes and lowered her head.

“I know.” He said. “He loves you too. Just not in the same way.”

*****

For the remainder of their night at the Capital Grill, the conversation was deliberately kept upbeat and away from topics that might take a toll on the atmosphere or Selene’s mood, which after finding out about Daryl’s extra line of work, had been up and down more times than a rollercoaster. Nevertheless, she was pleased with her decisions to allow him to take her out and to trust him to be honest with her going forward. She could see it in his face that he didn’t want to walk out of her life and as a result, she had little reason to worry about him keeping anything else from her.

They strolled along the sidewalk, side by side with Selene giggling and chatting animatedly while Daryl looked on, chuckling along with her from time to time. As they passed Marty’s, Daryl noticed the lights were still on and there were people still inside. Checking his battered cell phone for the time, he saw it was almost midnight and that Marty’s was open for another hour yet. He stepped off the sidewalk and reached out, slipping his hand into hers and steering her across the road with him. She didn’t have to ask what he was doing. He had made it clear that as long as Marty’s was still open, he was going to spend as much time with her as possible.
Daryl led Selene into the bar by her hand, proudly striding across from the door and noticing a few people look up and recognise her, whispering about the man she was holding hands with. She waved here and there and called out a hello to a couple of acquaintances before beaming at Marty as she settled on a barstool and slapped his palm in a high five. After ordering two beers, she shifted her stool as close to Daryl’s as she could get. He surveyed the room, noting all the staring faces.

“Ever get the feelin’ you’re bein’ watched?” He grumbled, nudging his head up in thanks to Marty who had placed two beers in front of them.

“I know a lot of people in here. They’ve never seen me with anyone except Angelo. Then I walk in here, hand in hand with you. That’s why they’re looking.” She explained. “Let them, maybe I want to show you off.”

“Yeah, right” He scoffed.

From the other side of the room, Daryl clocked Joe, the guy that had walked up and slid his hands around her waist the first time he had sat with her in the same spot. It seemed Joe hadn’t changed one bit when in minutes, he was behind Selene again, hands firmly planted on her hips and Daryl’s anger levels boiling over. Selene closed her eyes briefly in an attempt to control her frustration before she offered a polite greeting and tried to work her fingers between his hand and her hip bone, telling him in no uncertain terms that she did not want to be touched. In seconds, Daryl was on his feet.

“Take ya hands off of her.” He snapped.

Joe glanced to the side, shooting Daryl a dirty look which only fuelled the now scorching fury working its way to his fists.

“You got a problem, man? Or a little crush?” Joe quipped.

Daryl stepped forwards, using the fact that he was taller than Joe to aid him in his defiant display.

“Yeah, I got a problem. You touchin’ her without her permission.” Daryl told him, his voice raising.

Selene looked at Marty with raised eyebrows, Joes hands now feeling so out of place on her that it almost felt like they were burning into her skin.

“If they start a brawl, I’m blaming you.” Marty warned her with a snigger.

“I’m just havin’ a little fun.” Joe reasoned with a shrug of one shoulder.

“Have it someplace else.” Daryl spat.

“Joe…” Selene started, only to be silenced by Daryl getting right up in Joe’s face. She could feel his wrath from where she was and had no doubt that if Joe didn’t take heed there would be a full-on fight in the middle of the bar.

“If you don’t take your fuckin’ hands off my girl, I’mma knock ya god damn teeth out.” Daryl snarled at him.

Selene startled at his words, as shocked as Joe looked at her newly appointed role as Daryl’s girl. It wasn’t something she disliked the sound of, having never been described in such a way before. She even felt a pang of pride. Daryl had proved over and over that he would do anything to ensure her
safety and that he had no problem with violence if it meant he could ram his point home. But the last thing Selene wanted, was for him to get hurt, or to hurt someone else so badly that it would only spell trouble for him.

“Your girl, huh?” Joe pressed.

“Joe, please remove your hands from my waist.” Selene asked politely, feeling it was time for her to intervene.

The pressure on her hips vanished as Joe finally backed up and faced Daryl head on.

“Daryl” Selene warned “It’s not worth it, sit down.”

He didn’t move, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he glared at Joe with a venomous hatred.

“She aint your girl. She aint nobody’s girl. Never has been, never will be.” Joe informed him.

Selene stood up, her barstool clattering back across the surface and making Joe jump. Now, she was the one that was angry.

“Really, Joe? Who did I walk in here with? Who am I sat with at the bar? Who am I going home with tonight? Because it sure as hell isn’t you. It never has been and it never will be. Some things change, but others don’t. In future, keep your slimy, desperate hands to yourself or I’ll name drop you to my father. Now, kindly go away.”

Seeing Joe completely change the way he looked at her, his face changing from friendly to disgust, Daryl reached out to grab the front of his shirt but Selene shot an arm out to stop him.

“Oh no. Sit your ass down.” She demanded, pointing to the empty stool next to him. He reluctantly let Joe wander off and sat quietly next to Selene, his knuckles white as he gripped the brass bar that ran along the edge of the counter.

“Marty’s going to blame me if you start fighting in here.” She said.

“I don’t like that guy.” Daryl grumbled.

“Yeah, I got that.” She affirmed.

“Don’t like him thinkin he can just touch you like that.” He continued,

“I know, but he’s gone. It’s finished. Stop seething.” She said with a smile.

“I ain’t seething.” He denied.

“Yes, you are.” She giggled. He shook his head and groaned, eventually smiling back at her.

“So, uh…your girl-” She started.

“-Don’t.” He interrupted. She gave him a shocked look, turning to him in her seat with great amusement.

“Really?! You’re not even going to acknowledge it?” She asked.

“Nope.” He replied,downing his beer in a few large gulps. Selene was clueless as to what to do, what to say or how to react. So much so, that she merely took a sip of her drink followed by a deep breath.
“Alrighty then.” She said to herself.

*****

The heavens had opened. When it rained in their part of the state, it always seemed to rain relentlessly and without mercy. Streets became awash with streams of water and no amount of hiding in shop doorways would mean anyone got home without a decent soaking. When Marty’s bar closed, Selene tried to link her arm through Daryl’s as they stood under the plastic canopy above the door. He pulled away and shrugged his leather vest off, opening it up and holding it above her head.

“Take this. Might not help much but it’s somethin’.” He said.

She tried to protest, arguing that he would be soaked through without it, but he wouldn’t hear of it, telling her he could only get wet once and a bit of rain wouldn’t kill him. She held the vest over her head and took his hand which he gripped tightly as they sprinted down the sidewalks towards the tattoo studio.

Reaching the door, Selene fumbled with her keys but they were soon inside, dripping wet and freezing cold. She held the saturated leather vest in her hand and studied him. His hair was stuck, flat to his head and his shirt didn’t have one dry part left.

She beckoned him to follow her and they both left a trail of wet footprints through the studio and up the stairs until they reached her apartment. She opened the door and told him to take his shirt off so she could throw it in the dryer. Disappearing into her closet, she rummaged around as the swinging lightbulb above her cast a jumping, glow on the rug outside. Daryl wandered to the kitchen, unbuttoning his shirt and removing it. He threw it into the dryer and closed the door, turning around to see Selene motionless in front of him, clutching an oversized, black T-shirt in her hands. Her face seemed to have drained of its colour and she looked desperately sad.

“What?” He asked

“N-Nothing.” She stuttered.

It hit him like a bolt from the blue. His scars. He hadn’t given them a second thought when he’d shed his outer layer. He didn’t know if it meant he was that comfortable with her he just hadn’t thought of it or because he was at a point in his life where he rarely thought about them at all, having not been involved in many romantic trysts or situations where they could be seen. He sighed and rubbed his face with his hand, weighing up how to approach this. Slowly padding over to her, he looked down into her eyes, noting that she averted her gaze from him.

“My scars, right?” He mumbled. She handed him the t-shirt and he rapidly pulled it over his head.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare, I-” she said quickly, the alarm in her voice evident and it pulled on his heart.

“-S’ok” He stopped her. “Should have warned ya. I know they ain’t pretty.”

Her eyes finally flickered to his and her jaw seemed to tighten.

“You think they put me off?” She asked.

It was something he had been forced to take into account. She was the first woman he had ever felt
anything for and the thought of her running a mile at the sight of his tainted skin wasn’t an easy one to handle. It filled him with worry and made him feel slightly nauseous with anger at the fact that he’d never asked for this and that his father was still impacting on his life even all those years after his death. He didn’t know the answer to her question, but he did know what he hoped she would say.

“Do they?” He countered.

She instantly placed a hand on his chest, not with too much pressure, but enough to feel him tense up under her touch. He briefly looked down before resuming eye contact with her.

“No. Not even one little bit.” She assured him. “You’re very attractive. I was also staring at the fact that you were shirtless in my apartment. That’s something I’d like to see again.”

She was so close to him, her breasts now pushed against his chest and he could see the delicate wings of her eyeliner on each eye, drawn on with such precision. She was close enough for him to lean down and kiss her, to take her mind away from what she had seen on his back.

“You’ve been through a lot” She whispered.

“Guess so.” He uttered.

“It must have had some kind of lasting effect, aside from the scars, I mean.” She mused as she traced patterns across his chest with her fingers over his shirt. He had no idea how, but such a simple and apparently non-sexual gesture was beginning to stir parts of him that he hadn’t anticipated.

“Always been kinda angry. Some things I just aint good at.” He mentioned, trying to keep his thoughts on track.

“Like what?” She enquired.

“Feelin…anything. Talkin’ ‘bout shit. I hate bein’ touched.”

She moved back and withdrew her hand. It dawned on her that every time she had touched him, it was possible that he’d hated it. Daryl huffed at his own stupidity and lack of consideration at his choice of words.

Nice one, asshole. Now she thinks she can’t touch you.

“I’m sorry, you should tell me, if-if you don’t like me touching you. I’ll understand and we can-”

“-Never said I didn’t like you touchin’ me.” He interrupted, his icy blue stare piercing through her soul. “You’re different. It’s still hard, but I do like it. I just aint so good with affection.”

“OK.” She smiled “That’s OK.”

Unaware that her mouth had dropped open slightly with astonishment when he seized her hand and placed it back on his chest, in the same place as before, she figured he may have more disclosures to find out about the more she got to know him. She closed the gap between them again, taking full advantage of his signals.

“You’re not so bad at talking either, y’know.” She pointed out.

“Only to you.” He corrected.
Then, something in the very narrowed space between their bodies changed. He could hear her breathing deepen and she detected the intensity of the look in his eyes. She slowly licked her lips, examining his face and discovering she liked every line, every blemish and scar, his strong jawline and the shape of his lips. Lips. He was zoned in on hers and she understood what he was thinking. He wanted to kiss her.

“Am I your girl, Daryl?” She whispered.

“You wanna be?” He asked hesitantly.

“You don’t know the answer to that?” She said with a faint smile, drawing ever nearer, the hand on his chest commencing a path up to his neck.

“I know I said… in the bar. But, I don’t wanna assume.” He admitted.

“I think you can assume.” She confirmed.

She brought her face so close to him that her nose brushed across his skin, her lips ghosting his cheek and her fingertips tickling over his jawline. He closed his eyes. He really didn’t dislike it when she touched him. His heart began to rush in his chest and his head bustled with thoughts.

*You’re going to fuck this up. You really want to kiss her. She’s too good for you. She chose you. You’re wasting your time. You wouldn’t be here if she didn’t like you. She’s not going to kiss you.*

“Will you let me kiss you?” She breathed.

He didn’t say anything but him grasping her free hand and giving it a firm squeeze was enough of a response to her.

Every muscle in his body became stiff when her lips gently grazed over his. He didn’t move an inch and his bones suddenly felt immovable, like he was paralyzed with something, a feeling he hadn’t felt in a very, very long time. He searched the far corners of his mind in those few seconds to identify it when it finally revealed itself. It was fear. He wasn’t afraid of anything anymore, or so he thought. But the dazzling beauty of Selene had bestowed upon him a flood of emotions that had both excited and terrified him all at the same time.

The air left his lungs in a rush when she gingerly stepped back from him. He hadn’t known about the breath he was holding. His eyes darted around before he dipped his head and peered up at her nervously. She looked worried that she’d pushed him too far too soon from his lack of reaction. Him not returning her kiss had resulted in a gnawing disappointment that seemed to worsen with every second that passed.

*Shit. What the fuck do I do? I need to do something or I’m going to lose her. C’mon, you got this far, stop being such a pussy.*

As if someone flicked a switch, he quickly lunged at her, taking control of her lips and holding her face with both hands. She whimpered and tried not to smile too much as she kissed him back, teasing him with her tongue until he let her in. One of his hands dropped and he placed it on the small of her back, needing more contact with her body.

Her fingers gripped his bicep and she could feel his muscles flex as he pushed her against him. She wanted to hook her fingers into the waistline of his jeans and drag him over to the bed, feeling a sting of dissatisfaction that she would have to wait for anything more than this one, powerful and now perfect first kiss that Daryl had taken ownership of and was startling her more and more with his surprising skill. Because of him, there was fire in her bones, a bonfire raged, complete with
fireworks deep inside that she had never felt with anyone else. She was filled with joy, with elation at this long-awaited moment and the same word repeated over and over in her head.

Finally. Finally. Finally.

He wanted to look at her, to see her hazy eyes and moistened lips. So, he attempted to break the kiss, moving back slightly and finding that she just moved with him, her lip rings pressed to his lower lip. He copied her smile and heard her giggle slightly as she finally let him go. She gazed up at him, watching as he huffed and timidly lifted the corner of his mouth. She flashed him a brilliant, pure white smile and he contemplated that she looked slightly different. Her features were still pretty, but there was now something behind her eyes and the more he looked the more obvious it became. She was happy.

“Oh my god. I’m so addicted to you” She whispered, feeling her cheeks grow hot as she buried her face into his shoulder.

Daryl felt the same, stunned, turned on, happy and like his veins were alight with electricity. At a guess he would probably say he felt it even more so while he stood there in utter disbelief that the woman with her arms around him, with which he had enjoyed the most delectable of kisses, had reacted this way at being able to kiss him.

“Sorry I froze up.” He mumbled “Um… I ain’t never kissed nobody I actually liked before.”

It wasn’t a lie. One day, he figured he might tell her how he had been rooted to the spot with fear. How she had provoked a reaction in him that he hadn’t experienced in years, but this time it hadn’t been because of violence or abuse. This time, it was because he was petrified of something he never thought he would feel in his life. Now wasn’t the time to come clean. Now, he was going to enjoy every second of being with her.

“It’s OK.” She replied, sliding her hands down his arms and grasping his fingers on both sides. “I just thought maybe you weren’t ready.”

“I am.” He uttered, sensing her squeezing his fingers slightly and returning the gesture. She loosened his grasp on one hand and smoothed it up his torso, back to it’s original place over his heart.

“Your heart is beating really fast” she observed, able to feel it pulsing forcefully under her palm.

“Just didn’t wanna screw that up.” He admitted.

“You didn’t. I don’t know where you learned to kiss like that, but…wow” She giggled. It wasn’t the first time he’d heard it. Not having been the most experienced with women, he had felt smug and like his ego had doubled in size when Amy, the stripper from the club that he had slept with, told him that out of all the men she’d kissed (and there were a hell of a lot) he had been the one with the hidden talent for it.

“So, are you going to answer my question now?” She asked.

He brushed her hair back and leaned down to kiss her again. This time a gentle, light touch that turned her weak at the knees and she fought to reopen her eyes again afterwards. His heart was still racing and his skin prickled with delight as he clung to her. She hummed happily and nuzzled at the side of his face.

“You’re my girl.” He whispered.
It had crept up on him so suddenly. The words had tumbled out as though they meant nothing and everything all at once. When he thought of the relationship between him and Selene, he most certainly did consider her to be his in the way that he knew he would protect her with his life and that his feelings for her were new, an unknown and confusing sensation that had led him to this point; holding her after having just experienced the electrifying delight of a first kiss. If someone had told him he would be where he was at that moment a few months back, he would have laughed in their face.

Chapter End Notes

As I said in my introduction, this is extremely self indulgent. The Ritchie storyline is partly based on something I experienced with a friend of mine, he is even described as looking the same. In real life, he is a truly gorgeous and sweet person which is what I wanted to maintain with his personality in this fic. Sadly, we are no longer in contact. Being in love with someone you can never have (I'm married to someone else) is one of the most painful things to go through.

Also, the last scene in this chapter between Daryl and Selene is based on a real first kiss and I chose it because the guy it was with was very, very similar to Daryl in character.

Just in case anyone cares!
Chapter Notes

Another chapter! I had a couple queued for when I got back. This is a reasonably fluffy one, so enjoy!

When Selene dragged Daryl’s shirt from the dryer, she threw her own sweater in after it and felt along the seams, making sure it was dry enough for him to put back on. She turned to see him dragging the black T-shirt she had given him over his head. His exposed torso caused her to turn her back to him briefly and grip onto the edge of the countertop.

“Behave, Selene.” She said to herself through her teeth before whirling around and plastering a bright smile on her face. Crossing the apartment to where he stood by her bed, she stopped at least a foot away and hesitated. Daryl noticed her nervousness and waited for her to say something.

About to take a huge risk, she opened her mouth to say the words, his shirt still pinched in her grasp in front of her.

“Can-can I see?” She asked, her voice nothing but a squeak. “I know I saw before, but I just-”

Instead of saying anything, Daryl just turned. Not needing to vocalise his permission he remained still and lowered his head, the front strands of his hair falling forward.

She took a deep breath and took a couple of steps forward, raising a hand and hovering it over the severe and unforgiving gashes that decorated his back. A macabre, tragic and heart wrenching story, forever branded onto his skin. Her hand shook as she held it over his skin, close enough for him to feel the warmth of it but not close enough to result in him flinching away. She swallowed hard as her eyes grazed over each darkened patch and felt her stomach flip and her throat close up.

Don’t cry. Don’t let him see you cry.

Telling herself she would do her crying when she was alone, she remained strong and wondered how he managed to pull himself through such trauma at such a difficult age. The physical pain was one thing, but the emotional pain would have been enough to break some people. But not Daryl.

“Can feel your hand.” She heard him mutter. “Can touch me. S’ok.”

She tenderly connected her hand with his shoulder blade atop of one of two demon tattoos that she could only imagine were some kind of visual manifestations of the demons he carried in his own head. Moving her hand to the left, she felt the first scar, the skin marred and different. It criss-crossed with another, larger one and she was able to gather from the patterns that whatever his father had used, was thin, strong and extremely savage.

“D-Daryl” She stammered. “What…”

A mere whisper, Daryl wasn’t sure if she’d given up speaking or if he’d missed what she said. Until he heard her drag in a jagged breath, telling him she had simply lost the words somewhere along the way. He could sense her hand travelling across to his other shoulder, then to the middle on the left side again. This was where the worst of it was. The deepest, most vile slashes.
Try as she might to push it all away, she could feel nothing but his pain and it had crept into her soul and slowly began chipping away at it, bit by bit, a little more with every scar she feathered with her fingertips. She wasn’t outwardly crying, but her heart was aching. She dropped the shirt onto the bed beside them, enabling her to use both hands. She threaded them around his waist, holding him close from behind. He held her hands at his middle, bringing one up and kissing over her knuckles. Selene would have described it as a comfortable silence that surrounded them for those few minutes, but in reality, it was nothing but comfortable. It was raw, candid and distressing.

“What did he use?” She managed to whisper from behind him.

Briefly, he raised his head to take a deep breath before he lowered it again and held tightly onto her hands.

“Birch tree switch or his belt.” He said.

Tears began to well in her eyes as she battled to keep them back, not wanting to show weakness in front of him. She had to be stronger if she was going to be with someone with such a difficult past. Who no doubt had hundreds of awful stories to tell and unresolved trauma that ate away at him from the inside.

She let go of him, pulling her arms back from around his waist and moved around to his front, lacing her hands into his hair with his head still lowered. She encouraged him to lift his gaze. His eyes were glazed and she could sense the heaviness in her hands, he wanted to hide and she was going to let him. She unthreaded her fingers from his hair and let him do as he needed, shocked and saddened when he stepped closer to her and rested his forehead on her shoulder. Holding him there with a hand on his neck, she kissed the side of his head and he closed her eyes.

“I keep thinking about that night. The bleachers.” She confessed.

In truth, that was the main reason she wanted to cry. The thought of his despair and searing pain in his back as he sat there and smoked on the seats. Unaware that she watched him, tempted to take a photo and capture the moment. It was the perfect shot. Only now, she understood that it would have been the most beautiful and tragic shot she would ever have taken.

He raised his head and backed up slightly, his chest heaving as he took a large breath and tried to ground himself.

“Don’t. You’ll drive yourself crazy.” He told her.

She reached down to the bed and collected his shirt, holding it away from him when he tried to take it from her.

“Can I?” She asked. Not knowing the full extent of what she meant, he agreed anyway. She had just seen the proof of his horrific childhood, so anything else she wanted to do wasn’t likely to be anywhere near as much of a big deal.

She opened up the shirt and held out one arm hole, flicking her head in its direction and motioning for him to dip his arm through it. He obliged and turned as she helped him slide the other side on before setting to work on the buttons at the front. As she worked, she held eye contact with him for the entire time and thought it might have been the most fun she’d ever had putting clothes on a guy instead of taking them off.

“It’s late, I should go.” He rasped as she fastened the last button on his shirt. She raised an eyebrow
at him and leaned close to his ear.

“Probably wise. We both know things could get out of hand if you stay.” She alluded.

“Outta hand like how?” He asked innocently but with every intention to boldly try and drag some sort of erotic confession out of her. But Selene knew better and saw straight through his plan.

“Oh, You want me to break it down for you?” She challenged.

“Yeah.” He shot back, aware that she wasn’t expecting this kind of flirtatious back and forth with him.

She snuggled into the side of his face, kissed him gently and travelled from his lips across his jawline to his ear. He tilted his head, allowing her better access and closed his eyes, a gravelly groan escaping him.

“That face of yours…” She purred in his ear while tickling at the back of his neck, much like she had done when she had first flirted with him at Shorty’s wedding. “…I like it. But I really think it would look better between my legs”

His eyes snapped open as if he’d been pinched and he looked to the side, catching her eye. No matter how many times she three stepped him, no matter how many forward and blunt things she said, he didn’t think he’d ever get used to it. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to either, the delightful surprise of a seductive and bordering on dirty comment here and there wasn’t something he ever wanted to become complacent about, despite it throwing him off guard. He had concluded a long time ago that he had been lucky to still have her in his life since the alley at the side of the Velvet Rabbit. Now, with the notion firmly cemented in his imagination that he would one day be between those legs, he figured it nothing short of a miracle.

“Oh yeah?” He questioned with a smirk.

“Mmhmm. One day.” She hummed, as if she had been listening to his thoughts all along.

“Yeah, one day.” He grinned.

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A bitterly cold day called for another layer of leather and Daryl had selected Merle’s heavy, biker jacket that had been discarded carelessly on the floor behind the couch in their living room. He was sure Merle wouldn’t even notice, seeing as it had been there for over two weeks and he had never once charged about the house and accused Daryl of having it. Yet another occasion where his older brother had assumed he’d lost something while out drunk or high somewhere. His leather vest fit well over the top, providing him with a much-needed shield from the harsh wind.

Once again, Daryl had hardly slept, but this time it was almost bearable. This time he had memories circulating in his imagination that he was happy to recall over and over again. Selene smiling at him across the table at The Capital Grill while she explained her own variation of sports names. How she had melted into him when he’d finally come to his senses and kissed her properly. The kiss itself, something he had wanted to do to her since he first set eyes on her as a teenager at high school.

He had tossed and turned on the mattress, wishing he could just get up, drive to her place, knock on the door and throw out any need for patience, self-restraint or holding back. But he knew in his heart that there was every possibility he would make some kind of terrible mistake or freak out if he ran in as if it was some kind of race.
On his way to work, he parked in his usual spot, across town so he could walk past the tattoo parlour. A habit he hadn’t given up despite Selene knowing about his bizarre morning routine. He checked the front desk, squinting from across the street and seeing only Ray stooped over the keyboard and jabbing furiously at the keys. Deciding to check the coffee shop, he slowly walked past, checking through the door as someone opened it to leave the building. No. She wasn’t there either. Then, he heard music. Loud hip hop. Following the sound, he ended up staring back at The Ink Cabinet, where he could clearly see Selene, Axel, Shorty, Bear and Ray all dancing about and rapping a verse each to the music. She wore her Ink Cabinet Baseball cap backwards and was so immersed in the verse she was reeling off that she appeared to look right at him and didn’t notice him. Daryl leaned against a street lamp and crossed his arms, a half smile on his face as he watched them all laughing and throwing up signs with their hands. She looked happy, her face a bright ray of sunshine in a dark and stormy day. He needed to see her, just for a minute and speak to her for a few seconds. So, he crossed the street, swerving around cars queuing at traffic lights and stopped in the doorway, which had been propped open with a doorstop.

Selene was finishing up her verse, encouraged by Shorty and Axel chiming in with the odd grunt as Bear and Ray danced around like two white gangsters at a rap battle. It was a strange sight, seeing a woman decked out in fishnet tights, platform boots, a leather skirt and ripped sweater, throwing down to rap music. He had no idea she even liked rap and hip hop, yet here she was, rapping away like she’s done it a thousand times. He made a mental note to ask her about this at a later date. She flung her hands up as she spoke, swapping eager facial expressions with her friends and winding her hips to the beat.

“I’m in a Maybach right now tryna innovate

I’m too fly, don’t try to give me my props, just give me space

Your favourite artist tryna party with Puff, I’m tryna fuck Cardi in a pair of Cartier buffs, what!”

Daryl laughed loudly and shifted his positioning on the step in the entrance to the studio, bringing a hand to his face to mask his chuckling at the scene before him. Hearing him, Selene whirled around and threw her hands up, covering her face with embarrassment. Everyone around her laughed between verses and began whooping and cheering.

“She’s got some explaining to do now!” Shorty chortled above the music. “Hey Daryl!”

“Shorty.” Daryl replied “Good Honeymoon?”


By now, Selene had just about managed to scrape her dignity up from the floor and she plucked her phone from the back of her leather skirt and lowered the music’s volume, leaving Axel, Shorty, Ray and Bear all still messing about, rapping at one another with near perfect recollection of the words.

“Hi.” She squeaked at Daryl.

“Hey.”

“You um, here for the early morning motivational dance off?” She asked shyly.

He took a while to respond, his eyes scanning her face, taking in her change of lip jewellery, two spiked studs instead of rings, her hair was curled at the ends and she wore black, framed glasses similar to Ray’s with a dark purple lipstick.
“Just wanted to see ya for a minute.” He admitted with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth and his hands in the front pocket of his jeans.

“That a new jacket?” She questioned, pinching at the excess leather at his elbow.

“Naw, it’s Merle’s. He don’t know yet, but I’ll soon be mine.” He told her.

“I like it. Looks good on you.” She offered.

They just stared at each other for a few minutes and Ray twirled around with his arms in the air and immediately noticed the sexual tension boiling over between them. Getting the attention of the others. They all ceased their dance off and pretended to be milling around the front desk checking appointments. The sniggering emanating from the desk wasn’t lost on Selene, but she didn’t really care at that moment.

Daryl tenderly moved Selene’s hair from her eyes as it blew in the breeze from the open door in what was becoming his signature move. The silky strands threaded through his fingers and he loved how soft it was and how good she smelt. Like perfume but not overpowering.

Ray reached out, slapping his hands-on whatever arms he could find without looking, ending up with Axel’s under one hand and Shorty’s under the other while Bear was already watching with his jaw pulled tight.

“Oh, be still my beatin’ heart.” Ray whispered. “That shit is adorable. You see the way he’s looking at her? I need to get me a man that looks at me like that.”

Axel scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Only thing you look at like that is a stack of pancakes first thing in the morning.” He jested.

“I leave you guys for a couple weeks and this place turns into the twilight zone.” Shorty quipped. “Ritchie’s lost his mind, Selene’s got a boyfriend and Bear hasn’t strangled him yet.”

“Yet.” Bear echoed.

Selene quickly shot the others a look, overhearing them whispering. They all seemed to jump at the same time in an overdramatic scene of looking busy and disinterested. They frantically searched for something to look occupied with. Axel even picking up a stapler and holding it to his ear until he realised how utterly ridiculous he looked.

She turned back to Daryl, shamelessly checking him out and focusing on the slither of his chest she could see beneath his open, top buttons. She ran her tongue over her lower lip and tried not to think about how she wanted to kiss and lick her way across the V-shaped patch before her..

Daryl’s mind was also running away with him as he remembered their kiss again and how it had made him feel. How strange it felt to hold her so close to him at first but then how it all became so natural and effortless. How her lip rings had pressed against his lips, unfamiliar territory at first but then sexy and different. The sounds she made, contended hums and soft giggles. Her hands on his arms, making him feel strong, wanted and attractive to her.

She stepped closer to him, ignoring the freezing cold air that was wafting in from outside and he looked down into her bright eyes. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, but if he said it every time he thought it, he wouldn’t ever say much else.
“M’ late for work.” He managed to mumble.

“You should go.” She hushed, not breaking their eye contact.

“Yeah, I should.”

She heard everyone at the desk fall silent as she lifted a hand and placed it on the side of his face, stroking her thumb over his cheek and encouraging him to lean down to her so she could steal a slow and sensual kiss that neither of them wanted to break. It occurred to Selene that Daryl was a surprisingly good kisser despite having never kissed anyone he liked before and that the previous night was not just a one off. He executed his kiss with a passion she had never seen in him before but also with expert precision that left her almost a complete wreck in his grasp. Even when his lips had left hers, he still refused to back up, enjoying her tickling his face with the tip of her nose. She forgot about their little audience for those few seconds and desperately tried to pull herself together by taking a small step back.

“Go to work.” She smiled.

“Alright. Later, pretty girl.” He said as he slowly walked off towards the direction of his workplace.

When Selene went back to the front desk, Axel and shorty were both suppressing laugher and Bear was speechless. Pleased to see his sister happy but unable to ignore the familiar sting of protectiveness he felt, he chose to simmer quietly. Ray, was sat at the desk with his head propped on the heel of his hand, blinking and sighing dramatically at her.

“I almost puked” Axel blurted out.

“I know man, me too. That was some Hallmark channel shit.” Shorty laughed.

Selene flipped them both the bird with a gigantic false smile and pointed to their workstations.

“Don’t you assholes have designs to draw up? Get to it. Bitches” She ordered.

Sitting down next to Ray, he slowly turned on the leather, wheeled chair to face her. She was looking down into her lap, her hands clasped together and with a big smirk on her face.

“Did we just witness a first kiss there?” Ray asked through his teeth, keeping the volume of his voice low to avoid more ridicule from the others. She sighed happily and slowly licked her lips.

“More like the third or fourth, I lost count” she confessed, shifting her chair closer to him. “First was last night and it was-it was fucking delicious. He does things to me when he kisses me. He’s so good at it. I want to pin him down and screw his brains out.”

“You and me both.” Ray agreed, picking up a pen and clamping it’s end between his teeth.

“Easy, dude’s mine now. Being patient is hard.” She complained.

“I hear ya. That’s why I don’t bother with all this shit. I just dive right on in.” He said, swishing the pen from left to right rapidly in front of him before chewing on it again.

“Unlike you, I’m not a slut.” Selene hissed.

Ray was unamused but hardly ever took anything too personally, preferring to utterly destroy
people that had offended him with a quick-witted joke at their expense in a public place.

“Daryl’s a good kisser, I’m a good slut. We all have our talents. So, when y’all gonna be doing the interior decoratin’?”

It took a couple of seconds for the penny to drop but when it did, Selene turned and gawped at Ray in astonishment.

“RAY!” she gasped “That is disgusting!”

“Oh, fuck off, you ain’t no prude, girl. Ya gonna make him wait?” he wanted to know.

Second guessing whether she should be disclosing such sensitive and private information to the person that had possibly the biggest mouth in the whole town, she yielded when she remembered that of all the things that Ray could broadcast about her to everyone else, he never had. Her secrets would go to his grave and it worked both ways. Even with this in mind, she was still apprehensive to disclose her knowledge of Daryl’s drug dealing and to Ritchie. Deciding to keep it to herself for the time being, she told herself she would tell Ray another time and that right now, it wasn’t relevant.

“As much as I want to drag him to bed every time I set eyes on him, I know it’s best to wait. I haven’t had a relationship for so long because of my father and Daryl hasn’t ever had one.” She explained as she dragged Ray’s coffee cup across the desk and took a big gulp of the now too cold drink. Appreciating the caffeine, she was going to take every drop she could get.

“What?! Dixon’s never had a girlfriend?” Ray exclaimed

“Nope.” She said, shaking her head.

“Female population in this town must be fuckin blind to let that fine ass man wander around without any sugar.” He mused.

“He’s not a virgin, Ray. He just hasn’t found anybody he liked that much.” She corrected.

He began to chuckle and nudge her in the side, coupled with a wide, pure white grin and his perfectly shaped eyebrows raised.

“Ooh and he really likes you so prepare yourself, guuuurl. You gonna need to get buffed, preened and shaved to within an inch of your life. Gonna be some pent-up frustration in him.” He giggled.

“I kinda hope so. I’m frustrated” She shrugged.

He opened the desk drawer and dragged his hand around inside until he located the pack of gum they kept hidden from the others to save them all stealing it and threw a small, white square into his mouth, holding one out to Selene, who carefully placed it on the desk in front of her before finishing off Ray’s coffee.

“I’m jealous. I am sick and tired of being over-dressed and under-fucked.” He announced.

“Are you still in touch with shorty’s brother?” She asked, putting the coffee mug down and eating the gum. He held up a finger, signalling for her to wait and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He opened the pictures and scrolled through masses of tattoo designs before coming to a naked photo of a man and holding it up so Selene could see.

“Oh god! Jesus, Ray!” She cried, recoiling in horror “I don’t want to see Shorty’s brother naked!
What the hell?!”

He quickly brought an index finger to his lips, hushing her and leaning closer.

“Just because you got yaself a hottie doesn’t mean you’re the only one that can boast.” He told her.

“You actually like this guy?” She questioned.

“I don’t know, I like his thighs. Does that count?” He suggested.

“Considering it’s you we’re talking about, yes.”

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After a busy day of shoving pieces of metal through people’s body parts in Ritchie’s absence, Selene threw her legs over the arm of the chesterfield and lay back, flat on the cushions with her fingers pushed into her hair and her eyes closed. She was alone, the last person that had left was Bear after she refused to let him go anywhere without tidying up his mess. On the speaker played a carefully selected playlist of slow, industrial metal that she only really used for tough days.

Stirred by a knock at the front door, she summoned up the motivation to raise her head and check to see who it was. Having absolutely no intentions to open the door for any unobservant clients that were incapable of reading the opening times on the door. But it wasn’t a client. It was Daryl.

She got to her feet, straightening her skirt and unlocked the door. Without him having to say anything, she could tell something was wrong. His energy seemed off and he hadn’t blessed her with the same awestruck look he always did. Daryl had been battling with the idea not to tell her something all day but wasn’t about to hide anything else from her after their chat the previous night.

“I gotta tell ya somethin” He said, wasting no time.

“OK.” She sat down on the arm of the couch.

“Ya ol’ man wants to see me tonight. 7pm.” He informed her.

She regarded him with slight confusion, her eyebrows slightly pulled together and her mouth pushed into a thin line.

“Is that unusual?” she queried.

“Yeah. Only ever been in his office once before.”

Her heart sank and she quickly tried to come up with a reason why he would want to see Daryl alone. Annoyance spread through her and she began to tap her fingers against her thigh anxiously.

“For god sakes.” She spat.

“Think this is because of…us?” He hazarded.

“Without a doubt. Luigi is camped outside this place 24/7 watching me. Wait here, I’ll get my coat.” She decided.

“Wait, why?” He called out after her.

“You’re not going in there alone” She replied from the stairwell that housed a coat rack.
“I was told to go alon-”

“.This is not a fucking discussion, Daryl. My father is a murderer, you’d do well to remember that.” She interrupted with a hint of anger as she threw her coat over her shoulders and grabbed her keys.

By all accounts, Bill’s office was like an 80’s throwback with it’s old fashioned wooden panels and garishly patterned carpet. Delilah had tried to convince him to redecorate numerous times, but was always met with the old saying of ‘if it aint broke, don’t fix it.’. Sometimes, she thought he liked to live in the past, connected by happier times that she wasn’t a part of, so her desire to push him too much was always short lived and it was one of the few things she knew she would have no success with if she persevered.

As a known employee, Daryl was able to pass the doormen and security with little more than a nod and the offer of his full name Selene on the other hand, was disgusted to find that the security had been warned of the probability that she would arrive with him. However, they provided little protest when she demanded to be let in, no one was stupid enough to upset the boss’s daughter.

Shoving the door open so hard it rattled on its hinges and slammed into the wall, Selene strutted inside, leading Daryl in by the hand. She let go once the security guys had tried to explain that Selene had given them no choice and were dismissed. Leaving the three of them alone.

“Stay here.” She hissed at Daryl before stepping in front of him. Blocking Bill’s view of him with her head held high.

“Selene, what are you doing here?” Bill sighed in irritation.

“This room contains four guns, daddy. One in the desk drawer, two taped to the underside of the desk, and one in the TV cabinet. I am not stupid. I’m here because I don’t trust you. You won’t shoot Daryl in the head if you have to go through me.” She stated plainly.

Daryl’s head lowered but his eyes widened in shock and he glanced from Bill to Selene in disbelief. Was she serious? Was that a possibility?

Bill looked as though she had slapped him square across the face. He was unaware of the extent of knowledge about his tactics and illegal activities, hoping that she remembered very little from her childhood and heard next to nothing through the grapevine. It seemed his hopes had been dashed as he recalled every single person he had in fact, shot in the head right where Daryl stood and all the times that she had visited his office as a child, counting the number of guns in the room and remembering their locations.

“I would like to speak with Daryl alone. You can wait outside.” He barked.

“No. I’m not leaving him. Anything you want to say to him, you can say in front of me.”

“Selene, you are as stubborn as your mother was.”

“Good. At least I’m nothing like you.” She spat.

“Selene!” He suddenly shouted. Daryl didn’t move, raised voices rarely affected him after so many years of numbing himself to such sounds. Selene also didn’t move, her fear of her father now completely diminished as she saw him more as a constant, irritating feature in her life more than anything else.
“I have made exceptions in recent weeks that I previously never would have. I have allowed you to do as you please. So, at least afford me this one request and wait outside.”

“Allowed me to do as I please, huh? Yeah with my Italian babysitter, Luigi watching my every fucking move. You can yell at me as much as you like, I’m not afraid of you and I am not leaving Daryl here with you. I’m staying right here, in front of him so you can’t hurt him.” She confirmed.

“I won’t hurt him. You have my word.” Bill assured her.

“Your word means shit. If it did, we wouldn’t even be here.” She hissed.

As Bill’s face began to redden with rage, Daryl gently took her hand, stopping her from saying anything else and escalating the situation. Not usually the one to consider the bigger picture in the heat of the moment, Daryl could see how this was playing out and it was making him uncomfortable.

“Hey, it’s alright. I’ll be fine. Go wait with Delilah.” He told her.

She looked up at him with pleading eyes as Bill glared at their hands entwined and notices how Daryl looks at her with such adoration. It both angered him further but also affirmed that Daryl genuinely did care for her.

“It’s OK. Go.” He urged.

She quickly turned to face him, backing him up towards the door and keeping her voice barely above a whisper as the words rapidly tumbled from her mouth.

“Remember where the guns are. That’s why I pointed them out. Drawer, desk, TV cabinet. All are loaded with the safety off. He thrives on control. Let him think he has it.”

Selene then turned to face her father “If you hurt him, you won’t need your heart meds anymore.”

Bill blinked at her and behind his eyes for a split second, Daryl could see how devastated her comment had left him, but his façade was strong. Stronger than his own.

“That’s right. Maybe I’m more like you than I thought.” She threatened before she broke away from Daryl and hauled the door open, slamming it again, showing no respect for anything he owned. She stood alone in the hallway in the dimmed light of the strip club, trying to still her hammering heart and praying that Daryl would walk out of there alive.

The tension seemed to leave the room with Selene and Daryl found himself sure that he did the right thing by asking her to wait outside. Bill was waddling from left to ring behind his desk, his hand rubbing over the greasy skin of his face.

“Have a seat, Daryl.” He ordered and he dutifully sat down. “How are you? Work OK?”

He was immediately confused and his defences went up in response to such normal and apparently caring questions.

“I’m good. Work is fine, sir.” He replied.

Bill sat down in his office chair and it creaked loudly under his barrelling weight. He clasped his hands together in front of his rounded stomach that strained against the buttons of his shirt.
“How many times have I seen you in this office before?” He questioned.

“Once, sir.” Daryl answered.

“That’s right, once. When we had a little… issue with a shipment. Is that correct?” He pressed.

“Yes, sir.”

Bill narrowed his eyes at him, looking over his slightly dishevelled hair, the black grease marks on his hands from his work and his leather vest that laced up at the sides. He was not the kind of man he would have hoped for Selene to end up with. In fact, he had hoped Selene would just give up all hopes of a relationship altogether, because that way she would never be hurt.

“You like my daughter, Daryl?” He asked.

Daryl cleared his throat awkwardly and dropped his vision, shifting in his seat.

“I do” he mumbled.

“Then tell me, what is it you like about her?”

He had no idea how to proceed with answering this one. What exactly did he want to hear? After an uncomfortably long pause, Bill leaned forward and his gaze bore into Daryl’s soul.

“Is that a difficult question, kid?”

“N-No, sir.” He stuttered “she uh… she sees me.”

Like Selene, Daryl wasn’t afraid of Bill. But what he was afraid of, was saying the wrong thing and ending up dead, jobless, with a dead brother or dead himself. He hated having to be so polite to a person that wasn’t so far removed from his own father, with his bullying tactics and need for power and control.

“She sees you? What does that mean?” Bill prodded.

“She sees who I am n’ for some reason, likes me anyways. Plus, she’s real smart, smarter than me. She’s funny. Real good at what she does. She cares ‘bout people too.”

Bill seemed satisfied with this as an answer, especially because Daryl had not once mentioned her looks. It was something he had not expected and always seemed to be the main reason anyone was interested in Selene. Bill could always see their lack of interest in knowing her as a person and it filled him with an uncontrollable rage to think that they only wanted her for one thing.

“My daughter, she doesn’t go unnoticed. She’s been known to draw more interest from my clients as she walks through this club than the strippers in front of them. I don’t like it. Not one iota. You though, you didn’t mention her looks once.”

“She’s beautiful, sir. But there’s more to her than that.”

“Hmm”. Bill hummed and he picked up a remote from the desk and pointed it at the wall, the cabinet slid back to reveal a large TV and upon another click of a button an image appeared on the screen. Daryl recognised it as the inside of the door to the club.

“Not a day goes by when I don’t want to build a wall around Selene and protect her from the evil that men do. From emotional pain that she can do without. But also, from physical pain. I know everything about you, Daryl. Just like I know everything about every man to ever put his hands on
my little girl. While I was delving into your life, I asked for all CCTV from this place that included you. My people spent a while piecing this night together, so, it’s only now been brought to my attention.”

Daryl felt a stab of panic, did he know about Delilah? Surely, he had footage of them leaving together? Or maybe he hadn’t gone back that far. But he would have, this was Bill Taylor. No stone left unturned.

“Watch.” He demanded, pressing play on the remote.

Daryl could see himself on the screen as he walked in behind Merle, who was shaking the hands of the doormen. Daryl nodded politely to both of them and the camera flickered over to the side of one of the podiums. The two settled down and ordered drinks while a girl swinging around the pole on the podium gained all of Merle’s attention. Daryl watched too, but his attention waned and after Bill fast forwarded the tape, around half an hour had lapsed on the timer in the corner when he stopped it again. Daryl got up and pulled his cigarettes from his pocket and the cameras flicked from one to the other, following him out of the side door and into the alley, where finally, it pointed down over the exit and into the dark alley. He could see himself stood back from the door, the glow of the end of his cigarette and the light just touching one shoulder giving his location away. The door opened and Selene stormed out. Daryl saw himself freeze on the footage, the moment he realised who she was. Then, her attacker appeared from the darkness, threw himself at her and grabbed her. Daryl watched as the TV version of him wasted no time in running to her aid, ripping the guy from her and raining punch after punch down on his face. Finding watching his own violence a little too unsettling, he turned his head away from the screen.

Bill hit the power button followed by another which closed the sliding wooden panel in front of the screen.

“Why did you do what you did that night?”

Daryl hesitated, he didn’t even really know himself. He hadn’t seen Selene since school and thought she knew nothing of him anyway. But he wasn’t about to stand back and watch her get attacked. He wouldn’t have stood back and done nothing if it was any other woman either. Merle would have, but not Daryl. The fact that it was Selene had ignited a rage in him and he knew it was because of something he had not told her. He had liked her ever since high school.

“Daryl?” Bill pressed

“I couldn’t stand there and let him hurt her.” He eventually said. “I wanted to kill him.”

“Why didn’t you? He didn’t deserve to live. You’re an employee and you helped my daughter, I’d have made the necessary arrangements.” Bill reasoned.

“Didn’t want her to have to see that.” He said “she’s tough, but she was scared. I could see it.”

Bill rose from his seat and wandered to the drinks cabinet integrated into the wall of the office. He selected a bourbon and poured them a glass each before strolling thoughtfully to Daryl and handing him a heavy, cut crystal glass. Hesitantly, Daryl accepted.

“Thank you. For helping Selene that night.” Bill said sincerely, clinking his glass on Daryl’s. “Thank you’s we’re not usually something that came easily to Bill. The words almost stuck in his mouth like thick toffee and he frequently saw gratitude as some kind of weakness, ensuring never to show it and be at the mercy of another. But now, he was thankful. To the greasy motorcycle mechanic that his daughter was so enamoured with. Daryl nodded him a polite acceptance and took
a sip of the liquor, impressed by its taste and smoothness. He could only imagine how expensive it was to buy.

“Selene is not perfect. She is hot headed and can be impulsive. She’s also extremely stubborn but you may well be aware of those traits by now. Never underestimate me, Daryl. I have eyes everywhere. Having said that, it’s for this reason that I know you are respectful and protective of her. I assume the entitled imbecile in Marty’s bar won’t be touching her again?”

He even knows about that?!

“No, sir. Not if I can help it” He affirmed.

“Good. That’s good. You see, she thinks she left me little choice but to allow this to go on right under my nose, but even after all these years, she is the only one that underestimates me. She doesn’t hold the reins on this, I do. I always have. Tell me, does she know about your distribution duties?”

Daryl began to worry again, he was about to admit to revealing to Selene something that Bill had never told her.

“I don’t wanna hide stuff from her. So I told her.” He admitted.

“That explains her increased wrath today I suppose.” Bill sighed.

“There’s somethin’ else I should tell ya.” Daryl said, taking Bill off guard.

“Go on.”

“I was sellin’ to Ritchie, Selene’s friend. He got all fucked up. Selene ended up takin him in, takin care of him. It upset her. So, I refused to sell to him again. I know I can’t just choose like that. But I did it for her. So, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather he went some place else to get his meth.”

Bill stared at Daryl with an unreadable expression that struck uneasiness into his mind. What was he thinking? Was he mad? Was he about to shoot him in the head? A silence fell for an awkwardly long time as he continued to glare before he spoke, but his voice was low, almost a growl.

“He upset my little girl?” he asked.

“No. I mean yeah. But not like that. She’s just worried about him. She wants him to go to rehab.” He explained, trying to ensure that Bill didn’t put a hit out on Ritchie because of some mindless comment he’d made without thinking of how it could be interpreted.

“Interesting.” Was all he said before sitting down at his desk and pulling open a drawer to retrieve a cigar. Daryl noticed the black handgun located in the same drawer and figured that Selene was maybe more observant than he realised and that her assumption that her father could easily just shoot him wasn’t at all exaggerated.

“Do you consider yourself to be a good man, Daryl?” Bill continued to question.

He was torn. He wanted to be honest, but his truthful reply was not about to gain him any favours.

“No, sir. You knew my ol’man. Ya know my brother. They ain’t good men. S’all I ever knew.”

“Then why on earth should I let you near Selene?” Bill asked in disbelief.

Seeing this as his opportunity to fight his case and guessing this was probably what a job interview
felt like, albeit a dangerous one, he thought carefully about his words this time.

“Ain’t gonna sit here and say she ain’t gonna find no better than me. ’Cause she could. But I sure as hell aint gonna let her do any worse. She sees the good in people. There must be some good in me, ’Cause she likes me. I know how lucky I am that she even looked at me twice n’ yeah, she ain’t perfect, but she is to me.”

Daryl thought he spotted a fleeting, barely-there smile from Bill and he lowered his head and huffed to himself.

“The evidence in my possession alludes to you caring a great deal about her. It’s for that reason that I will give you a chance. One, single chance. You look out for her and I will allow you to stop providing her friend with drugs. If you mess up, like the last and only other time you were in this office, you will never see her again. Or the light of day, for that matter. Remember, I see everything. She is a precious thing. A rare person, so like her mother in many ways.”

It was then that Daryl began to understand what Bill probably didn’t himself. He was trying to keep the memory of the woman he loved and lost alive through Selene. He had never let her go and that explained why he sought to control Selene’s life. “I’d like to think that you and I can work together on this. With her best interests at the forefront of it all.”

Getting up from his chair again, he rounded the desk and Daryl could see that he held the handgun in his hand. He leaned over him, the metal of the weapon clattering against the chrome arm of the chair. Bill glowered down at him. Sweat peppered his forehead, the odour swimming around him mixed with the alcohol.

“I haven’t forgotten what you did before, Daryl. This is your chance to redeem yourself. To show me that you’re not only a good employee, but that I made the right choices in giving you a second chance, and my permission to be with Selene. If you hurt her. I will know and I will kill you and your brother myself. The Dixon family line will end here.”

“I’d never hurt her.” Daryl said firmly, refusing to be intimidated. It wasn’t the first gun he’d been threatened with and he knew it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“Then I believe we have an understanding.” Bill concluded, backing off and placing the gun on the edge of the desk. “You’re free to go.”

Daryl gingerly stood up and turned to head for the door.

“One more thing” Bill said. Daryl looked over his shoulder. “Merle.”

“What about him?”

“He may have proved his loyalty to me over the years. But I don’t want him anywhere near Selene.” Bill warned.

“Think we definitely agree on that.” Daryl responded without a second thought.

Bill nodded and waved him off. Daryl opened the door and stepped outside to find the hallway empty. He looked over the side of the platform walkway above the club to find her sat with Delilah. The strippers’ arm around her shoulders.

Please, don’t give her any more details, Delilah.

When he descended the stairs, the club had begun to fill up with clients dotted around the building.
The podiums still remained empty, most of the girls wandering around and drumming up business before any main shows began. Loud hip hop played over the speakers and Daryl couldn’t make out what they were saying as he approached them at the bar. Selene sprang to her feet when she saw him.

“Are you OK? What did he say?” She demanded.

“Everything’s fine” he assured her, his eyes flitting over to her companion.

“Hey Delilah.”

“Hi gorgeous.” She offered with a wink.

“Can I talk to you?” He requested.

She blinked at him for a moment before slipping from her barstool and motioning to an area in front of the stage.

“Sit down, It’s all OK. I promise.” He whispered to Selene before kissing the side of her head and following Delilah to the stage.

“What’s up, honey?” Delilah probed.

Daryl swallowed and shoved a hand into his jeans pocket, careful to turn away from Selene so she couldn’t hear what he was saying or lip read anything.

“Why didn’t ya tell me it was Bill? When we…Why didn’t ya tell me?” He said through his teeth.

Delilah regarded him with mild surprise and flapped a hand at him, wanting him to sit down. He sank into the nearest, velvet covered seat and rubbed his hand over his chin. Delilah clasped her hands in her lap and tilted her head to the side.

“Don’t be mad” She pleaded, her hands held up in submission.

“I’m gonna be mad, aint I?” He growled.

“I knew you’d say no.” She admitted.

“Ya damn right I’d have said no!” He exclaimed, quickly being hushed by her hissing through her teeth at him and checking Selene wasn’t looking. She was actually tied up in conversation with the bartender, which was a saving grace.

“Ya didn’t even charge me so I can’t even say I was a client” He continued.

“Why would I? You told me you don’t pay for sex. I was sad, needed a little attention and you’re an attractive man. We’d split up at the time. I thought we discussed this.” She suggested.

“You didn’t tell me it was him! Shit, Delilah! I screwed my boss’s girlfriend and now I’m with his daughter! He can’t ever find out what we did.” He told her.

To his disbelief, she fought not to laugh and failed miserably to disguise a snigger.

“Oh, Daryl. You could start an argument in an empty house, sugar!” She laughed.
“It aint fuckin’ funny!” Daryl scolded.

She reluctantly nodded in agreement, shielding her smirk with her hand before clearing her throat and composing herself “Look, I don’t want him knowing that anyways. Secrets safe with me.”

“Is it? Because you told my girl. Like you told her about Amy too.” He snapped.

She sat back in her seat, her expression now genuinely downcast as she recalled what she’d done. Guilt began to sting at her conscience at the thought that she had made things difficult for him.

“I didn’t mean to make things awkward for ya, Daryl. It was just girl talk. It was Selene so I knew it wouldn’t go any further. I’m sorry.” She said sincerely, squeezing the hand that was resting on his knee before he moved it away.

“S’alright, we talked it over. She’s fine.” He dismissed.

“Of course, she is. She has it bad for you. I don’t blame her. You’re a catch, sweetheart.” She smiled.

Daryl didn’t know what it was about Delilah that made people want to confess their deepest, darkest secrets to her. Maybe it was her persuasive nature that also made her a successful high-class prostitute. She knew a lot about him, as she did about most of the people she encountered in The Velvet Rabbit. Their friendship had spanned nearly a decade and even as the years went on, she still hated Merle and became more and more fond of Daryl.

“I don’t know what I’m doin, Delilah. I’m in over my fuckin’ head here.” He blurted out, quickly looking over at Selene who was in fits of hysterical laughter with the bartender. “Look at her. I fuckin’ lucked out and I aint got a clue how. This shit, it doesn’t happen to me.”

“It has now.” She grinned. “Stop overthinking it. She wants you, no one else. It’s that simple.”

“I aint done this before.” He disclosed. “Aint never had a girl. Never thought I would.”

Delilah’s heart almost broke for him when she recalled his abusive father and his degenerate brother. It wasn’t any wonder he never thought it would happen after the life he’d lived so far.

“Are you happy?” She questioned, wanting to centre around the most important thing.

“Kiddin’ me, right? Been grinnin’ like an opossum eatin’ a sweet tater for weeks now.”

Delilah giggled. Daryl always did have a way with one liners when it was least expected.

“Then you don’t need to worry about a thing. Because she’s happy too. I know she is, I spent my life watchin’ that girl grow up.” She summarised, seeing him nod subtly. A kind of coyness washed over him and he felt an uncontrollable urge to just tell someone the one thing he had thought every single day since he first saw her at High School. He glanced up at Delilah, concluding that their friendship was most probably strong enough for her to be the right person to say such a sentence to.

“Can’t believe how beautiful she is” He smiled.

Delilah wanted to gather him in her arms and squeeze the life out of him for such an adorable and unexpected comment. She had never heard him speak of anyone in the same way before and it was endearing and heart warming for her to finally see him with someone he liked. Instead of embracing him, which she knew he would hate, she beamed at him and gently but briefly squeezed his forearm.
“And she’s your girl, Daryl. Yours.” She reminded him.

“Yeah, she is.” He huffed.

Weaving back through the chairs, Daryl saw Selene jump up from her barstool again and walk towards him. Delilah was strutting along beside him and she passed by Selene, heading back to her seat and drink.

“Daryl” Selene pleaded “what’s going on?”

“Ya ain’t gotta worry about nothin. We’re good. That’s it.” He tried.

“What? What does that mean?” She demanded, her voice laced with an annoyed and impatient undertone

“He just wanted me to know that he’s givin’ me a chance. With you. N’ threatened to kill me if I fucked it up.” He said.

“Ahh Lord.” Delilah complained from behind Selene with an over dramatic roll of her eyes. “He gets my goose.” Obviously, she could hear every word and had been listening since she sat down. Not a lot got past Delilah, she was the gatekeeper, the eyes and ears of the club and even knew more than some of the spotters and security. It was a talent she had honed for years and one she always kept from Bill.

“He was giving you a chance anyway, I threatened him.” Selene protested.

“Yeah, I know. There was stuff he had to say to me. I get why he wanted to see me. It’s fine, Selene. Relax.”

“He’s right” Delilah chimed in “Sit ya pretty butt down and finish ya wine. As long as you two kids can still be together you don’t have to worry about a thing.”

Daryl gently took hold of Selene’s wrist and whispered in her ear.

“I told him I can’t sell to Ritchie no more. He gets it.”

“You did that?” She uttered.

“Yeah. Figured Lying to him would piss him off.”

Touched by his brave decision to admit to breaking the rules for her sake, she quickly kissed his cheek, holding his face to hers for a few seconds while she connected her forehead with his. Delilah swapped a delighted glance with the woman behind the bar who was also admiring the sweet exchange between them.

“Well well we’ll. Ain’t we one big, happy family?!” Merle announced as he neared them from the other side of the bar. He walked right up to Daryl, squaring up to him and Daryl was forced to push Selene out of his reach. Delilah grabbed her arm and made her take up her previous seat next to her.

“Ya a lyin’ little sommbitch. Been bumpin’ uglies with the boss’s daughter all this time, huh?”
“It ain’t ya business.” Daryl told him.

“Ain’t it? She’s off limits, little brother. Gonna get us both up shit creek without a paddle if he takes a look at these here cameras right now.” He said, pointing upwards at the masses of CCTV cameras that the club housed.

“He knows. I just got outta his office. So, you can back the hell off.” Daryl sneered.

“If ya lips are movin’, ya lyin” Merle commented.

“It’s true, Merle.” Delilah called out in exasperation. “That’s enough now, boys.”

Merle looked over at her, then at Selene and rubbed his chin with a leering, creepy appreciation. His black suit jacket looking out of place on such a rough looking person. He raised his eyebrow at her fishnet covered legs and tight, leather skirt as she sat with one leg crossed over the other at the bar.

“Hoooh! Can see clear to the promised land! She’s worth a little danger, no? Bet that bitch is a firecracker in the sack.”

Daryl’s stomach flipped in disgust and his voice lowered into a barely controlled rasp

“Don’t talk shit about her, Merle. You don’t even look at her” He growled.

Merle turned back to his younger brother, narrowing his gaze at him.

“You like dancin’ with the Devil boy?”

“Well I learned from the best.” Daryl quickly replied.

“She better be worth it. Better marry this bitch or we’re both dead.”

Daryl lashed out, grabbing two fistfuls of Merles clothing and shoving him back against the countertop with his teeth bared.

“You call her that again and I’mma throw ya across the damn bar.” He threatened.

Merle chuckled at Daryl’s gusto, it had never faltered since he’d become too big and too strong to pick on anymore, but it didn’t mean Merle would give up trying, the two of them often ending up in violent brawls.

“Like to see you try, little brother. Remember where ya loyalties are.”

“What, like you? Runnin’ away when stuff gets tough? Or how about all the times I bailed your ass outta whatever shit pile you got yaself into.” Daryl seethed, his face taut with tension.

Selene looked worriedly at Delilah, who got up and slapped her metal clutch bag so loud on the countertop, everyone in the club stopped what they were doing and looked over at the four of them. Selene shrank down in her seat.

“I said that’s enough! You pair of dumbasses! You want me to take my damn shoe off and beat the holy hell outta both of ya with the heel? Huh? Because I fuckin’ will! Merle this is your place of employment so behave your damn self! I heard you’re on the door tonight so go on now, fuck off and stop causing trouble or so help me god, I will march on up there and snitch on you!”

Merle sneered at Selene over Delilah’s shoulder, looking her up and down again and Daryl
defiantly stepped in front of her, shielding her from his view before Merle eventually laughed to himself and walked away.

Selene picked up her wine glass, chucking the liquid down her throat and slamming the glass on the countertop.

“C’mon, Daryl. We’re leaving. Bye, Delilah, thanks for the pep talk.” She said all at once.

“Later!” Grinned Delilah as she watched Selene dragging Daryl across the bar by his wrist.

Out in the parking lot, Daryl had parked his truck in the corner under a broken light. Selene stopped walking and stared at the area around it for a couple of seconds before continuing to drag him towards it.

“The hell are ya doin?” He asked.

She didn’t respond and continued to march him into the dark corner of the parking lot beside the truck. Letting go of him, she stopped and turned to him in the dark.

“He’s letting us be together?” She asked. “Officially?”

“Yeah”

He jolted when her hands slapped against the leather of his vest and gripped onto it, pulling him towards her at first before shoving him back against the side door of the truck. The clunk of his body against the metal echoed through the lot but Selene didn’t care, he raised his hands slightly in surprise, not sure what he intended to do with them until she kissed him passionately, his hands soon finding her waist and forcing her close to him. His body surged with desire at her spontaneity and he managed to raise his hands and hold her face back just enough for him to tickle her lip with his tongue, bumping over her lip rings. It drove her crazy as lust thundered through her veins and she began journeying her hands over his chest, inside the leather then underneath all the fabric, skin on skin, not able to get enough of him. His own fingers were now shoved under her sweater and top, working their way up her spine and leaving tingling patches on her skin as he moved under the strap. She was locked into a deep kiss, allowing him to have full control as his tongue caressed hers. In the split second that she’d pulled back for air, he removed a hand from under her clothes and reached around her shoulders, gathering her hair on one side, out of his way and lightly nipping at her neck. She couldn’t help herself, lowering a hand and closing it around the erection that strained against the inside of his pants. She felt him start at the move and stumbled further back into the truck but he continued to kiss and bite her neck, breathing heavily as he went.

“Not here.” She heard him gasp into her neck.

“I want you now.” She argued.

He stopped and raised his head from her neck, his lips pink and parted as he panted. She peered up at him with lust filled eyes and applied more pressure to the front of his jeans. His head lolled back and thudded against the window of the truck as he released a slow and throaty growl.

“Fuck. Selene….s-stop.”

She refused, now beginning to rub at him. His eyes snapped open and he was staring at the stars, tiny glittering dots on a black canvas as he fought to control himself and maintain some restraint. She was making it difficult. So, incredibly difficult.

“You don’t want me to stop. I can feel it.” She purred, her hand pressing harder when she
emphasised the word ‘feel’.

Daryl groaned and closed his eyes again as she began to kiss at the top of his chest.

*That feels so fucking good. I can’t take much more of this.*

With her other hand, she lead his fingers to the button of her jeans, hooking them over her waistline. He opened his eyes, looking down at her as she continued to work away at him with her other hand. He was throbbing, willing himself to give up and let her have what she wanted. But logic somehow prevailed and with both hands. He took hold of her face and looked into her eyes.

“You got no idea how much I wanna do this. But I ain’t doin’ it here. Not in a parkin’ lot. You deserve better than that.”

She smiled up at him mischievously and feathered her fingers up and down his erection once more, biting her lip when she felt him harden and throb under her hand as it reached his tip.

“You’re so hard.” She whispered.

He was hard. Rock hard and his whole body was screaming at him for just a little relief. He wanted to drop his pants and let her do as she pleased. He wanted to bend her over the truck and slam inside her until she too could see the stars. He wanted to lick her chest and work his way down her body, using her tattoos as a map to his final destination. But he couldn’t. His eyes flicked over to the corner of the building and Selene followed their direction. She spotted the camera, pointed right at them and the want in her body was replaced by irritation in a split second.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She complained. Dropping her hand and leaving him feeling abandoned in his wound-up state. He almost whimpered at how he twitched in desperation, needing her hand to be back where it was. She stepped back and he buckled over, his hands on his knees and his head hanging low, sucking in deep breaths.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Selene.” He mumbled between breaths.

“Sorry.” She giggled, biting down on a thumb. He looked up at her and shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Get in the damn truck, girl.” He ordered in his southern drawl. “I need a minute here.”

Finally doing as she was told, she hopped into the passenger seat of the truck and chuckled quietly to herself as she watched Daryl trying to pull himself together outside. He resumed his previous place, leaned back on the trucks window with his head to the sky and she could see the rise and fall of his rapid breathing and hear the light sound of him cursing under his breath.

If she could turn him on this much just by some kisses and a well-placed hand, what was she capable of in bed?

Stop it. Stop thinking about that. You’re making shit worse.

He tried to focus on the cold air around him, willing it to quieten the hot lust that was pulsating between his legs. He resisted the urge to reach down, to just allow himself a small squeeze, a slight adjustment here and there which would gain him some relief. But he was under a camera and he hadn’t forgotten it.

*I wonder what she would have done to me if I’d let her. No. Stop it. Save it for later when you’re alone. Concentrate. You have a truck to drive.*
When he finally climbed into the truck, he gave Selene a bashful look and tried to concentrate on starting the truck when her hand crept across the space between them and settled on his thigh. He looked down at it and sighed.

“I’m not doing anything.” She said innocently.

“Ya always doin’ somethin’. Told ya before, ya only gotta look at me.”

She slowly removed her hand and sat back against the door, bending on leg in front of her and draping an arm over it. Nibbling on the nails of one hand, she raised an eyebrow at him.

“You better get me home then.” She grinned.
The journey was quiet save for a few quiet bouts of laughter when he had caught her staring at him with her bottom lip clamped between her teeth and when they pulled into the parking lot of the Ink Cabinet, Daryl stopped the engine and looked over at her. She was playing with a loose thread on the Edge of the truck’s seat, winding it around her finger and gazing thoughtfully out of the window. He wanted to ask her if she was alright, to find out what she was thinking about, but he didn’t want to disturb her. In the subtle white glow of the light outside the back door of the building, her face was partially glowing and he thought she looked incomparably pretty to anything or anyone else he had ever seen. She clicked the door open, climbed out of the truck and walked around it to stop by his window. For a second, he thought she might vanish inside without saying goodbye.

“Will you come in for a minute?” She asked.

“Yeah, sure” he agreed, opening the truck and heading to the door behind her.

Inside, she selected a playlist from her cellphone and switched the speaker on. Turning the volume down to a reasonable level, she settled on a tattoo chair and motioned for him to do the same opposite. He was pleased to hear that she’d put Black Label Society on, another one of the bands they had in common.

“Thank you.” She uttered.

His brow furrowed and he craned his neck to try and see her face. She must have noticed because she turned her head to him.

“For what?” He asked

“For not having sex with me in a parking lot.” She said. “I’m glad that didn’t end up being our first time”

He nodded and propped a hand on the cabinet beside him, using it to pivot the chair to face her.

“Me too. You’re kinda stubborn.” He expressed.

She screwed her face up into a pained expression, anticipating that her topic of conversation was going to be a tough one for her as much as it would be for Daryl.

“I feel like we need to discuss… sex.”

“Ahh jeez.” He sighed. Never being coy enough to have remained a virgin, he still wasn’t the kind of person to discuss such a subject without an uncomfortable anxiety under the surface. It was so
nerve wracking to him that he had previously avoided it for his entire life.

“You’re right. I am stubborn and I don’t back down easily. I’m sorry I- I went a little far with you. I should have listened when you said stop. I just…like you. A lot.” She stammered, wondering where her shyness was coming from and why Daryl seemed to be the only man she’d ever met to make her feel like that.

“I like you enough to have faced ya ol’man today.” He pointed out. “N’ don’t be sorry. I guess I’m just thinkin’ of it as a teaser trailer.” He tried.

Selene laughed shyly and brought a hand to her face, hiding her blushing cheeks. She turned away from him for a few seconds and waited for her reddened face to settle.

“Yeah…the trailer for when the final release actually happens” she shrugged.

He didn’t want her to think it never would, or that it he wasn’t as interested as she was. So, he plucked up the courage from somewhere to say it.

“Hey.” He grunted, leaning forwards and tapping her forearm lightly. She met his eye. “You know I want to, right? Thought it was obvious that I did. I didn’t really want ya to stop, I just knew that camera was there and I was just runnin’ outta self-control. I don’t wanna be the guy that screws ya against a truck in a parkin’ lot. Specially not at the Rabbit. Ya dad will blow my fuckin’ brains out. I never liked nobody before n’ I ain’t exactly experienced, especially with all this feeling’s bullshit. So, I can’t rush n’ mess everythin’ up.”

She used her feet on the ground to swivel her chair back and forth as she thought. Daryl assumed that maybe he’d said a little too much, now expecting to be questioned on some of it which was not his end goal.

“When you say ‘not exactly experienced’, what do you mean?” She wanted to know.

*Shit.*

“Uh, well, I ain’t got a line of women waitin’ for you to get bored of me.” He offered with a small shrug.

Selene thought back to when he told her she should just say whatever she wanted to him and not worry about holding back her naturally curious and direct nature. Using this as a reasonable excuse, she went ahead and asked what she wanted to know.

“How many women have you had sex with, Daryl?” She questioned.

Daryl didn’t reply for a few seconds, he focused on her boots as the soles pivoted on the shiny floor, forcing her chair from one side to the other over and over. She looked as uncomfortable as he felt but he suspected that if this were a competition on who could feel the most out of place, he would win hands down. Running through the possible reasons why she may have asked only made him feel worse.

“That matter to you?” He gently prodded.

She stopped moving her chair when it was facing him and leaned forwards, resting her elbows on each armrest and linking her fingers in front of her

“No. But you told me I should say whatever I want. So, I’m asking because I’m curious. Not because it matters.” She said bluntly, not fussing with sugar coating anything.
It never even entered his head that he should lie. Daryl had never felt the need to overexaggerate or fabricate any part of his life, always staying true to himself and the background he was from. In a way, it became easier as he grew up to not expect anything and he wouldn’t be disappointed, so it made more sense to him to lay his cards on the table and let people to take him as he was, or not at all.

“Delilah, Amy… n’ the woman I lost my virginity to when I was fifteen.” He answered. He sat back in the chair, resting one ankle on his knee and one hand repeatedly smoothing over his chin.

“Woman?” She pressed.

He took a deep breath and stole a fleeting glance around the studio. Selene was on tenterhooks with an impatient and enthralled expression.

“She was twenty-two.” He mumbled, startled by a loud gasp from her.

“Noooo waaaay, really?” Selene breathed, flicking the switch on the side of the chair without even looking and waiting for the leg rests to rise before moving along them, closer to him. She was leaning forwards as if he had given her the worlds most valuable piece of gossip. “That’s… I’m pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“Yeah. She was one of Merle’s friends.” He confessed.

He could tell her reaction was more one of fascination than anything else which served well to subdue his concerns about telling her.

“Was this just a one off?” She asked.

“No. She used to come over when he wasn’t there. We’d get high, screw around and then she’d take off.”

She inhaled deeply and slowly, blinking a couple of times and slowly rubbing her hands together and fiddling with her rings.

“That is statutory rape.” She said, to herself.

“Hell, I don’t ever remember sayin no.” He responded, despite the statement not being directed at him.

“In a court, you wouldn’t have to and, well I guess you wouldn’t have anyway. Teenage boy getting the chance to fool around with an older woman.” She mentioned.

“Can see how messed up it was now I’m older.” He admitted.

It was the truth, as he’d grown up, he was able to understand that what had happened with his older brother’s friend was wrong. When she had vanished, never to return to the house again, he decided to put it all behind him and not breathe a word to anyone about it. His first time had held no emotional value, no profound revelations or strong feelings. It had been mechanical, manipulated and calculating but still not something he had credited with leaving any kind of traumatic memories. To him, it was what it was, nothing more.

He caught her eye and recognised that she didn’t exactly look happy about possibly having to volunteer her own number.

“Four” She said quickly, wanting to get it over with.
“Four?” He repeated.

“No. Double it.” She cringed.

“Eight?”

“And add one.” She blushed, covering her face with her hands. “Can I not just half it and not count the bad ones?”

“Selene, c’mon. Ya don’t even have to tell me.” He urged.

She dropped her hands and refused to meet his gaze, turning her chair slightly and positioning a hand on her knee. She began nervously tapping away with her index finger. He waited, calm in the knowledge that she would say something at some point and being reluctant to push her. This subject was her idea, so he wasn’t about to bustle in and take over. Leading things wasn’t something he did in regular conversations, let alone one of this sensitive nature.

There was no way Selene was going to demand this kind of information from him and not offer her own truths. What she hadn’t expected, was how worried she was of his opinion of her after he found out.

“Nine. It’s nine.” She eventually muttered.

“So? Don’t matter.” He huffed, stopping short of saying the other thoughts that were queued up in his mind. He was becoming braver with her, having managed to get this far in a most unusual and awkward conversation that he would have otherwise avoided if it was anyone else. But now he found himself with a strange and unfamiliar urge to say things to her that were not only out of character for him, but also daring and bordering on sexually explicit.

*Grow some balls. Just say it. She does it to you. You asked her to.*

“Nine or three don’t mean nothin. I’ll still sweat for it n’ make ya beg me” He let slip, his eyes widening slightly at the sound of it once it had left his lips. It sounded like something someone else would say. He gazed into his own lap in confusion before screwing his face up and closing his eyes. “Shit. Sorry. I dunno where that came from.”

Stealing a quick look at her through one, open eye, he found her looking right at him with a dirty, highly entertained smile on her face.

“Oh, OK. Holy shit. Um. Did you just have a personality transplant in the last few seconds?!” She asked.

“Uh…yeah…again, dunno why I said that. M’sorry. I don’t—I don’t see you like some object or nothin’. Fuck. M’sorry.” He stammered. She shuffled from the chair and stood over him, hitting a button on the controls. The whole thing buzzed and hummed as it moved, the backrest moving upright 30 degrees. He stared up at her as she casually straddled him and held onto his shoulders, his lap instantly become warm and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he was in the same predicament back in the parking lot of the Club.

“Apology not accepted. Don’t you dare apologise. I’m never going to mind you saying things like that to me. My imagination is going crazy. Just…make it a promise. Make me beg.” She purred as she picked up his hands and positioned them on her thighs over her fishnet tights. Her leather skirt had ridden up, strained by her legs being either side of him and it made for a delicious view of her black underwear beneath. He tried not to look, tried not to let things get too far but now she was on top of him, pinning him down with her toned legs and teasing his tongue, coaxing him further and
further along. She crossed her arms in front of her, picking up the ripped, woollen fabric edge of
her sweater and hoisted it over her head. Once it was past her face and her hair drifted down and
over her shoulders, she saw Daryl’s gaze roam her body appreciatively, behind his eyes was a
certain trepidation as if everything was happening at the drop of a hat. She stooped down to kiss
him gently. Small, peppered kisses on his lips.

“I’m not doing this to turn it into anything.” She uttered while she brushed her lips over his cheek
and jaw. “I’m just…getting to know you.”

“Then I’mma do the same.” He told her, gripping her legs with more pressure and pushing his
hands further up, his thumbs trailing along her inner thighs until he was ever so nearly touching her
somewhere that would have meant the whole thing had turned into something after all. Wringing
his hands over each thigh, he pushed her down onto him and shifted under her. She sat back and
tilted her head back at the sensation of him hardening underneath. Her chest rose and fell before
him and there was no way he was going to pass up this opportunity. Without removing any more of
her clothing, he sat up, his lips met the soft, fleshy top of her left breast and she heard him
breathing her in, sucking in long breaths between kisses. She took one of his hands and brought it to
her chest, below where he was kissing her. He stopped and checked she was sure of what she was
doing as she lay his fingers over her tank top, closing them around one breast. She shifted upwards,
gently placing a hand on the back of his head and guiding him back to where he was as she closed
her eyes and let him explore the feminine curves of her. Daryl was unravelling at a faster rate than
he’d estimated, the hand that wasn’t on her breast was now dangerously close to her underwear
between her legs and he was wrestling with the urge to slip it into her panties. Leaving her chest
thrumming with kisses and small bites, he lifted his head and frantically kissed her with a force she
hadn’t expected. She moaned tunefully and rotated her hips slightly. All of a sudden applying a
powerful spark of pleasure through his now desperate erection.

“Uuhh, shit. I-I can’t…” He trailed off as he sat back and covered his eyes with one wrist.

“Can’t what?” She panted.

“I just…” He removed his arm from his face and nibbled on his bottom lip. “I dunno how far I can
go with this.”

She reached between her legs and tapped the metal button on his jeans with her nail.

“I could open this” She suggested with a piercing stare. She could feel him under her, the warm,
hardness pressing into her core and it was driving her crazy.

He knew his limits and right at that moment he was clinging on for dear life, the prospect of any
kind of sexual act was an appealing one, but he understood that the likelihood of him being able to
keep a hold of his self-control was extremely low. Selene traced her fingertip around his jeans
button with one hand while his attention was drawn back to her chest, where both her top and bra
straps had dropped down her arms, creating one of the most glorious sights he’d ever seen.

“Don’t” He managed to croak.

“Why not?” She whispered “Tell me what you’re thinking”

“I aint doin’ that” He dismissed.

“Tell me. It’s OK.” She encouraged

“I-I can’t.”
“Yes, you can. Trust me, Daryl. I want to know. Tell me what you want.” She continued.

She began to unfasten the button when his hand snapped around her wrist.

**Say it. She wants you to.**

“You pop them jeans n’ I’mma fuck you right here in this chair.” He warned.

In an attempt not to look too shocked, she giggled and bit her bottom lip as she lowered herself down onto him, pushing him backwards onto the chairs backrest, laying her chest on his. His eyes had darkened somehow and his lips were parted and moistened. She could feel his hands run along her sides, coming to a halt over her ribs, his thumbs hooking under each breast. Her hands linked over the top of the chair above him, steadying her.

“Should tell me what you’re thinking more often.” She smiled.

Accepting her request off the back of the success of his disclosure, he took the time to examine her pretty features as he decided what words to proceed with next.

“Selene, I-I do want this. You’re so fuckin’ hot. But when it happens, I want it to be right.” He told her. A sentiment which had earned him an immediate and deep, lingering kiss.

“Me too.” She smiled when she moved back and sat up. Daryl smoothed her straps back up to her shoulders and took the opportunity to thread his fingers through her soft hair.

“I am so going to do you in one of these chairs though.” She chuckled. “Never realised how perfect they are for positioning with all their moveable parts!”

A pleasant chorus of giggles filled the tattoo parlour as they both exulted in the moment together, whispering between kisses and staying put for what seemed like ten minutes but was actually closer to an hour. Daryl didn’t want to leave. It was like everything would vanish again when the door closed behind him and he would have to wait what felt like an eternity to see her again.

*****

Ritchie lived in a brand new, flawlessly decorated and well-kept house that was vastly too large for just the two of them. His parents had just purchased it, along with the fateful trip to Europe that would spell his father’s demise, his mother’s Vicodin addiction and his own vice for Crystal Meth. The one thing his mother still had control of in her life was the house they occupied and she meticulously inspected it’s surfaces for dust and fingerprints twice daily. Locked in a constant battle with her drug addict son, they did little else but argue and Selene had been known to let Ritchie stay on her couch in the past to give him some respite from her incessant screeching at him.

The front of the house boasted a sweeping drive lined with delicate flower beds whose colours matched the hanging basket that slowly rotated in the breeze outside the front door. The exterior was a shade of Navy Blue with white edges as was popular in their more affluent part of town and the front porch was wider than Selene’s entire apartment.

She crunched across the gravelled drive in her heavy, military boots and squinted at the darkened windows, trying to see signs of movement inside. The house looked still, unoccupied and she thought it might be best to come back another time when she caught a slight flash of a white shirt in the living room. She continued to the front door, taking the steps and fumbling with the neckline on her shirt, fastening an extra button in case Ritchie’s mother answered the door. She hit the doorbell and listened to the long, drawn out ‘bing bong’ of the chime.
The door opened and Selene smiled widely. Her teeth appearing even whiter in contrast to her dark purple lipstick.

“Hi Mrs. Miller.” She squeaked.

“Selene. How are you?” The straight laced, short haired brunette said politely from the doorway. Her white shirt was rolled up at the sleeves and for a couple of seconds, Selene played a quick game of ‘spot the creases’ as her vision swept over Ritchie’s mother. Not one single crease. It had been so long since she’d last seen her that she had almost forgotten how stoic and bordering on indifferent she was.

“I’m fine thank you. How about you?” Selene replied.

“Oh, I’m…OK. Thank you.” She smiled thinly.

“I was wondering if Ritchie was around.” Selene stated, craning her neck to try and see past the older woman and into the house.

“You don’t know? He’s in Rehab. Paid for by your father.” She tugged at the door handle behind her, obscuring the view into the house at her side.

Selene visibly flinched at the information. Taking a small step back and knitting her eyebrows together.

“He is? No, I-I didn’t know that. My dad didn’t say anything when I saw him last week.”

She refrained from disclosing that the last time she had seen her father she had threatened to kill him if he hurt Daryl. But she did quickly put two and two together, remembering that Daryl had told her father that he wanted to stop selling drugs to Ritchie. What else did Daryl say, exactly?

“I was very grateful. The man that delivered the cheque was very nice. He said your father wanted to do something to help your friend. Since all our money is tied up in this house, I was thankful for the help. Now, my junkie son is getting clean and I can have some peace and quiet.” She explained nonchalantly. Her choice of words was designed to be meaningful and to portray some emotional attachment, but her tone of voice was flat, as if Ritchie provided her with nothing but problems. Selene felt her temper fray slightly but didn’t react.

“Yeah, he went down the wrong track for a while. I’m glad he’s getting help too. And that my father was able to lend a hand. I’ll be sure to tell him how grateful you are. If you hear from Ritchie, will you tell him I came by to see him, please?” Selene requested, detecting a slight roll of Ritchie’s mother’s eyes, she cleared her throat and told herself not to waste her energy on a woman that was quite clearly only interested in herself. She was relieved that she hadn’t enlisted this woman for help in the first place, she was more likely to complain about the inconvenience than actually worry about her son.

“He’s not allowed contact with anyone for the first couple weeks. He only went in yesterday. But yes, if he calls, I suppose I could tell him.” She stated emotionlessly.

*If he calls? Why don’t you call the rehab centre in two weeks, you cold-hearted bitch?*

“Alright. Thank you, Mrs. Miller. It was nice to see you looking so well, as always.” Selene chirped as she hopped down the stairs and started across the drive.

“Um, yes. You too. Good day.” She heard from behind her as she curled her lip in disgust.
For the first time in a while, Selene had a tattoo appointment that day. A large black design on a calf muscle. She had been excited for the chance to pick up a tattoo gun again after so long out of the loop. Her signature style being so unusual resulted in her not receiving many takers for her work which meant the decision to own the tattoo parlour instead of just getting a job as an artist somewhere else had been more appealing. So unusual were her designs that those that fell in love with her style came from far and wide to be branded for life by her.

When she had first opened The Ink Cabinet, she took as many walk-in appointments as she could, needing to keep tattooing, to immerse herself in her passion and was convinced she would never get bored of it. But after months of butterflies, tribal pieces and quotes that made hardly any sense, she handed the reins to the others, who were happy to be taking the extra cash. She turned her hand to piercing and along with Ritchie, was swamped in the first two weeks when they first opened the upper floors piercing studio. Their friendship had blossomed after being stuck in the same room together for so long, Ritchie helping Selene to perfect her skills and eventually being convinced to give her the snakebite piercings on her lower lip that she so proudly wore to that day.

From then on, she shared tattooing and piercing appointments, covering where necessary but mainly overseeing the running of the business with Ray firmly planted at the marketing and customer service side of things.

The design had taken her hours to draw up and she found herself dissatisfied with the result twice, resulting in her ripping the entire thing up and starting again. With her hair scraped into a messy bun, a baggy Ink Cabinet, black hooded sweater covering her torso and a pair of black, denim shorts over her fishnets, she tucked one boot underneath her on a stool and signalled for Ray to wheel her closer to her enormous client, who was nervously chattering away, face down on the tattoo bed with one shaved calf and a wallet full of cash with Selene’s name on it.

“OK, this is your first tattoo so while there’s no Ink involved yet, I’m just going to show you what it feels like, so you know to expect.” She explained before drawing an invisible line on the man’s skin with the needle. He jumped more than she expected, coupled with a small whimper.

Pussy.

She glanced up at Axel, who was leaned forward in his tattoo chair. He gave her a well-hidden nod. She always knew she could rely on him to hold down any extra sensitive clients.

It had taken all of fifteen minutes before the man was writhing under Axel and Bears strong grasp while Shorty stood over them, stuffing potato chips in his mouth and trying not to laugh. Selene was busy concentrating and trying desperately not to stray from the design as the man bucked and complained. On the verge of losing her temper, he suddenly stopped.

“Um…Selene?” Axel said.

She looked up at him, her black gloved hands poised with the tattoo gun just above his skin.

“He’s gone limp.” Bear pointed out.

“Huh.” She scoffed “It doesn’t hurt that much!” She reached a hand out and feeling his neck for a pulse. A thud, thud, thud of a heartbeat was still present so she turned her attention back to the task in hand, adjusting the voltage and finding where she left off. Taking a small glimpse up at Axel
and Bear, she shrugged.

“He’s alive. He just passed out so I can get the majority of this done before he wakes up. I know it’s not a good idea but the guy’s going to end up crying if I don’t finish this and I can’t deal with a guy this size crying at me.”

They exchanged a glance and both let the man go, going back to their own workstations with Shorty following on.

“Hey, hey, Shorty!” Selene called out. “Where you going with those potato chips? Sit the hell down and share, man!”

Shorty immediately took up a stool on the other side of the man and repeatedly fed her chip after chip as she worked.

When Daryl walked through the front door, he was greeted by a flirtatious wink from Ray who sat at the front desk, swinging his glasses around in his hand thoughtlessly. All the staff at The Ink Cabinet were required to wear at least one branded piece of clothing every day, whether that be a baseball cap, sweater or T-shirt. Ray had opted for a white version of the T-shirt with the studio’s Logo emblazoned in black across the back which gave the impression of a band T-shirt which was just how Selene liked it. She knew it got attention and wanted people to remember their unusual branding.

Ray’s colourful tattoos appeared even brighter on his arms due to the pure white of his top. Far from being skinny, his muscular arms also made the whole thing appear a little too small for him, a look which Selene had told him was likely to get him more action. Both as a tattoo artist and in the bedroom.

“Somebody call for a mechanic stripper?” Ray announced, suddenly throwing a hand up and switching his voice to the most high-pitched, feminine tone Daryl had ever heard on a male before. “Me! I did!”

Ray heard Axel grumble something about him being ‘The most tragic gay in town’ from behind the partition wall and chose to ignore him, instead chuckling happily at his own joke.

“Hey, Daryl. You’re so hot I wanna bake cookies on you.” He purred, dragging his eyes from Daryl’s head to his toes and then back again, appreciating the view.

“Back off, glitter fart!” Selene called out from the other side of the wall.

Having got used to him, Daryl hardly ever reacted to Ray, expecting him to push the boundaries every time and this occasion was no different. He offered a small smile and flicked his head up in acknowledgement.

“Ray.”

“You come to see Selene tattoo that big chunk o’ man in there?” he asked.

“What?” Daryl asked.

Ray craned his neck to try and see past the partition to find Bear blocking the view.

“Hey, bigfoot! Gimme a side step outta the fuckin’ way.” Ray demanded. Bear quickly moved to
the side to reveal Selene, perched on a leather stool, tongue poking out from the side of her mouth as she tattooed the leg of a huge man who was laying unusually still under her hands.

“Hit me” She mumbled and shortly dutifully fed her a potato chip across the man’s immobile body. Daryl looked at Ray, none the wiser at why everyone seemed so enthralled by the fact that she was tattooing.

“She don’t get to tattoo much. It’s like an addiction, you get a kick outta the noise, the art, the pain of lesser mortals. When ya can’t do it, ya miss it. Her stuff is unusual. Here, take a look.” He offered, plucking a leather-bound book from a magazine rack mounted to the wall at the side of the desk and handing it to him.

Daryl flicked through the pages, quickly at first but then slowing down when he realised just how interesting her work was. Images of animals, skulls, anatomical hearts, plants and trees all morphed together by a black, spider-webbed like tar. He hadn’t seen anything like it before, it was dark, twisted and he was seriously impressed at the detail and talent it took to create such designs.

“She uses a needle so thin you can barely see it. It’s how she creates all the tiny, little black lines.” Ray explained “You can go on in. His bitch ass passed out a long time ago. He aint gonna care.”

Handing the portfolio back to Ray, Daryl wandered past the threshold and Selene raised her vision along with her tattoo gun.

“Hi” She smiled.

“Hey.”

“How was work?” She asked.

“Fine. How’s the tattoo goin’?” he wanted to know.

“Excellent” She beamed. “Well, now that he’s passed out.”

“Huh. What a pussy.”

“I know, right?!”

“I just stopped by to see if ya were free.” He told her.

“I am once I’ve finished up here. I’d say another 30 minutes or so? Can you wait?” She asked.

“Yeah, sure.” He agreed. “I’mma go for a smoke.”

He made tracks towards the back door and was surprised to find Axel following him grumbling about how his cell phone was dying and his charging cable was in his car. When Daryl stepped outside, he sat on the bench and lit up, hearing Axel’s car door slam and expecting him to wander past at any moment. Instead, he sat beside him, winding the cable around his fingers. Not knowing if he smoked or not, Daryl offered him the pack of smokes but Axel held up a hand and shook his head.

“No thanks. Quit last year.” He said.

“Good for you.” Daryl rasped, taking a long drag.

Axel was leaning forwards with his elbows propped on his knees, fiddling with the cable around his fingers.
“How’s it going? With you and Selene?” Axel asked.

Daryl quickly looked sideways at him before dropping his gaze again and taking another drag. Smoke collected around them in a cloud before dissipating in the cold breeze.

“That why ya out here?” Daryl responded.

“Nah, man…I needed my-”

Daryl shot him a disbelieving glare, stopping him mid-sentence.

“Alright, yeah.” He admitted.

Tapping ash from his cigarette out in front of him, Daryl rubbed his chin briefly with his other hand.

“S’goin’ good. She’s awesome.” He surrendered, figuring if he was going to be with Selene he may as well make the effort to answer when her friends asked after their relationship.

Axel nodded in acceptance “She’s cool. She’s a great boss. Good rack too.”

Daryl slowly looked to the side, his face displaying a mix of anger and bafflement. Axel shifted back slightly, his hands raised.

“That was a joke, man. I mean I haven’t…actually that’s a lie, I have seen them. Not like that though. Shit. I mean I walked in on her. It was an accident-”

“-You got a death wish or somethin’, dude?” Daryl commented.

“Ahh apparently.” Axel sighed, realising that Daryl’s sense of humour was far removed from his own and re-evaluating his decision to badger him for information. “Total accident, I swear it.”

“Hmm” Daryl growled, opting to let it slide.

“Seriously, I’m happy for you guys. Can tell she’s happy with you, she’s easier to be around in the mornings.” Axel commented.

Finally, Daryl let his guard down and smirked, hearing Axels cell phone ping. He tugged it from his pocket and opened up his messages.

“Selene text you as much as my girl texts me? It’s like… all freakin day. How she have that much to say?” He complained.

“Ain’t got that problem.” Daryl stated.

“She doesn’t send you messages at all? Lucky you. It’s nice in a way, she wants to talk to me, but in another… damn, put the phone down, girl. Surprised she’s got any thumbs left”

“Naw.” He dismissed, giving the notion some thought. He wasn’t sure if he’d want them to have that kind of relationship. He was used to passing the studio most mornings and making arrangements from there. But there was something she did do that had turned into a habit since she’d invited him to Shorty and Maria’s wedding. Something neither of them had ever told anyone.

“She calls me most nights. Around midnight” He volunteered.

“Really?!?” Axel questioned with a mildly shocked expression. “She hates phone calls.”
“She took my number when she invited me to Shorty’s wedding. Been calling me late at night ever since.” Daryl disclosed.

Then

He had stared at his cellphone screen for a little too long when Selene’s name appeared on it for the first time. It was almost midnight and he was out making some extra cash with several wraps of coke in his pocket. Not one for talking, let alone phone conversations, he wondered what could possibly be so urgent that she was calling him that late at night. He jabbed the answer button and held the phone to his ear, stepping back into the shadows of a store’s doorway.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Selene.”

“Hey. You OK?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I know it’s late, I just thought I’d call and say hi. I didn’t realise the time.”

“S’ok. I’m awake.”

“What are you doing?”

“Um… I couldn’t sleep so I took a walk.” He lied.

“Merle high?”

“Drunk.” He huffed.

He hadn’t anticipated a call just ‘to say hi’, no one had ever called him for that reason. In fact, the only calls he got were from junkies wanting their fixes. He didn’t know how to participate in a conversation of this type on the phone and with a woman he had a serious thing for. Not wanting to just stay silent and have her think he was rude or disinterested, he had tried his best.

“What about you?”

“I’m drawing up some designs for the website. You’re on loudspeaker.”

“You alone?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, nobody can hear you if you want to whisper sweet nothings to me.”

Daryl experienced a pang of unease. It was a mildly flirty comment and not one he knew how to deal with. It had come out of the blue along with the phone call it’s self and couldn’t help but feel a bit baffled by what was happening.

“You want me to do that?” He asked.

“I’m just kidding. I mean, not that I’m against a little romance every now and then, if you’re feeling daring.”

She had giggled and swiftly moved on to another subject before he could get too uncomfortable with her mild flirtying. It hadn’t completely gone over his head and he wondered if she deliberately called him to gauge his reaction to her flirtatious choice of subject matter.
"Consider yourself honoured. She won’t even call Ray and they’re joined at the hip. When she gave me the job here, she didn’t call me to tell me, she text me and asked me to meet at her here, then she told me.” Axel explained.

Daryl couldn’t deny that Axels confusion meant he did feel honoured to be the only person she ever wanted to speak to on the phone, late at night, when she was alone. It was something she had continued, stopping only between finding out where he worked and giving her father an ultimatum.

“The girl I’m seeing, Skye. She was supposed to be going out with Ritchie. Selene set them up. His brain must have grown out into those dreadlocks because the dipshit ghosted her. Then, Ray caught her looking at me in Marty’s.” Axel continued. “She’s cool, y’know? Funny, great ass, pretty eyes. Just wish she’d ease off on the texting. How the hell do I tell her that?”

Far from being an expert on the fairer sex, Daryl had no idea why he was being asked the question or what he should say as an answer. Having only had his brother for any kind of man-to- man conversations, he had never found himself entrusted with such subject matter. Especially with the likes of Axel, who he was sure that if they attended the same school, he would have hated with a deep-seated passion, the same way he hated everyone else, except Selene. He was no more clued up than Axel was and it appeared to be the blind leading the blind.

“The hell ya askin’ me for? I dunno about women.” Daryl gruffed.

“Dude, are you for real?! Do you have any idea how many guys would kill to have a girlfriend like yours? You must know something.”

*Girlfriend? Shit. I have a girlfriend. That is real weird.*

“I dunno nothin’. She just lost her mind n I happened to be around.” He shrugged, finishing his smoke and dropping it into a disused flowerpot under the bench.

Axel laughed loudly and nodded as if he were well aware of how Daryl perceived the situation.

“Believe me, I think that on the regular about mine too.”

Then

“Hello?”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, Selene.”

“Can you talk?”

“Yeah, sure. You alright?”

“I’m good… I was just checking you’re still up for coming to the wedding tomorrow.”

They had discussed the exact, same thing the previous night, and the night before that and by that point, Daryl was beginning to see that she was actually finding excuses to call him and talk to him.
Far be it from him to go on assumptions, he had brushed it off the second time. But after this, the third time she’d checked on his intentions to attend, he could see there may be something else in it.

“Yeah, said I was when we spoke last night.”

“Oh, you’re right. You did. I’m sorry. I’ll leave you alone.”

“No, don’t. It’s fine. I ain’t doin nothin anyways.”

“Are you sure? If I’m bothering you-“

By now, he was totally sure he was right, she wanted to talk to him. What he couldn’t figure out, was why.

“Y’aint botherin me. Don’t mind ya callin’. Just not a lot of folks wanna talk to me”

“Really? I like talking to you.”

Here, he paused. He wanted to ask why. To probe more into her intentions, to quell the feeling that he was reading too much into everything. Instead, he chose to return her compliment.

“Like talkin to you too.”

“Well, good. What are you doing right now?”

“Nothin’. Just havin’ a beer. You?”

“I’m outside Marty’s on my own. I was going to ask you but I thought it was a bit late notice.”

He didn’t want to appear too keen, but her excuses to call and chat could only be seen as a positive sign. At this point he had no idea if this was just something she did with everyone, or if she was making an exception for him.

“Should have. I’d have met ya.”

“Oh, well… it’s late now. It doesn’t matter. I’ll know for next time.”

“Aint ever gonna say no to a decent drink with decent company.”

“I’m decent?”

“Yeah, you’re decent.”

“That’s a compliment I’ve not had before.”

“I’ll try n’ think up a better one for tomorrow.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Won’t take me long.”

He heard a feminine and alluring giggle from the other end of the phone and smiled smugly to himself.

_Nice._
“Finally decided on a dress. Took me like a week. It’s hard being a girl. I’m still not sure if I’ll actually be overdressed.”

“M’sure you’ll look fine “

He wanted to tell her that she could turn up in a garbage sack and he would still think she was the sexiest woman he’d ever seen. But he figured that was a little too much for someone that was supposed to be a friend.

Now

His mind wandered while Axel sat beside him. He didn’t dislike any of Selene’s friends, least of all the muscle bound, tattooed ken doll that made the effort to engage him in conversation. Daryl wasn’t the type to make friends easily, his ability trust almost next to nothing. But in Selene’s little family, he had found a great deal of loyalty and sincere appreciation of one another. As unusual as the dynamics were; one female and five males, somehow, they made it work and it was obvious to Daryl that they all had each other’s backs. Axel hadn’t passed a single ounce of judgement and had been the one, aside from Ray who had been able to pick up on Daryl’s need to look out for Selene since the beginning.

“Where you taking her tonight? If you don’t mind me asking.” Axel enquired.

“Thought id just drive us to my place. My brothers out.” He mumbled “although takin’ her to a war zone might be better”

“How’s that?”

Daryl shifted in his spot, leaning back and briefly rubbing his hands along his thighs in an anxious manoeuvre that told Axel he should think himself lucky his question was even being answered.

“Live up in the mountains. In the woods. Place ain’t nothin much.” He grumbled.

Axel’s eyes moved around the parking lot briefly and he nodded pursing his lips briefly in thought.

“Nah, dude. Pick up a bottle of something and a pack of smokes on the way and she won’t give a crap.” He assured him. “My family are pretty shitty, hardly ever see them and when I do, they always ask when I’m going to get a real job and better place to live. But I like my life the way it is. So, Selene and I share Christmas duties. One year we all come here to her apartment, have dinner, watch movies and get drunk. The next year, they all come to my place. It’s half the size, someone always has to sit on the floor. It’s damp and could do with a lick of paint, but we all cram and no one gives a fuck. She won’t care where you live, man. She’ll just be happy you wanted her to see it.”

He couldn’t argue with the logic. Axel was right and so he decided to stick with his plan and take her back to the house he shared with Merle. All he could do was hope that his older brother hadn’t left it looking like a crack den.

Axel got to his feet and shoved the charger cable into his pocket. Beginning to make his way to the back door, he paused to read a message from Sky on his cell.

“Hey.” Daryl rasped from behind him. He turned and looked up inquisitively. “Ya got two options. You can tell her the truth. Or, you can lie to her n’ tell her ya can’t use ya cellphone at work no more. I don’t know shit about women, but I do know hidin’ shit gets ya nowhere.”
Met with a thoughtful stare and a subtle tilt of the head from Axel, Daryl surprised even himself with the urge to help the guy out.

“Thanks, big guy.” Axel said with a small smile.

“Big guy?” Daryl repeated with a disgusted look which Axel quickly mimicked when he realised how cringeworthy it sounded.

“Sorry, thought it was a ‘big guy’ moment. Should have known only Ray gets away with saying that.” Axel huffed.

“Thanks… for the advice” Daryl called out, receiving a dismissing wave as Axel went back into the building.

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He hadn’t told her where he was taking her and she hadn’t asked. She merely did what she was told in getting her coat and locking up the building while Daryl visited the corner store and bought whiskey, smokes and snacks. He threw the bag into the back of the truck and waited in the parking lot for her to appear.

Despite his chat with Axel, his head was still swimming with doubts. His living situation was less than ideal with Merle being an ever-present problem, bringing noise, mess, drugs and destruction through the door on the daily.

When she climbed into the truck and slammed the door, she shot him a huge, bright grin and leaned into him, gently kissing his cheek. The corner of his mouth quirked up into a bashful smile and he started the engine and pulled the truck out of the lot. From his peripheral vision, he picked up on her massaging her hand as she watched the darkened world go by beyond the window. Her partially curled hair sat over her shoulder, on the studded collar of her biker jacket, illuminated by the passing, glittering lights of the highway.

“You OK?” He asked.

She peered around at him, her face slightly obscured by the night and the dim lights from the trucks dash.

“Yeah, my hand is sore from that tattoo. Not done it a while, getting kind of rusty.” She shrugged.

“Was worth it. You’re real talented.” He offered, hearing a shy giggle come from her direction as he took a left, leaving the highway and starting on the road up to the mountains.

“Thank you.” She murmured.

“Ray showed me some of ya other stuff. It’s different, I like it.” He told her.

“Would you let me Tattoo you one day?” She asked.

“Maybe.” He smirked, taking his eyes off the road momentarily so he could witness her curious expression.

“Actually, on second thoughts, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” She backtracked.

“Why not?”

“If I screw up the tattoo, it’ll always be on you and it’ll always be wrong. If I screw up the
relationship. It’ll still always be on you, a memory you can’t erase.” She explained.

“Thought I was the pessimistic one.” He scoffed.

“I’m sorry, It’s not that I don’t have faith in this. In us. I do. I just have these moments of self doubt where I say and do stupid shit” She confessed. Her insecurities were usually very well hidden, venturing out only when she was a toxic mixture of inebriated and sad or angry. It was a part of her personality that she wasn’t proud of, a vulnerability that only her closest of friends were aware of. But she trusted Daryl, and felt like he needed to know.

“Like the Angelo thing.” He said

“Yeah.” She agreed shamefully.

“I’m the same.” He rasped. “Really, I get it.”

She smiled at him, squeezing his leg gently as he continued to steer the truck along the pitch-black winding roads.

"Whatever you said to my father about Ritchie...thank you. He's in rehab. Paid for.” She murmured.

It hadn't been Daryl's intention to get Ritchie shipped off to rehab, but he figured it was a result that benefitted everyone, especially Selene, who was now comfortable in the knowledge that her friend was getting clean and that she may get the opportunity to see him start over again, drug free and with a clearer head.

"Just told him you care about him n' wanted him to go. Maybe ya dad listens to more than ya give him credit for." He suggested.

"Yeah, or maybe he's just trying to get into my good books again.” She said coldly.

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Selene could barely see anything outside in the dark when Daryl stopped the truck. She scanned the scene around her, picking up on a single light emitting from a lightbulb on a rickety wooden porch in the distance. The area surrounding it was shrouded in shadows. She turned to Daryl.

“Are we at your house, Daryl?”

She had very little information about the world Daryl lived in. Only that in his words it was a ‘shack in the woods’ that he shared with Merle. Never having mentioned a desire to take her there, she didn’t want to push, guessing that one day it would come up in conversation and she would have her chance to express how much she wanted to see the place he retreated to when he wasn’t with her.

“Yeah.”

She eagerly shot a hand out, feeling along the inside of the trucks door for the handle before he was halted by his grip on her other wrist.

“Don’t expect much. We ain’t house proud.” He warned.

Selene’s face dropped into a saddened expression and she removed his hand from her wrist, lacing her fingers between his.
“Do you really think that I’m going to judge you for that?” She asked.

“No. S’why I brought ya here. Just… don’t want ya be shocked or nothin’.” He expressed.

“Oh Daryl.” Selene’s sighed in exasperation, her face tinged with a faint but genuine smile. “C’mon. Show me your home.”

Leaving the vehicle, Daryl collected the bag from the backseat and met Selene at the foot of the porch. Pulling his keys from his pocket, he handed them to her and received a confused stare.

“You expect me to do everythin’? I’m carryin’ shit here. Open the door.” He jested.

She excitedly snatched the keys from his hand and unlocked the door, hearing a piercing squeak from it’s hinges as she pushed it open.

“Switch for the light is on the left.” He said. She stepped inside, clicked on the light and Daryl followed her, kicking the door closed behind him and not bothering to lock it. He had every intention to have a couple of drinks, but wanted to stay sober enough to drive her home at some point. That was, unless she wanted to stay. She slowly wandered down the hall and to the living room.

The carpet was old, ripped and stained from knocked over drinks. The drapes, yellowed from nicotine and hanging from the pole as if they’d been thrown up there out of the way. The couch and chair in the corner of the room were clean enough, littered with papers and the odd crushed can of beer. The coffee table in front of the TV held a large dish filled with cigarette ends. At the end of the room, there was another, larger table covered with mail, newspapers and cigarette cartons. The entire room had the strong odour of smoke and alcohol but Selene wasn’t surprised in the slightest that Daryl and Merle would live in conditions any different from this.

Coming back from dumping the bag in the kitchen, Daryl handed her a tumbler of whiskey and she grinned at him.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” She said sincerely.

“Other places I’d rather be with ya.” He mumbled. “But Merle’s out tonight so I took the chance.”

“Show me where you sleep.” She suggested, winding her hand around his and stepping back.

“Alright.” He agreed, taking a large sip of his drink and leading her down a hallway to a door at the end. She swallowed a gulp of the burning liquid as she wandered along behind him, her boots thudding on the threadbare carpet as they went. He opened the door and switched on the light, stepping aside and letting her walk in first with a hand lightly placed on her back between her shoulder blades.

The room was simple and much tidier than the living room even though there were a couple of piles of clothes around. It was less smoky and Selene could see straight away that he had little need for clutter or sentimental knick-knacks. The shelves and surfaces were clear, save for a pile of coins here and there and the odd bit of mail addressed to him. The bed was made. A heavy, grey throw folded over the foot of it. Moving her eyes to the walls, she smiled at the posters. All bands they had in common. Daryl thought himself lucky that he had previously had the forethought to remove the tasteless, tattered posters of nearly naked women from his teenage years. Hung on a large hook between the bands album images was a crossbow.
“Now that is cool.” She said under her breath as she approached it. Daryl followed her, reaching over her shoulder and grabbing the weapon, unhooking it from the wall and holding it in front of her. She slid her glass onto a nearby shelf and wrapped her delicate fingers around the crossbows stock and foregrip and held it up, rotating it and examining all the different parts. He moved back to give her some room and silently watched her as she held his pride and joy up to look through the scope.

*She looks hot holding that.*

“Will you let me use this one day?” She pleaded

“Sure, looks better on you anyways” He said.

She placed the crossbow back on the wall and picked up her drink, her eyes beaming at him over the rim of the glass. They swapped a shy glance with each other, Selene’s stomach filling with butterflies. She loved the effect he had on her, he reduced her to an excitable mess and there was no one else she had met in her life that had managed such a feat.

“So this where you lay your head.” She uttered. “When we talk on the phone, late at night and you tell me you just ‘having a beer’ this is where you are.”

“Yeah.” He responded quietly, mesmerised by her deliberate and alluring glare until she tore her gaze away. She ambled around the room, looking at everything, picking up a stack of books and looking through them.

“You read?” She asked,

“Not really. Had ’em a while, never touched ’em. No pictures.” He replied. She giggled quietly and padded over to the bed, throwing the books onto the covers and thudding her glass on the nightstand. She then unzipped her boots, kicked them off and pulled her work sweater over her head. Her black top underneath had thin straps and it barely covered her stomach, a sight that Daryl approved of as his eyes swept over the hints of her tattoos under her clothing. She settled on the bed, crossing her legs and thumbing through one of the books. Daryl sat behind her, taking in the shimmer of her black hair and the pale deliciousness of her shoulders and lower back. She hummed a gentle tune as she read and he found himself wishing she was a permanent fixture in his room, his very own rose amongst the thorns of the painful memories the house held. While he sipped his whiskey, he hazarded raising a hand and feathering the tips of his fingers draw across her shoulder blade. She moaned happily and tilted her head to the side, letting him cover more of her skin in tickling, electrifying lines as her eyes swept over the words on the pages in front of her.

“Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated.” She said, reading aloud from the book and arching her back to the touch of his fingers drawing down her spine. Her face, which he could only see the side of when she lolled her head back and closed her eyes, displayed a kind of peaceful bliss. He knew he could listen to her talk for hours, but listening to her read was even more pleasing. Her voice was almost tuneful, floating into his mind and lulling him into a state of relaxation.

“Read more?” He asked gingerly.

She slowly turned her head, catching his eye over her shoulder as she turned the page and looked back at the book.

“For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty. There is
no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”

He had now drawn a faint line along her spine and back up again, circling the back of her neck and shifting closer to her on the bed.

“I like listening to you.” He admitted.

“I like you touching me like that.” She hummed.

“Good. ‘Cause I could do this all day.” He responded with a drawn-out sigh. She heard him clunk the whiskey glass onto the nightstand, the straps of her top suddenly brushed down from her shoulders. Lips were on her skin, kissing tenderly over her shoulders then moving up to her neck.

“Daryl.” Selene whispered, closing the book in her hands.

“Mm?” He grunted.

“You’re turning me on.”

“Want me to stop?” He asked when his lips left the space below her ear.

“That depends.” She told him. “You said you wanted it to be right. I want it to be right too.” She shifted around so she could see him properly, lighting tracing her thumb over his lips. “Is it right?”

Everything felt right to him, she was there, in the room that he had convinced himself would never contain another soul that he would care so much about. Merle was out for the night and he was in his own space. Her bright and fascinating eyes were distracting him, a two-tone wonder that peered back at him with longing.

“It’s right” He said quietly, the words barely sounding as they left his lips.

She took his hand and stood up, also bringing him to his feet. Reaching out to him, she pushed his leather vest from his shoulders and dropped it to the floor. Unexpectedly, his body tensed up and nervous anticipation washed over him like a tidal wave. Was this really it? Able to sense his anxiety and finding herself having to control her own, Selene nuzzled at his face as she worked to unfasten his shirt one button at a time. He ran his fingers up and down her arms as she finished up opening the shirt and pushing her hands inside. His lips found hers and he started lifting the bottom of her top up, gradually moving it higher and higher until she lifted her arms and allowed him to hoist it over her head. She quickly popped the button on his jeans, lowered the zipper and had forced them to the floor faster than he had time to register.

“Woah, slow down.” He smiled into their kiss. She moved back and beamed up at him.

“Merle’s not coming home?” She checked.

“Not til 6am. He’s on a nightshift at the Rabbit.”

Now working on undoing her own shorts, she threw them down her legs, leaving only her underwear and fishnets.

“How many times can we have sex between now and 6am?” She asked.

Daryl chuckled softly at her eagerness and kissed her gently.

“A lot” He whispered.
“Sit down” She ordered, placing her hands on his shoulders. As he sank down to the edge of the bed, she climbed onto his lap, her fishnet covered legs either side of him and his eyes took in the detailed mass of tattoos that covered her torso. Under her breasts, on her ribs and on her lower abdomen. His hands explored them before rubbing over her legs and then up to reach the clasp of her bra as she nipped at his bottom lip and held him to her by draping her arms over his shoulders and gliding his shirt down, revealing his scarred back.

Daryl couldn’t believe his luck as he pinched at the tiny, metal hooks on the back of her bra. She was everything he wanted and more and as she shed each item of clothing, he was realising that just when he thought she couldn’t get any more perfect to him, she did. Her skin was milky pale, soft to the touch and her body lean but curvaceous in all the right places. To him, she was the most attractive thing he had ever seen.

She brought her arms back from his shoulders, unlacing them from the shoulder straps of her bra while Daryl released it at the back. With his index finger, he gently pulled at the middle of it, bringing it away from her chest and leaving it on the bed beside them. Selene replaced her arms over his shoulders and he kissed over the delicious flesh of her breasts, emitting small gasps between each small kiss which, coupled with his thumb bumping over her nipple, meant she was moaning and tilting her head back. His view was even greater now with her hair hanging in a soft curtain down her spine and her eyes closed. He was starting to throb against her core, with only the thin fabric of his boxers and her panties between them, warmth radiated from underneath and she lifted her hips, slowly lowering herself down and centering his erection under her.

He grunted loudly against her chest, followed by a breathy, barely audible curse word. She dipped her head, catching his lips again as he massaged one breast and she knew then that she wanted to speed things up. She needed him and she needed him soon. Still kissing him roughly, she searched for his free hand and found it around her waist. Picking it up, she guided him to the small gap between them, slipping his fingers into her panties.

Increasingly encouraged by the warm, wetness of her, he groaned with her as his fingers grazed over her spot. She shuddered and rocked her hips on his lap as he seized her lips once more and his fingers began to work in tiny circles.

“Oh my god” She uttered.

“You like that?” He panted.

“Yes”

“Sit up higher for me” He requested.

She lifted herself from his lap, everything suddenly feeling cold and she was now starkly aware of his absence from between her legs. Instead, his hand was there, two fingers sliding inside while his thumb still worked away. She gripped his strong, broad shoulders and her higher positioning meant he had even better access to her nipples. His tongue danced over her left one and she cried out, clamping her muscles around his fingers below.

“Damn” he breathed.

Her head dropped forwards and her hair curtained him, his fingers beckoning her inside.

“Havin’ ourselves a little afternoon delight?” Merle’s voice came from the doorway, snapping
Daryl out of his lustful blur and causing Selene to let out a small yelp. In a blind panic, she could only think to obscure Merle’s view of her by wrapping herself around Daryl and looking in the other direction, her face burning red.
Chapter Summary

There are so many smut fics of this site and I have written smutty scenes in my other stories (there's nothing wrong with a bit of Daryl Smut!). But, this was intended to be a mix of emotion and physicality. So hopefully I've struck the right balance. Probably not safe to read this one at work!

Posted from my phone so it’s probably littered with typos. I will pick them up as I proofread. Apologies in advance! I just wanted to get this posted because it’s been a while.

I also had some serious formatting issues with this chapter. I’m not sure why everything is so widely spaced apart. I’ve tried everything to get it back to normal! I messed up too and posted the latter half of this without the beginning! I’m so sorry. Here it is in its entirety!

He leaned against the doorframe, a smug and sinister expression on his face.

“What the fuck, Merle?!” Daryl raged as he reached out and grabbed the grey throw from the foot of the bed. He gently but rapidly lay it over Selene’s shoulders and gathered it at the front, taking her hand and getting her to hold it closed herself. “You’re sposed to be at work.”

“I’m on a break, forgot my smokes. Lucky I did or I’d have missed out on this here sight.”

“Get the hell outta here!” Daryl snapped.

“Aint my fault ya too busy getting up in them guts to close the damn door.” Merle chortled.

“He” Selene grunted.

Daryl levelled his lips with her ear after a long sigh, laced with a growl of exasperation and rage left his lungs.

“I’mma have to move ya. Keep hold of that at the front.” He whispered to her while tenderly brushing through her hair. Merle didn’t budge. Social etiquette clearly meant nothing to him, nor did privacy, dignity or basic respect for his younger brother.

Selene slid from his lap, thankful that Daryl’s bed contained something to cover her modesty reasonably well. She quickly pulled it further around her and sighed loudly while Daryl dragged on his jeans and stormed, topless over to the doorway, shoving past Merle.
“I need to talk to you, asshole.” He spat.

In the living room, Daryl’s anger levels were almost at boiling point when the amused sneer on Merle’s face refused to budge. He found the whole thing hilarious while Daryl was enraged at his brothers lack of consideration and respect, having just walked in on what was the most intimate moment he had ever had with the woman he cared deeply for.

“You couldn’t have just left, huh?! What the fuck was that?! What the hell is wrong with you?” He raged, gesturing wildly to his head as he spoke.

“I was curious” Merle shrugged with a smirk.
Daryl glared at him, bringing a finger up and jabbing him in the chest “You don’t go near her. You don’t even look at her. You hear me?” he growled.

“I aint no rapist, boy.” Merle warned.

“No, but ya just proved that ya are a fuckin’ pervert” Daryl shot back.

Merle sat on the arm of the couch and lit a smoke, laughing to himself and shaking his head. The tension in the room began to gather with the smoke from Merle’s cigarette, hanging over them in a heavy cloud.

“Relax, I’m just havin’ a little fun.” Merle grinned.

“Yeah, don’t mean ya gotta spoil mine!” Daryl fumed, realising he should probably lower his voice.

“Ahh I gotta hand it to ya, I’m almost proud. I had ya down as one of them fancyboys for a while. No pussy for years and now ya got ya mits on that fine ass bitch.”

Daryl was about to launch himself across the room and collide his fist firmly with Merle’s face when Selene wandered into the room and he was forced to stuff his fury down and choose not to react when she placed a hand gently on his chest and met his eyes. She shook her head slowly and put her faith in him not to turn to violence despite clearly being able to see the intense fire burning away behind his eyes. She was still wearing the throw from the bed, but she had fastened it like a toga, over her shoulders and it swept about the floor as she casually left Daryl and Merle with the two whiskey tumblers in her hand. She smiled broadly at them both as she passed, her blasé body language and lack of clothing met with two confused stares.

Daryl and Merle exchanged a glance, Merle raising a non-existent eyebrow while they listened to her clinking around in the next room. The sound of pouring liquid and the tuneful melody of her
voice as she sang quietly to herself. When he re-appeared, she sauntered up to them, a lit cigarette poised between her fingers and three glasses pinched in her other hand. She walked confidently and held up her hand, motioning with her head or them to take a glass each. They both hesitated before Merle shrugged and accepted his, followed by Daryl who lowered his head and spoke to her through his teeth.

“What are ya doin?” He asked.

“Offering a drink to your brother and refilling ours. God knows we need it now.” She chirped.

“Should go put some clothes on.” He told her.

She scoffed at him and took a drag on her smoke before offering it to him. He looked down at the cigarette and gave in, taking it from her and finishing it up in seconds. He needed the nicotine to calm him down along with the whiskey she had poured for him.

“If this was good enough for the ancient romans, it’s good enough for me.” She smiled, turning away from him and sitting on a chair opposite Merle, who was swishing the alcohol from his glass around in his mouth like mouthwash before he swallowed it.

“Merle” She purred, holding her glass up.

“Miss. Taylor.” He rasped back, returning her gesture and raising his drink. “Couldn’t help but notice ya got some sweet ink on ya.”

Daryl stiffened at his brother’s observation of his girlfriend, he had obviously chosen this comment as a dig and to prod at Daryl’s already irate mood.

“I bet you couldn’t help but notice, fuckin’ jerk.” Daryl spat.

“Thank you, Merle. I’d be a shitty tattoo artist if I didn’t” She grinned.

“Ain’t ya got a job to go back to?” Daryl snapped.

“Still got time on the clock, little brother. I’mma just sit back and enjoy the view for a little while.” He jested, winking at Selene who leaned towards him.

“Careful, Merle. You wouldn’t want my father to find out about this little… mishap now, would you?”

“You threatenin’ me, girl?”
“Yes. Yes I am. In future, you might want to knock or stay the hell away.”

She never chose to have a father that would kill anyone that so much as looked at their in a questionable way, but he had to admit that it did come with its perks. She only ever used it in situations like this, when the person she was threatening really could do without Bill Taylor breathing down their neck. The likes of Joe, who knew of Selene’s father very well due to working in one of his restaurants, and Merle who was a glorified servant, would always be careful not to step out of line.

“Last strike, I hear.” Selene threw at him, catching Daryl’s eye as she brought her glass to her lips.

He was still shirtless, stood almost between them but further back in the room. He looked worriedly from Selene to Merle and asked himself if she would actually follow through with her threat. Most of the time, he hated Merle but nothing would ever change the fact that he was family and Daryl didn’t want to see him six feet under. Merle began to laugh, his check crackling as his face crinkled into a grin.

“Hot damn, she got a good ass and a huge pair of balls to boot! Funny how she’s ended up with the likes of you.” Merle quipped at Daryl.

“Shut up, Merle. Go back to work.”

“I kinda like her.” Merle added, looking Selene up and down and licking his lips.

“Merle” Daryl warned, finally moving and stepping in front of Selene. He didn’t like the way he looked at her, the same way he peered at the women in the club, the same way he looked at all women. Selene wasn’t an object to Daryl, she was a precious thing that he had to protect, even from the likes of his brother. “I told ya, you don’t look at her. Go back to fuckin’ work.”

“Wouldn’t want to be late now. That’d give me time to call daddy and cry about you walking in on Daryl and I. Sniff sniff…woe is me.” She mocked from the armchair behind Daryl’s legs. Merle knocked back his drink and stood up, handing the empty glass to Daryl and swaggering towards the door, collecting his smokes and his keys from the side table on his way.

“You ever wanna get a little frisky with a real man, you come see me, sugar. Thanks for the show, usually have to pay for that shit!” He called over his shoulder.

Daryl flinched at went to run at him but Selene, with cat like reflexes she didn’t know she possessed, grabbed hold of the waistband of his jeans and stopped him.

“No. Don’t. Please.” She pleaded as she peered up at him.
He glanced down at her with a tight jaw and stormed off to his room without a word. Selene collected the bag of snacks and the whiskey bottle from the kitchen and quietly padded into his room in search of him. She found him sat on his bed with his back to her, leaned forwards with his head in his hands. Placing the items from the kitchen on a set of drawers, she walked over to him, gently sitting beside him and resting a hand on his back between his shoulder blades and over one of his scars.

“Daryl-“ she whispered.

“- i Fuckin’ hate him.” He snapped, louder than she’d expected.

“Maybe, but he’s your blood. Your family. So you love him at the same time.” She said. “No. I just hate him. He’s just like our ol’ man.” He complained.

“I hate my father. But I still love him because he’s my father. There’s a fine line. It blurs sometimes.” She mused.

He sat back and looked at her, his expression defeated and to Selene, painfully disappointed.

“I’m sorry.” He croaked.

Sliding her arms around him, she brought her legs up and curled up on his lap, her smaller frame and shorter height meaning it was not only possible but comfortable too. Burying her head in his chest, she felt the hammering of his heart and his arms tightly wrapped around her.

“It’s not your fault.” She told him.

“Get dressed, I’ll take ya home.” He mumbled abruptly.

She looked up at him, gently and slowly kissing his lips, dismayed when he didn’t react much. When she stopped, he had relaxed but she could still sense the underlying anger in him.

“Please can I stay with you?” She requested.

“You don’t wanna stay after…all that.” He sighed, tapping her leg and telling her he wanted to get up after only a few seconds of being In her embrace. She scrambled back from his lap and onto the bed, watching him stand up and go to the window. He moved the drape slightly and squinted into the darkness, making sure Merle had left.

“Actually, I do.” She squeaked from behind him. “But if you want me to-“
“-I don’t want ya to go, I didn’t say that, did I? Jesus.” He snapped, his voice tight with irritation.

Selene fell silent and pushed her lips together into a thin line. Daryl let go of the drape and ran a hand through his hair, scratching at the back of his neck. His broad, barrelled chest fell when he released a loud breath.

“I didn’t mean that how it sounded.” He offered with a regretful look.

“It’s OK.” She uttered, moving from the bed and quickly collecting her clothes from the floor. She turned her back to him and dropped the Makeshift toga, threading her arms through her bra and clipping it together behind her back. Then, she stepped into her denim shorts and wiggled them up her legs.

“What are ya doin?” Daryl questioned.

She paused and warily looked at him over her shoulder.

“Getting dressed so you can take me home.” She said.

“Look, I don’t want ya to go. I’m- I’m just mad, alright?”

“I know, I can see that. Maybe I should just leave you to calm down.”

“No. No. Just-just sit the hell down a minute and let me think.” He demanded. She fastened her shorts and picked up her top, clasping it in her hands as she sat on the bed and waited. He began to pace up and down breathing heavily as he attempted to figure out what he wanted, what he needed to dispel his rage.

Selene played with the creases on the bedsheets before putting her top back on and collecting her drink, downing it and sitting back down again with a wince as the liquid hit the bottom of her stomach. Unable to see him properly, she crawled over the bed on her hands and knees and sat up on the pillows, hugging her knees and following Daryl with her eyes. Eventually, he stopped walking and stood still, chewing on his bottom lip.

“You…” he started “You’re the only thing that calms me down when I’m like this. I dunno how ya do it, but you-you can stop me. So, just… stay.”

“OK.” She replied softly “I’ll stay.”

She didn’t know how she did it either but she suspected it wasn’t really something she was trying to do. It was just what he saw when he looked at her that calmed him. Whatever it was, she was
glad about it and hoped it wouldn’t change. When she’d seen him go for Joe in Marty’s bar, a simple stern order and a jovial approach to conversation immediately afterwards had been noticeably effective and she didn’t think he’d even realised how quickly he’d calmed. As it turned out, he did realise and it was entirely new to him, having led his life with a fiery and uncontrollable temper that exhausted him and got him into all kinds of trouble.

“How about it” She said, patting the bed next to her.

Doing as she asked, he climbed onto the bed and lay next to her on his back. She slid down beside him, her head propped up by her elbow and began to draw shapes on the middle of his chest with her index finger. “Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“Finally got somethin’ good. He’s gotta fuck with it.” He admitted.

“He’s not. We won’t let him.” She assured him.

“He did tonight. We were….y’know what I mean.”

“You’ve had the teaser trailer, now you’ve had the full trailer and the sneak peek. Next is the whole feature.” She informed him, feeling a small sense of victory when he looked at her and his mouth quirked up into a faint smile.

“Full trailer n’ sneak peek was awesome.” He confessed.

“Yeah, it was.” She giggled, dropping her head onto his shoulder and leaving a small kiss on his skin. “Think we’ve earned the whole feature if you ask me.”

He rolled towards her, gliding his hand into her hair and kissing her lips, properly this time compared to his partially motivated effort after Merle had left. Breaking the kiss, he lay his head back on the pillow and tickled over her shoulder and arm.

“Too damn paranoid now.” He muttered.

“Me too” She agreed, rolling her eyes. “Not tonight, just relax. I brought the booze and the snacks in. Put some music on, help me eat all those pretzels and get shitfaced drunk with me.”

He laughed briefly while his hand made its way to her waist and over her hip. A small, uneasy noise left his throat and she guessed he might be on the verge of saying something else, his mouth curling up and threatening to smile widely at whatever he was thinking.

“Say it” She urged with a raised eyebrow. “Go on.”
“Alright, um…. yeah, I’ll get lit with ya. But only if ya take those clothes off again.” He challenged.

She giggled and slowly licked her lips.
“Think I can manage that.” She agreed.

Two hours passing saw Selene and Daryl sat on the floor with the whiskey bottle between them, pretzels and potato chips scattering the ground after a playful and laughter filled food fight. Daryl had his back to the end of the bed while Selene used his closet door as a backrest, both had their legs resting straight out in front of them, him still shirtless and her in her short, strappy top, panties and fishnets which Daryl had asked her to keep on. She had cocked her head at him, amused by the prospect that he may have decided that he had a thing for them.

She stretched out her foot, pointing her toes and nudging his ankle with them, encouraging him to look up. They had managed to drink most of the bottle between them and Daryl had visited the kitchen at one point to forage for more, returning with half a bottle of vodka and a six pack of beer. Selene’s face lit up when she’d seen him walk in with his arms full but she had openly admitted that she was going to have a terrible hangover the next day. Daryl shrugged, telling her that if she woke up and had another beer straight away, she’d feel nothing but tired. She curled her lip in disgust, making fun of him by calling him a ‘professional alcoholic’, which had only got her locked into an unbearable tickling session during which she had screamed, laughed uncontrollably and writhed about under him until he finally showed mercy and turned it into the best make-out session Selene had ever had. Feeling it escalate, she had wriggled from his grasp and both of them had backed up against the closest thing to them, ending up in their current positions, dizzy and far more confident than usual.

“You like goth girls, Daryl? That your thing? Your type?” She asked carelessly, waving her whiskey glass about in front of her.

“Helps to be into the same shit, I guess” He considered “You’re my type.”

“That’s cheating!” She announced “You can’t just say that, I have to be your type. You wooed me into sitting here in my underwear and getting drunk with you.”

“Wooed? The hells that? Is that even a word?” He questioned, wrinkling his nose and gulping down another burning glug of whiskey.

“It’s an old word. It means to gain someone’s admiration in a romantic way. Apparently, I’m from the 15th century” She scoffed.

“Specifics, please. You stroke my ego and I’ll stroke your…” She trailed off

His eyes shot up from his glass and fixed on her.

“…ego too.” She uttered with a wink.

“Yeah, um. Right. OK, gimme a sec, I aint used to this shit.” He told her.

She knew he wasn’t, but for the first time, she’d managed to get him to a reasonably chatty state and conversation up until this point hadn’t been totally controlled by her. She was enjoying getting to know him in this way, the alcohol helping him to drop his defences and show her a little more of who he was than he’d be comfortable with while sober.

“I’ll go first then” She volunteered, holding her index finger in the air to silence him. “I didn’t think I had a type although I’ve probably always gone for guys that look like Ray or Axel, big, toned and tattooed. But there’s been a few exceptions. Don’t take this the wrong way because he’s just my friend but I actually think Ritchie is just so cute, he’s very pretty. But when I started spending time with you and I think I realised that I either didn’t have a type or if I did it was complete bullshit. You’re like a whole new level. Kinda rough, unapproachable and angry. But inside, you’re just fascinating. There are so many layers to you and it’s amazing. You got this broken ‘I need to be saved but I fucking hate everyone’ thing about you It’s super-duper hot.” She explained.

Daryl was lighting a cigarette as she spoke but he was listening to every single word, a lot more relaxed than if she’d have said it all to him when he was sober. “Also, your eyes are gorgeous and don’t even get me started on those fucking arms of yours.” She brought her hand up to her mouth, curling it into a fist and biting her knuckles.

Daryl laughed and shook his head, exhaling smoke and throwing her the pack.

“Um. Thanks. That was…new.” He huffed.

“Allright. So uh, Tattoos, that’s a big thing to me. Yours are real good and they’re interestin’, specially where they are. Um, piercings, I like ya lip rings. Aint never kissed a girl with them before. Guess I always liked black hair on girls. You aint got a clue how hard it is to make me laugh, but you do. You’re smart, got ya own business and you’re good at it. Ya like the same stuff as me. It’s hard to find anyone that likes decent music, let alone someone that looks like you. You um…you really wanna hear all this?” he asked

“Yes.” She replied quickly, her face displaying a wide smile at possibly the most words he’d ever said to her in one go.

“Doesn’t make you a jackass.” She dismissed. She pursed her lips after exhaling a lungful of smoke, bending one leg and draping her arm over her knee. She had surmised that he did have a type, most of the things he liked about her being the elements of her that made her stand out from the crowd. She was pleased she’d asked and that the whiskey had allowed for her to have such a conversation with him without him closing up and retreating in horror.

“Sectoral Heterochromia.” He added, looking her straight in the eyes. “Can’t stop staring at it. It’s beautiful.”

She smiled so widely she could feel her lip piercings pulling but paid it no mind as smoke from her cigarette drifted up to the ceiling between them.

“Thank you” She whispered, a wave of shyness cloaking her and taking her off guard. She had always felt self-conscious about her eye, having been picked on at school for it. But Daryl liked it and now nothing else anyone had said mattered.

“You know what it’s called.” She stated, impressed.

“Yeah” was all he said as he filled his glass and offered her the bottle so she could have the last of what was left. She accepted and drank the rest from the bottle, catching Daryl smirking at her.

To him, this couldn’t get much better. He had a beautiful, alternative woman sat on his bedroom floor wearing minimal clothing, smoking cigarettes and downing hard liquor with him while they listened to heavy metal and stared at one another. Topping it off, was the fact that she was his girlfriend.

Falling asleep while heavily under the influence of alcohol wasn’t really falling asleep at all. More like a useless mix of sleep and passing out that wasn’t beneficial for rest or recuperation at all. Dry mouth, a thumping head and an empty, nauseating feeling consumed Selene when she managed to peel her eyes open and blink in the harsh crack of light from the drapes that was cast over her face. She sank down under the covers, reaching out and finding Daryl next to her. She slid to him, wrapping her limbs around him and sighing to herself when he enveloped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.

I feel awful.

Moving the covers down enough to peep over the top of them, she spotted both empty bottles of liquor and four of the six beers that were also empty.

“Oh goooooood” She groaned. His chest juddered under her and she realised he was laughing at her. She hadn’t noticed, but he had been awake for a while, watching her face as she slept, letting himself have it as a secret few moments all to himself, where he could marvel at her without interruption. Firmly gripped in his arms, she could tell she still had her fishnets on and the rest of what she’d been wearing and that Daryl wore boxers under the covers.
“We didn’t have sex, right?” She asked.

“Nope. Almost, but nope.” He whispered against the top of her head. She nuzzled her head up to see him.

“Almost?” She queried.

“You don’t remember?” He checked.

“N-no” She replied nervously. There it was. The fear. The morning after the night before fear that she regularly experienced after a night so heavy she barely remembered anything. Soon, would come the shame. She was dreading it.

“You don’t really need to know. We didn’t do anything, that’s all that matters.” He told her.

“Was it me? Did I throw myself at you?!” She demanded, now alarmed that he might be trying to sweep something under the rug.

“No, you didn’t. It was both of us. We were both to blame.” He smiled as he brought a hand up and linked a finger under her chin, tilting her face to him so he could kiss her slowly.

Daryl was proud the amount of self-control he’d used that night. He wouldn’t have described her actions as throwing herself at him, but she had become less inhibited and when she’d crawled over to him and began kissing him while on all fours over his legs, there was a part of him that came up with a million and one excuses as to why he should just give in and have her. But, he didn’t. At first, he let her kiss her way over his chest, he let her undo his jeans and he let her plunge her hand inside and feel him in his entirety. He almost clawed himself backwards over the floor at the intense pleasure he felt so quickly. But he listened to her encouragement, her compliments and her purring ideas at him about what she wanted to do to him. At the time he thought that just for a while, he would enjoy this most unheard-of situation he found himself in and actually found himself taking an active role in what he would have thought was a moment where chit chat wasn’t welcome.

“I um, I told you what I wanted to do to you, didn’t I?” She asked, a hand coming out of nowhere and covering her face. “I have a vague memory of it.”

“Yeah, ya did. It wasn’t just you though.” He admitted.

She jolted backwards, looking at him in shock and disappointment. “And I don’t remember it?! Shit!” She gasped.
Daryl sniggered to himself “I aint givin’ ya no details. But it was somethin’ else. That shit usually costs $3.95 a minute”

“Oh my god!” She cried, now covering her face with both of her hands and rolling back with his arm under her neck as he continued to laugh. “Did I…do anything to you?” She pressed.

“Nah, I stopped ya before it got too far. Really didn’t want to.” He disclosed.

She sighed dramatically and laced all of her fingers into the front of her hair while she gawped at the ceiling in horror.

“Getting shitfaced wasn’t such a good idea.” She mentioned.

Despite Merle’s interruption, Daryl had never had such a good night in his life and even through his head hammered with pain and his body was crying out for some kind of liquid that wasn’t alcoholic, he couldn’t say he was displeased at her idea to get drunk together. He considered that he had probably learned quite a bit about her from it. Especially just how bashful she could be at times he didn’t expect it. On the end of a small compliment or when she’d caught him admiring her, which also revealed how much of her bravado at times when she was sober was a cleverly disguised lie. But when she felt comfortable, he saw her transform into a woman that was a hundred percent sure of herself and her ability to seduce him. She had shown him just how into him she was on a physical level, which had both stunned him and left him considering that it was all a little too good to be true. Thinking back over the nights events left him in a somewhat wound up state, especially when he remembered what it felt like just before Merle walked in, to have her bare skin pressed against him, to have his lips connect with her chest and breasts. To have his fingers inside her and making her cry out for more.

“I’m frustrated.” She stated, interrupting his thoughts.

“Yes” He agreed.

“I gotta go.” She told him, springing out of bed and quickly putting her clothes on.

“What? It’s only 5am. Merle’s back at 6.” He said, sitting up and following her as she quickly moved around the room, tugging her zips up on her boots and wresting with the button on her shorts.

“I told you. I’m frustrated. I can’t stay here with you anymore, hardly dressed and wanting to fuck your brains out. It’s ridiculous. I need to-I need to go home and take a cold shower or something. I don’t know.” She rambled.

There it was again, she was becoming more and more upfront with him and instead of embarrassing him like it used to, he now just found it flattering and highly amusing the way she
just threw it into a sentence. He slid out of bed, and pulled his jeans on before throwing a flannel shirt over his shoulders and leaving it open at the front. His hair was messy, stuck up at one side and his eyes puffy from his hangover and poor sleep quality. Selene, even though she’d voiced how awful she felt, seemed spritlier all of a sudden and it only added to the strangeness of her random behaviour.

“Thanks for a nice night.” She continued, picking up her cell phone that had somehow ended up on the floor. She avoided his gaze the whole time she flitted about “I mean, it was more than nice it was great, real great. But now I gotta go. I can’t look at you and your fucking gorgeous arms anymore.”

Stumbling out of the room, she raced to the front door with Daryl in tow.

“Selene?” He called after her as she opened it.

“What?” She responded, her chest rising and falling in a panic. He had a broad smile on his face.

“Ya aint goin nowhere.” He told her.

“What? Yes, I am. I’m leaving, now. I’m going home to my cold shower” She said defiantly.

“How ya gonna get there?” He asked.

Her face dropped. The realisation setting in that she was up in the mountains in the middle of nowhere and she needed Daryl to drive her home.

“Five minutes” He snorted in delight “Probably shouldn’t be drivin’ but I’ll get my keys.”

He walked back to his room, leaving Selene in the doorway to the house, rapidly tapping her finger against her leg.

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The odd snigger and breathy huff were all that could be heard in the trucks cab as Daryl drove Selene back to The Ink Cabinet. She couldn’t help but keep looking over at him and he found it increasingly difficult not to do the same. Despite not being able to have each other completely, he did feel as though they had somehow grown closer overnight and as much as he didn’t want her to leave before she absolutely had to, he had to admit to himself that he understood her frustration and he needed a cold shower as much as she did. When he stopped the truck in the parking lot, he slowly turned his head to her, finding her fiddling with her lip rings, rotating them back and forth with a finger all while her leg bounced up and down. She froze when she saw him looking at her.
The truck rocked when she launched herself across the seats to him, somehow managing to end up on his lap with a leg either side of him, the steering wheel not seemingly a problem. He groaned at how forceful and passionate her kiss was, her tongue seeking entry and her hands groping between his legs. Her insistence on being able to touch him in this way only told him that he was allowed to do the same. She bucked and gasped at the sensation of his fingers, which were rubbing up and down, along the seam of her shorts which was positioned perfectly in the middle. She released a frustrated growl as she kissed him, feeling him lift his hips and push up to meet her hand. She broke away and leaned back against the steering wheel. While she had removed her hands from him, Daryl hadn’t done the same. His fingers still gently pressed on the denim covered space between her legs.

“Uuuuuuggghhh, I can’t keep my fucking hands off you.” She panted.

“Same” He agreed between breaths.

“You have to. Please.” She pleaded, resting her hand over his wrist. He gave in and removed his hand from her.

“If you’re gonna go, go now. I can’t stand this.” He said honestly.

“OK, OK.” She agreed, clicking the driver’s side door open and carefully climbing from his lap and out of the truck. She closed the door behind her and took a last look at him, both of them still trying to catch their breath.

“I want to see you. Soon.” She stated.

“You will.” He assured her as he started the truck’s ignition. She quickly ran back to the truck’s window and leaned through it, grabbing his shirt and pulling him to her for one, final kiss. Before she left him, she held on for a few more seconds, moving round to his ear.

“When you get home and you’re alone, I want you to remember…” She whispered. “…I’ll be using my hand but I’ll be thinking of you.”

She quickly let go of him, turned on her heels and walked to the back door of her building, not subjecting herself to seeing his reaction.
Daryl slumped back in the seat, thudding his head on the head rest and letting out a deep sigh, not able to concentrate on driving just yet.

“Damn, girl.” He muttered to himself.

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Thanksgiving and Christmas had come and gone and Ritchie was still in rehab having relapsed once and been placed firmly back on the straight and narrow. He was now allowed restricted
contact with the outside world in the form of the odd phone call and he had chosen to call Ray and Selene over his own mother. Selene had sat at the front desk of The Ink Cabinet and chattered away to him with Ray at her side. She swapped excited glances with him as she told Ritchie that his job was waiting for him when he returned, provided he was fit and well and his head was in the right place.

Daryl had been in an official relationship with Selene for almost 6 weeks and as each new day dawned, he grew increasingly fond of her. Wanting to be with her during every waking moment, he found himself having to set some personal rules for fear of driving her away or coming on too strong. He would answer her calls every night and say yes to almost every time she asked to see him, except when he had to meet junkies late at night and sell them substances that he knew would ruin their lives.

He tossed and turned most nights, savouring the various mental images he had stored away of them entwined in various stages of ‘very nearly’ and ‘not quite there’ moments. Daryl was guilty of stopping things once or twice, his emotions flooding through him like a tidal wave and leaving him in a confused and freaked out state. Selene was patient and understanding, having her own reservations about embarking on something so profound, not knowing how it would leave her feeling or even if she was ready to open herself up to such vulnerability. It was what they both had in common, a shared lack of any kind of meaningful relationship experience. There was no doubt the physical attraction was there, they’d shared more than one close call. Wandering hands, longing stares and even the odd grope under a table when they thought no one was looking. But ultimately, they had both ended up at a dead end.

In Marty’s bar, Selene, Axel and Shorty shared a gigantic bowl of ice cream while Ray and Bear played pool. Selene, making the most of the fact that she hadn’t paid for a thing in the two hours they’d been there, scooped up a gigantic spoonful of ice cream and stuffed it in her mouth, ignoring the searing brain freeze that followed and smacking her jaw noisily, without an ounce of manners.

Axel held up his spoon and licked it, catching sight of her just past the metal. He watched her shovelling ice cream into her mouth as if she hadn’t been fed in years and shot a glance at Shorty, who was also observing her with a baffled look. She examined the spoon, turning it around in the air and scrunching her face up in appreciation.

“Mmmm” She groaned “That is so good.”

“You um, hungry? Selene?” Shorty asked.

“Huh? Oh, no. Not really.” She said casually as she shoved the utensil back into the freezing substance and scooped out another serving for herself.

“Could have fooled me.” Axel commented.

In truth, her frustrated state was leading her to obsess over the little things in life. The taste of ice cream, the changes in the weather and once, when she’d watched a bumblebee on a single flower in the parking lot for half an hour while Ray looked at her like she’d grown three heads.

She had given little information to anyone about her relationship with Daryl, only that it was going well and she was happy. They had seen him quietly whispering to her at the door of the studio most mornings, kissing her goodbye before heading off to work and leaving her dreamy and distracted. Then, he would turn up after closing to take her on a date or to bring her take-out. They had all assumed everything was fine and that she had no issues. That was, until Axel and Shorty bore
witness to the odd but bordering on sexual way she was eating ice cream.

“Axel, you, um...you and Skye, you’ve done the...uh...the thing.” She stammered with a mouth full of strawberry sweetness.

“Think she’s asking if you’ve had sex with Skye yet, dude. Just in her awkward Selene language.” Shorty interrupted, his expression questioning and directed at her.


Far from being shy about such a topic, Axel simply shrugged and offered up his answer.

“Oh. Yeah. Sure, we have. Why?” He said.

She dropped her spoon into the bowl and stared at him, her lip rings covered in sticky, strawberry ice cream. Shorty quickly pointed to his own lips and flicked his index finger back and forth in front of them. She instantly got the message, rolling her eyes and roughly dragging her hand over her lips and ridding the metal rings of any mess.

“You guys haven’t been together long.” She commented.


“Yeah” Scoffed shorty. “Life is short and you were dying to get laid.”

Axel glanced to his side and picked up his beer, bringing it close to his face and pausing for a second to think.

“Well, yeah.” He admitted before taking a sip of his drink.

Ray could be heard over the hum drum chatter of the bars patrons, calling Bear a ‘fuckin’ loser’ and laughing manically along with the sound of the balls on the pool table cracking as they collided with one another. As the music changed, Selene’s attention briefly waned due to her appreciation of the jukebox choice.

“Have you and Daryl?” Shorty asked, snapping her out of her distraction.

Her eyes grew large and panicked and she collected her spoon and once again threw a huge spoonful of ice cream into her mouth, her teeth spiking with pain.

“Mmhmm” She lied, circling her spoon in the air in front of her and closing her eyes, willing the freezing, agonising texture in her mouth to melt quickly. As the pain began to subside, she took a huge gulp of her beer. “Sure, we have. All the time. I mean, it’s great, y’know? Real great. Can’t get enough of each other”

Axel and Shorty looked at one another.

“They haven’t.” Axel stated.


She threw the spoon back into the bowl and huffed to herself, sitting back, wiping her mouth on her hand again and crossing her arms over her corseted torso. Her perfectly made-up eyes danced between the two men sat in front of her who obviously knew her better than she’d given them credit for.
Ray appeared with Bear in tow while Axel and Shorty both leaned forward and silently demanded some kind of explanation from her which she was now extremely reluctant to give. Picking up on the fact that he’d walked right into the middle of something, Ray quickly sank into his seat and took a sip through the straw of his drink, dodging the sharp spikes of the small cocktail umbrella that he always insisted on. Bear grabbed a chair, turned it around and sat on it backwards, the legs straining under his great weight.

“What are y’all bein’ so awkward about?” Ray questioned.

“Ask Selene,” Axel replied, giving her a sly wink. She remained in her sulky position, her eyes narrowing at them all.

“You’re going to make me talk about this in front of my fucking brother guys? C’mom” She sighed.

“Bear, go get me a bowl of ice cream.” Ray ordered, clicking his fingers in Bears face.

“Gladly.” Came the response. Bear not wanting to hear anything his sister wasn’t comfortable telling him anyway. He stalked off to the bar, finding a pretty female to stand beside and Ray knew there and then that he wasn’t going to get his own bowl of ice cream. He leaned on the table, propping his head up with his hand and gazed at her expectantly. Now, she had three of her friends waiting impatiently for information.

“Fine. We haven’t.” She confessed.

Ray didn’t even need to be told what she meant, knowing straight away and sucking in a loud and dramatic breath. His hand shot up to his chest and he quickly looked to his side at Axel and Shorty.

“Is she fuckin’ serious?!?” He demanded, receiving a nod from Shorty.

“We wanted to take it slow, we both have our reasons. But now we’re at this point and it’s getting really, really difficult to hold back. I’m so frustrated. This morning, I was having breakfast and I found a banana attractive.” She complained, her hands flailing up in the air.

“Lord above! That is TRAGIC Selene!” Ray cried. “You have to do something about this or I’mma have to hide the fruit bowl”

“One of us always stops things. But there was the time I stayed at his place. Things were… progressing. I was literally down to my last stitch of clothing aaaaand then Merle walked in on us.” She told them.

All three of their faces fell and their eyes widened. Shorty began to chuckle while Axel and Ray stared at her, open-mouthed.

“Holy shit. Cock blocked by his own brother.” Shorty chortled, leaning back in his seat.

“You need to start locking doors.” Axel commented with a knowing look. Selene chose to ignore his subtle reference to the time he’d walked in on her getting dressed, not wanting to believe he still remembered it even though he clearly did.

“Oh honey, that’s enough to scar you for life.” Ray said sympathetically and placing a hand on her arm.

“We were both a little freaked out. So, we just got trashed together instead. Since then it’s like every single time one of us stops things. Is this too soon? Are we doing the right thing?” She asked,
exasperated at even having to go over it.

Ray exhaled from the corner of his mouth and rubbed a hand over his face, pausing to slick a finger over each eyebrow to ensure they were still perfectly preened.

“Only you and Daryl know the answer to that. You’ve known each other a while now. Think it’s safe to say y’all were always a little more than friends. I’d say its been long enough. Go get you some.” Axel expressed.

Shorty nodded in response to Axel’s take on things.

“I agree. Maria and I waited. It was agony, but it was awesome when it happened.” He volunteered.

Selene recoiled and shot them all a wary look.

“What if I’m not good enough?” She squeaked.

This kind of admission was usually something she would only ever share with Ray, but the entire group were her best friends and had seen her through some of the most difficult and awkward times of her life. For a bunch of guys, they had been more willing to rally around her and offer her advice than any of the females she had known in her life. Except for Delilah and her mother, that was.

“Bullshit.” Shorty snapped quickly.

“Yeah, don’t say that. That’s crap.” Axel agreed.

“I’m gonna kick ya ass if ya come out with that kinda shit again.” Ray scolded. “You are stunnin’. You’re a god damn queen. I can see it when he’s with ya, he thinks he’s the luckiest motherfucker in the world to be with you.”

She reached a hand over the table and squeezed Ray’s hand. Looking over at the other two, she offered them a sincere and thankful smile.

“Thank you, guys.” She smiled.

“Call him tonight and invite him over.” Axel suggested.

“He’s going to think I’m obsessed with sex or something.” She huffed.

“He’s a guy, can almost guarantee that he hopes you are.” Ray reasoned. “I aint gonna get my ice cream am I? I’ll settle for cake instead.”

“Brad!” Selene called out to her brother, who was leaning on the bar in front of the same woman that was there before, grinning at her. He scowled at his sister for interrupting him.

“We want cake. We need cake.” She ordered.

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That night saw Selene settled on her bed with her sketchpad on her lap and her cell phone in her hand. Daryl’s number was at the top of her recent contact list but for the first time in a while, she was nervous about calling him. Should she do what Axel suggested? Or, should she just invite him over and see what happened. She didn’t know if she could take another situation brought to the brink but then stopped at the last minute and so told herself that if things transpired that way, she wasn’t going to stop unless he asked her to. She hit the call button and held her breath.
“Hey.” He answered, his tone giving away that he already knew it was her even if he hadn’t checked the screen before accepting the call.

“Hi. I miss you. It’s dumb. I’m sorry.” She blurted out unintentionally. She quickly covered her mouth to stop anything else equally as embarrassingly honest from creeping out. She could hear him laugh to himself for a moment.

“It aint dumb. I miss you too.” He told her.

“I know it’s late, but do you want to come over to my place. Stay the night with me?” She asked, lowering her hand and anxiously toying with the edge of her black, satin nightdress.

“Um, I’m already out. I’m kinda busy.” He said. She felt her stomach drop.

He’s blowing me off.

“You are?” She questioned.

“Yeah, I gotta meet a couple folks.” He informed her.

He’s dealing.

“Oh…Right. I see. Forget it, it doesn’t matter.” She stammered, feeling a strange mix of anger, disappointment and worry.

“No, I want to. I do. I just need an hour or so. Just gotta do this, since Ritchie-”

Money. He needs the money because he refused to sell to my friend.

There it was. Since he went to Rehab, Selene hadn’t given much thought to how his lack of business would affect Daryl but it undoubtedly meant he was worse off financially which was something he had kept to himself after she’d expressed that she wanted to remain ignorant about his illegal activities.

“It’s OK, I understand. Just come over when you’re done. I’ll leave the key in the plant pot by the back door.” She chirped, attempting to hide the concern in her voice.

“Alright.”

“OK, I’ll see you soon.”

“Selene?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for understandin’.”

“It’s fine. See you later.”

*****

It was an hour and a half later when Daryl finally showed up. She wasn’t angry about him being longer than he’d said. In fact, she had simply sat there and worried about him wandering the streets in the middle of the night selling drugs. She worried about it being dangerous. She worried about him getting caught and she worried that it was something he may never be able to give up as long as he worked for her father. When he unlocked her front door, he found her laying on her front on
her bed drawing designs in her sketchbook. The sight of her scantily clad, pale but heavily inked skin stopped him in his tracks. He hadn’t expected to be greeted by such a delicious sight.

“Thought ya might have fallen asleep.” He managed to say as he clicked the door closed and slid the bolt across.

“I ate half a ton of ice cream and a piece of cake with the guys earlier, I’m on one hell of a sugar high. Take your shit off, get comfy. There’s beer in the refrigerator, some more cake I couldn’t resist bringing home with me and, yeah-you’ll find other stuff. I have to stop talking now. Wow.” She rambled.

He laughed quietly at her hyperactivity and made his way to the bed and tenderly kissed her forehead. She smiled up at him before going back to her drawing.

“I’m good, thanks. Had a busy night, just wanna chill.” He told her as he tugged off his boots and vest and settled next to her on the bed, watching her sketch.

“What you do. Is it dangerous?” She asked without looking up.

Daryl had to stifle a mildly irritated sigh. He had always known there was a chance she may question him about his illegal activities and until now she had remained apparently disinterested. But she had been tolerant and understanding on this particular night and as a result, he felt the need to answer whatever questions she had, provided she really wanted to hear his answers.

“Said ignorance was bliss.” He reminded her.

“I care about you, I need to know if you could get hurt.” She stated. She turned the sketchbook on her lap and began shading a different section.

“Sometimes. Town’s drugs are mostly distributed by Bill’s guys. But there are others, from gangs n shit. Sellin’ on someone else’s turf can mean a gun to the head. Or a beatin’. Worse if ya keep on doin’ it.” He explained.

“That ever happened to you?” She wanted to know, still shading her drawing and appearing disinterested, although he knew different.

“Yeah, one or twice. I got regulars now though, don’t need to branch out much no more.” He replied honestly.

“Right. OK. Thank you for being truthful.” She said nodding down at the page.

Accepting that it was the end of the conversation and being glad about it. He licked his lips as his eyes took in the satin of her nightdress. He lifted a hand, lightly dragging his fingertips over her shoulder and down her back.

“I like this” He uttered

Finally, she looked up at him, her gaze lingering on him for what seemed like forever while he tried to read her expression. He was used to silence, he was even used to being stared at so while he waited for her to give him some kind of hint as to what was going through her mind, he just admired her two-tone eye and her lightly freckled, make-up free face. He thought she was even more beautiful without her eyeliner and eyebrows painted on.

He had told her once. They were in his kitchen after she had spent yet another night at his place, taking advantage of Merle’s night shifts at the club. Wearing one of his shirts as a result of yet
another close call, she wandered in silently and snaked her arms around his waist while he fixed them some coffee. He turned in her embrace and looked down at her uncovered, exposed and pretty features. She usually spent her days behind an expertly applied veil of designer make-up and heavy black eyeliner. It wasn’t to hide anything, Daryl knew that much. It was just simply who she was. So bowled over was he by her natural appearance, it took him a good few seconds to form the words. She had heard them before, knowing how much it took for him to say something so meaningful. But this time he got to witness her cheeks redden and her look away shyly.

“You’re so beautiful.” Were the words that resonated in her head. What he didn’t know, is that she remembered in fine detail every time he had ever said it to her, and she wasn’t likely to forget.

In the present, she studied his narrowed eyes, his thin lips and his bristled chin, moving her vision down to his strong arms and hands. Her friends were right, they had waited long enough and above all else she felt like the previous nights maybe weren’t meant to happen anyway. Now, everything felt right.

“You wanna take it off me?” She suddenly asked. She was challenging him. This time there was something different in her eyes. A determination and intensity that caught him off guard.

“Your doesn’t want to wait anymore. Neither do I. He thought.

”You know I do.” He said.

She closed her sketchbook and hooked the pen on the binding before pushing it to the other side of the bed. Rolling over into her back, she smoothed her hand up his bare arm.

“Come here.” She whispered.

He moved over her, propped up by one elbow and gently holding the side of her face as he kissed her. She took full advantage of his sleeveless shirt, curling her fingers around his biceps and feeling herself melt under him. His hand moved from her face, down to her chest, over her breast and stomach, the black satin underneath creating a sensuous and silky barrier.

“No interruptions. No reasons to stop. Just me and you.” She breathed.

His wordless response was the drawing up of her nightdress over her thighs, revealing black, lace underwear that he hadn’t seen before. The corner of his mouth curled into a smile.

Is this for me?

So enamoured with the sight, he hadn’t noticed her unbuttoning his shirt. The sensation of her feeling over his chest telling him she wanted to move things along. He leaned down, planting his lips on her neck and leaving warm, delightful kisses on her skin. She hummed happily as a smile spread across her face, her hand finding his belt and working the leather from the clasp. He quickly came to her aid, unbuckling his belt and releasing the button on his jeans. Selene pulled the zipper down and began pushing his jeans from his hips as he went back to her underwear, his lips still kissing down her neck, soon meeting her chest.

Her body tensed slightly and a sharp breath left her lips when he slipped his hand into the front of her panties. Her mind was racing, full of insecure, self-doubting thoughts that she tried to shove away before they threatened to ruin everything again. His fingers rubbed a gentle line, up and down over her clit and between her folds as he moved back up to her face, kissing her deeply and slipping his tongue between her lips. An unfamiliar sensation caught his attention, causing him to stop kissing her and pull back so she could see her face.
“Ya tremblin’, you alright?” He asked.

Indeed, she was. Her body was wracked with anxiety and her breathing had become short and sharp. She’d hoped he hadn’t noticed and her heart sank when he did.

“I’m- I’m fine. It’s nothing.” She stammered, very aware of where his hand still was, hooked under the black lace and resting, waiting with anticipation to resume its journey.

“Don’t feel like nothin’.” He pressed.

“I’m just being stupid.” She commented, wishing he would drop it but at the same time, touched at his genuine concern and reluctance to let it go. He removed his hand from her underwear and relaxed on the pillow beside her.

“Shouldn’t be havin’ sex with me if ya can’t talk to me.” He offered. A statement she hadn’t expected to hear from him and also couldn’t argue with.

“I can talk to you. I trust you. I’m just…” her sentence faded and she paused to gather the courage to be honest. “…I’m just really nervous.”

At her admission, he became even more enamoured with her. Relief flooded over him, reassuring him that he wasn’t the only one that felt that way. He was curious though, what could she possibly be nervous about when she was usually the one that displayed all the confidence and led everything?

“What are ya worried about?” He queried with some caution, not wanting to push too much.

“I-I don’t want to disappoint you.” She uttered. Her voice was laced with such sincerity that Daryl didn’t even have to question it. What he did do, was involuntary release a small huff and a smile of incredulity.

“You kiddin’ me?!” He asked, deliberately looking her body over and running a hand along the curves of her side. “ Couldn’t disappoint me if ya tried.”

“I might.” She argued.

“Naw. It ain’t possible.” He assured her, nudging at her nose with his. “You’re fuckin hot, girl.”

“OK.” She breathed through a jagged exhalation. “OK.”

He decided to give her a minute to relax, needing to settle his own nerves.

“What about you? Why are you nervous?” She wanted to know, figuring if she was going to feel exposed in her confession, it was only fair she heard his concerns too.

“Regular guy stuff I guess.”

She didn’t really have to press him for more details. Their drunken nights spent together in the last 6 weeks revealing more about his encounters than he cared to remember himself or than he wanted her to know But, alcohol had coaxed it out of him and Selene had taken mental notes. Still, she hazarded a guess.

“It’s been a long time?” She questioned.

“Yeah.”
She brushed his hair from his forehead, rubbing a thumb over his skin.

“Whatever happens, it’s fine. Really. There’s always round two, right?” She promised, running her fingers through the side of his tousled hair. He smiled down at her before lightly kissing her forehead.

“Right.” He agreed.

She brought him back to her, pressing her lips to his more urgently by the second when he started to make a path over her jaw and down her neck. He slowly slid the strap of her nightdress down on one side to allow for better access to her chest as he peppered it with frantic yet heavenly kisses that made her writhe under him and dig her fingers into the flesh of his upper arm. Before she knew it, her underwear had been pushed down her legs and he was teasing her again. Such delicate lines that she found herself bucking her hips, needing more. She heard him smile and breathe close to her ear when he’d decided to move back to her neck and nip at her skin.

“You’re teasing me.” She gasped.

“Naw… I wouldn’t do that.” He whispered sarcastically, resulting in a giggle from her as she rolled over to him and hooked her leg over his hip. Her positioning told him she wanted more and that his teasing wouldn’t be tolerated much longer, no matter how much he was enjoying her raising her hips to him.

She glided her hands over his chest, pushing his shirt from his shoulders and needing his bare skin against hers as she drew her arms around his shoulders and pulled him further over her. With her legs now either side of his, she could sense him nudging them up from underneath with his knees as he connected his forehead with hers, seeing her smiled up at him breathlessly and he thought it might have been the prettiest he’d ever seen her. Vulnerable yet determined, nervous yet trusting. Her lips were reddened from his sometimes-harsh kisses that she enjoyed just as much as the softened ones.

Daryl’s hand made its way back down her body, snaking over her stomach to its previous position. He kept his eyes on hers while his fingers danced circles over her clit, applying more pressure the more she reacted and enjoying the subtle, feminine gasps she made when he pushed a finger inside her. One at first, allowing her to adjust, followed by a second and his body began to shudder and tingle with anticipation. His lips worked down, over the dip in her stomach, across the ink branded into her skin until he reached the most secret part of her. She drove her hands into his hair as his tongue flickered over her, propelling her rapidly into a state of heated ecstasy.

The taste of her drove him insane, becoming drunk on her as he licked at her like she was some kind of sweet liquor he couldn’t get enough of. She involuntarily whimpered and it seemed to encourage him, his hands gripping at her thighs and driving them up, further apart so his lips and tongue could taste more of her, delving into her entrance. She inhaled sharply and bucked her hips at the sensation of his warm, wet tongue. She wriggled, trying to alleviate the pressure that was building but to no avail, one hand thudding onto the bed and gripping the sheets in a tightly balled fist, the other grabbing a fistful of his hair so she could hold him where he was.

Daryl briefly peeked up from his position and caught her eye, she flashed him shy but suggestive smile, squashing any self-doubts he had about this most bold of moves for him. His eyes were darkened and he knew she loved it by the stinging of his scalp under her hand. She was just as enthralling as he had imagined her to be in the moments when he was alone and able to let his imagination work its magic. But now it was real and her almost tuneful moans and husky breaths were all because of him. He lowered his head again, circling, drawing the letters of her name against her with his tongue until she began to grip even harder on his hair and breathe faster.
Needing to see more of her, he climbed back over her and in one swift movement, she found her satin clothing to be nothing more than discarded fabric on the bed next to her. She grabbed at him, at his arms, his chest then at his now unclothed hips as he resumed his quest to watch her squirm with pleasure with his hand between her legs. Able to reach out to him, she took full advantage and attempted not to get too carried away with the sensation of him gently pulsing in her hand as she caressed him. But he was winding her up, tighter and tighter with every beckoning movement and every badly hidden growl from his throat. She seized his wrist, halting his movements and panted rapidly. He was confused but didn’t show it, instead nuzzling into her chest and kissing up to her neck.

“You want me to stop?” He asked quietly.

“I’m going to come if you don’t.” She sighed, feeling his entire body still against hers.

“I want you to.” He whispered, giving it a couple of seconds before he moved back slightly to see her reaction. She gazed up at him with her lips parted and gradually let go of his wrist. Once more, the corner of his mouth lifted into a satisfied half smile and he applied a thumb to her sensitive spot, pushing back inside her. She arched her back and held her breath, increasing her grasp on him and working him faster, if she was being coaxed to the edge, she wasn’t about to let him get away with holding back.

Every ripple of his fingers inside her brought her to teetering on the brink and her voice vanished when she tried to warn him, all that was left was a throaty rumble as a carnal gratification rocked through her body so intensely that she felt it in her fingertips and her toes. Her eyes closed. Darkness guiding her through her high, heightening her sense of touch. The sound and sight of her orgasm shuddering through her core and limbs was nearly too much for Daryl, who was almost as tightly wound as Selene from the purposeful and well executed strokes of her hand. He nudged his way into the crook of her shoulder and kissed her collarbone.

“Uh, fuck… stop.” He warned, his breath warm against her now electrified skin.

Even in the throes of such a blissful encounter, she took it in and released him from her grasp as she opened her eyes to see him over her, biting his shiny lower lip. She grinned at him, a small giggle escaping her lips. He withdrew his hand from her and kissed her roughly, resulting in another whimper, this time louder and perfectly in tune with his lust filled groan. Her senses were heightened, her mind cleared of complicated and nerve-wracking thoughts. There was only the two of them, cocooned in their long-awaited exquisite embrace.

“Ohmygodyou’regororgeous” She managed to gasp between kisses, the words all said together in one long breath.

Damn. He thought. I’m one lucky son of a bitch.

His veins were raging with desire and he considered that he could touch her everywhere, for as long as he wanted but it still wouldn’t be enough. She was pinned under him, wrapped around him and he still wasn’t satisfied. He could almost feel the chemistry between them licking at his skin, the most primal, sensual yet emotional connection he had ever experienced. It was her lips, her enthusiasm. She kissed him like she wanted to kiss him forever and he couldn’t even stop to breathe.

He worked down to her chest, kissing her breast and skimming his tongue over her nipple. One of her hands was now on his hips, holding him to her, feeling his waiting erection against her leg. She repositioned herself, creating a gap so her other hand could reach down and grasp him, her thumb smoothing over his tip. He let her gently squeeze and work her fingers along his shaft, up and
down a few times, his muscles tensed and his teeth ground together and he felt the unmistakable
tightening of his balls and the tension inside of him and just had to pull away. He sighed loudly
against her shoulder.

“Stop” he gasped, his voice cracking.

If it wasn’t for the still heated touch of him on her skin, skimming over her thighs and stomach and
breasts, Selene would have gone into a panic.

“But, you did it for me” She urged.

“I-I can’t handle it.” He admitted

Then, it all made sense. Her own insecurities were redundant, she wasn’t doing anything wrong,
she just needed to take it easy.

“No. It’s my turn.” She announced abruptly and much to his surprise. Her tone of voice had
changed. She wasn’t apprehensive and shy anymore. Something in her had switched.

He blinked in disbelief when she suddenly rolled him over, ripped his jeans off and, fixed him to
the bed with her tattooed legs. Her hair tumbled from her shoulders and framed her breasts. She set
to work on him, setting his skin alight with her swollen, pink lips while she kissed her way down
his torso, soon manoeuvring herself over his legs and straddling one of them as her hand claimed
him once more. He was watching her every move with a complete, unwavering fascination.

The hell is she gonna to do to me?

Her eyes shot up and caught his. Instantly he felt his cock harden and twitch in her hand, the look
on her face turning him on more than the bodily contact for a split second.

“I need this.” She hummed.

Daryl’s eyebrows raised towards his hairline and a small grunt of shock escaped him. He wasn’t
sure if he was supposed to say anything back. No one had ever shown this much longing for him
before and he never thought anyone would.

She needs it? Needs?! She needs my…goddamn.

When she lowered her vision, her hair obscured his view. Rapidly propelled into a state of sheer
elation, he sensed her lips wrap around him and his head thudded back onto the pillow.

“Oh fuck” He groaned, his voice gravelly and broken.

She used every skill she possessed, holding nothing back and refusing to let nerves stop her from
giving him the most memorable experience of his life. Artistic hand movements followed by
affectionate motions as she caressed his thighs and held his hands and executed all sorts of other
tactics that he was experiencing for the first time. If he was honest, he no idea what was going on,
only that he was now seriously struggling to hold it together. She went from fast to slow, mild to
deep throat. He thought it amazing how she managed to pick up on how close he was to release,
only to switch up her pace and slow things down. He didn’t think such paradise was possible.

She was aware he didn’t want to completely come undone before he got a chance to be inside her
and it wasn’t something she wanted to pass up either. So, she eventually sat up and gave him yet
another glorious view as she ran her hands through her hair, her stomach pulling tight and her eyes
closing. When she lowered her eyes to him, she noticed the delectable tones of his muscular arms,
one pinned under his head where he had previously had no choice but to relax and let her do her thing.

She flung an arm out and blindly rummaged through the nightstand drawer, not wanting to move her gaze from him and soon finding what she was looking for. In her teeth, she bit the small, shiny packet. Losing control of his reactions, his mouth hung open when she ripped the packet open and slipped the condom over him, quickly and effortlessly as if she were some kind of expert. Looking back at her again, she tilted her head to the side, a questioning and calculating expression sweeping across her features.

“You want me?” She asked with a sly smile.

If Daryl didn’t know her as well as he did and wasn’t completely obsessed with her, he would have been a little hesitant at her out of the blue change in confidence and the precision and skill she seemed to possess. But he knew in the back of his mind that she was doing this because she was comfortable and she trusted him and any intentions he had to stop her were quickly being dispelled by the vision of her above him like some vampiric goddess, gently clawing over his chest and stomach. He slipped both hands up her thighs.

“I want you.” He responded.

Her eyes slowly blinked and she raised herself up, lining him up with her and stopping short of lowering herself down onto him. She saw his jaw tighten with pure want when she halted just above him and detected his fingers gripping onto both of her thighs. Tension fell heavy around them and he almost lifted his hips when he saw her raise an eyebrow. He needed to be inside her. He couldn’t wait any more.

“You want this?” She purred.

“Jesus Christ” He uttered to himself.

Instead of giving him what he wanted, she toyed with him further, grazing his tip across her entrance, her expression not faltering once. She was serious. Deadly serious. She wanted more.

“I’m not sure if you do.” She challenged. He was throbbing for her but she maintained her composure as much as her body was screaming at her to give in.

“I-I do.” He stammered, his hands still tightly clasping her legs but now sliding further up as if he were trying to push her down over him. His eyes flitted between her face and her holding him, poised and desperate under her.

He hadn’t intended for the word to leave his lips. It had been running through his mind the entire time she had been straddled over him and he had managed to keep it at bay until her façade cracked subtly and she shot him a hint of a smile.

“Please”

Please. Fuckin’ please!

Slowly tracing her tongue over her lip rings, she finally lowered her hips, allowing him to fill her and having to stop halfway to enable both of them to adjust and keep a hold of their self-control. She leaned forwards slightly, bracing herself on his chest. A simultaneous gasp filled the room when she settled down on him, both of them in unison. He couldn’t move for a few seconds, the sensation too strong, too powerful and too threatening already for him to even think about it. Selene seemed to know it, her entire body coming to a standstill. He reached up, gathering her hair
to one side and deciding there and then that the view may have been incredible, but she was too far away from him. He sat up and wrapped his arms around her, lightly biting her exposed neck and ever so slightly tilting his hips up, filling her entirely. She draped her arms over his shoulders and began to find a rhythm as she moaned happily.

Daryl had made it through the initial hurdle and by that point was forced to briefly revert his thoughts to something else to keep himself in check, especially when he realised at one point that his eyes were closed and upon opening them, he was faced with her reddened lips and magnificent, decorated chest. Her head tilted back and she groaned and panted loudly, safe in the knowledge that no one could hear them. It was a sound that he knew he would never get tired of hearing.

To her, it was perfect. Everything she had hoped for so far. She hadn’t felt such a strong bond with anyone before and it had turned their first sexual experience into something bigger than that, another level that she hadn’t anticipated.

“You feel so good.” She breathed. Everything from her waist down was thrumming with pleasure that only built with every rock of her hips, his size and warmth fulfilling her perfectly.

Snapping her from her trance like state, he took hold of her hips and eased her to the side, laying her on her back and positioning himself between her legs. Levelling his face with hers, he kissed her as he entered her again, grunting and tensing for a split second while she rose to meet his first thrust. With both elbows either side of her head, she knew he now wasn’t going anywhere and that he needed to see her face and communicate everything he couldn’t say with his eyes. His pace was slower but more deliberate and he ensured to kiss her as deeply and seductively as his own limitations would allow, occasionally brushing his nose against hers in a lovingly filled display of affection.

She knew he had a thing for her lip rings when she felt him run his tongue over them multiple times and when she dragged her nails around his taut and muscular bicep, she found herself beginning to slip. She bent her legs and gently pressed on his lower back. His eyes locked on her bright blue irises, illuminated by the single, bedside lamp.

“Faster” She said quietly.

Honouring her request, he shifted slightly, tucking one arm back and holding onto one of her hips as he increased the pace of his thrusts. Selene’s breath hitched and she couldn’t stop a throaty growl from escaping her lips. The quick change had left Daryl clinging on and he felt a twinge of relief when she nibbled his earlobe and told him she was close through her teeth. With one hand, she eased him back so she could look down into the space between their bodies, seeing his cock disappear over and over as he drove into her. Her mouth hung open. Daryl noticed her looking down between them

“Pervert” He managed to pant with a smile.

She let her head drop back onto the pillow and smiled back at him. The perspiration on her forehead and between her breasts now glistening in the light. She held his gaze and her expression slowly changed to one of utter seriousness.

“Fuck me harder.” She ordered.

“I’mma come” He warned.

“Me too.” She replied.
Crashing his lips to hers, he slammed into her. A little harder than she was expecting but the vigorous and mildly violent nature of it served to build her up and up, higher and higher. Grunts and strangled moans filled the room along with the slapping sound of skin on skin. Her clit tingled and ached with pleasure, her toes began to tingle as if she had pins and needles and a wave of penetrating, forceful delight coursed through her. She cried out, a throaty and rough shout that would have been loud enough to draw the attention of the neighbours, if she had any. Her nipples brushed against his chest as she trembled and rode out her second high, holding onto his upper arms. Then, everything in him seemed to go rigid above her and the taut muscles and protruding veins in his neck along with his constricted and rippled arms, told her that he too was there.

His mind raced. Images flashed before his eyes like flashbacks. Her on top of him. His fingers inside her. Her chest as she came the first time. Her hands on his cock as she carefully twisted them around his length and sucked on his tip at the same time. Her looking down between them and getting off on the view of him fucking her.

He came as he kissed her, moaning into her mouth and shuddering against her frame while she clutched onto his sweat covered skin and tickled her fingers down his back. He throbbed inside her, his breath catching in his throat each time and presenting as a series of small groans which she revelled in the sound of. His vision was blurred and he couldn’t tell if it was sweat or because he’d never come so hard before.

“Oh my god” She whispered. Daryl collapsed on top of her, hoping she was able to take his weight because he was spent and couldn’t possibly hold himself up after such an earth-shattering orgasm. His laboured breathing was loud in her ear, but he gently feathered his lips over her earlobe and onto her jawline. She didn’t want to let him go, her arms around his torso, fixing him to her while she continued to drag her palms and fingers over his scars.

After a couple of minutes, he stirred and lifted himself back because of a need to see her face more than anything else. His eyes scanned hers with an intent that she couldn’t quite figure out. There was a kind of helplessness behind them that struck concern into her.

“Are you OK?” She asked.

Her question seemed to snap him back to reality because he jolted and rolled to her side on his back, his entire body slick and shiny with sweat. She had never seen anything sexier than him in that moment.

“Yeah, I’m good.” He sighed, bringing an arm up and placing it across his eyes. She snuggled closer to him, not caring that her arm became covered in sweat when she slipped it over his chest and left a quick kiss on his shoulder. When he lowered his arm, she saw him staring at the ceiling and it was as if the cogs in his head were working overtime. His brow was furrowed and he wore a confused and worried look.

“Daryl?” She pressed. “You don’t look OK” He did a double take at her, managing to veil his anxious appearance with a thin smile.

“I’m fine.” He assured her, placing a hand over her thin fingers that were circling around on his chest. “Are ya…are ya happy?”

She thought the question was a little odd at first, but soon just put it down to him making sure she was as satisfied as he was.

“Very happy. Twice over.” She grinned.
He smiled back at her, reaching over and brushing his thumb over her cheek.

“You’re amazin’.” He told her.

“So are you. You were worth waiting for.” She hummed.

He wanted to tell her something else, but was unsure how she’d take it. He weighed up the pro’s and con’s, concluding that there wasn’t actually a genuine con at all and if it were Selene, she’d just go right ahead and say it.

“I aint ever had a blowjob like that before.” He blurted out.

She propped her head up on her elbow and bashfully glanced down at his arm, moving her hand and feeling over the bumpy landscape. She was conscious that he hadn’t said he liked it, just that it was new.

“You liked it? Or was it too much?” She asked gingerly.

“Liked it? I loved it. That n’ everythin’ else. Shit, ya fuckin’ ruined me.” He chuckled subtly.

Selene felt awash with pride and satisfaction that she was able to please him to such an extent and that their first time had included all the elements she had hoped for. She had the opportunity to tease him, to make him beg for her, to show him just what her mouth could do and she was treated to two orgasms from him and the most passionate sex she had ever had.

“I’m glad you liked it.” She giggled. “You were right, I am kind of a pervert. You do things to me.”

He laughed again, not disliking the sensation of her examining his upper arm, being exactly what she said she was. A pervert. When she fell quiet and her breathing became heavier, he realised she’d fallen asleep and sat up, reaching down the bed for a folded-up blanket at the bottom and draped it over her still naked and exquisitely appealing body. He settled next to her, staring at the ceiling again for a while before he ended up watching Selene as she slept.

Not usually one to hang around after the act itself, this part was entirely new to Daryl and he was unsure of what to do with himself. His lack of comfort with affection had progressed leaps and bounds from being with Selene, but this was in a different league. He had already connected with her, physically and emotionally, the latter a lot more than he had anticipated and as he lay there and looked at his beautiful, post intimacy girlfriend, he realised he was terrified. So terrified, that when he was sure she was taken by the gentle lull of sleep, he carefully got up from the bed and got dressed.
Paranoia

Chapter Summary

Thank you all for the love, every comment, bookmark and kudos is greatly appreciated.

With this story, I wanted to try and convey how truly wonderful it is to be a female with such loyal, respectful and protective male friends. It's rare that men and women can be close without sex or feelings (or both) getting in the way. Sometimes it does, but it isn't always the case. This chapter is a little tribute to my kings. My little tribe of four, male best friends who have stood in the middle of bar brawls to protect me, took me out for dinner when i've been stood up, sat and gamed with me and watched crappy movies when I was lonely and always been there to dry my tears. It is possible for men and women to be friends and it's also amazing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday 7am

Selene stared at the empty space in the bed next to her. Hugging her knees, her eyes swept over the crumpled sheets, her discarded nightdress and the ripped, shiny condom packet. The black covers were drawn up around her chest and the silence of the room weighed heavily on her. Expecting Daryl to be there when she woke up didn’t seem to be much of a tall order to her when she considered what they had shared the night before. But he wasn’t there and no matter how much she told herself that he most likely just needed to go home and get ready for work, she couldn’t shake the heavy, gnawing feeling in her gut.

Why didn’t he wake me up to tell me?

Climbing out of bed, she went about her morning routine solemnly, trying not to let the negative thoughts clawing away in her mind consume her. She ate breakfast, wishing Ray had turned up with pancakes that morning more than ever. Choosing a black Ink Cabinet T-shirt and a pair of PVC pants to go with her military boots, she stopped as she passed the mirror by the door. She didn’t look any different to how she normally did. Her hair was still shimmering, her eyeliner was still sharp and her eyes were still bright. But she felt different. Disappointed. Uneasy. Worried.

11am

Ray shook the hand of his client, a butch football player that had been extremely reluctant to engage in conversation when he first began his tattoo, but by the end they were both laughing loudly and swapping stories about the different characters they’d spotted in the gym. He had tipped generously and Ray tucked the cash into the front pocket of his black uniform shirt before using the front desk computer to mark himself as free for walk in’s and going in search of Selene.
He found her outside in the parking lot, sitting quietly and sipping on a can of soda. For the first two hours of the tattoo parlour being open, Selene had hardly spoken to anyone and used updating the social media as an excuse to distance herself from everyone and try to quieten the disappointment in her heart. When Daryl hadn’t stopped by with coffee, or even walked past that morning, her mood began to wane further and Ray had instantly noticed that she wasn’t herself.

Throwing a jacket on, he sat next to her on the bench and for a few minutes, neither of them spoke as they soaked up the light of the sun and she drew the leather of her coat around her to shield herself from the cold air.

“You’re distracted. What’s goin’ on?” Ray eventually decided to ask.

She didn’t reply straight away, thoughtfully gazing down at the gravelly ground and making a mental note to clear up the cigarette ends from the floor at some point.

“Nothing. I’m good.” She replied.

“I smell bullshit.” Ray grunted back straight away.

Selene sighed, sipped her drink the from the can and placed it beside her on the wooden bench. She was aware that Ray wasn’t about to let her walk away without volunteering the truth. She didn’t want to talk about it, the niggling thought that she’d done something wrong prodding away in her mind. But Ray was the one person she knew she could disclose such information to.

“Daryl and I had sex last night” She murmured.

“At fuckin’ last!” Ray said with a certain degree of exasperation. He craned his neck, peering around her as she leaned forwards, her elbows on her knees. “Why the long face? Oh god, was it bad?!"

She finally looked back at him, smiling thinly and sitting back.

“No. It was far from bad. It was mind blowing. It’s just…Oh, it’s nothing I’m just being paranoid.” She dismissed.

He narrowed his eyes at her, telling her in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t about to leave it there.

“Spit it out.” He demanded.

“When I woke up, he was gone. He’s not been past the studio at all this morning. I usually either see him walk by or he brings me coffee. Like every day.” She explained.

“S’only been a few hours since you guys did the dance with no pants. Don’t worry your pretty head too much just yet. He’s probably just stayed at home and jacked off all morning. You guys waited a hella long time before sealing the deal, he aint gonna be able to think about much else.”

When he didn’t hear a response from beside him, he braved a quick glimpse of her expression which was the same one she wore whenever Ray said anything a little below the belt.

“If that were true, he’d have stayed for more and he’d have got it.” She pointed out.

“He know what he was doing?” Ray asked, ignoring her previous comment and the fact that she’d just refused to accept his reasoning.

“Enough to get me off twice.” She replied with a raised eyebrow.
“Twice? Ooh, girl.” He squealed, gently nudging her arm with his hand.

“Aside from being paranoid, I have that feeling that you get the next day after you’ve had the most incredible sex and it’s all you can fucking think about.” She admitted with a smirk.

Ray chuckled to himself and released a contented sigh.

“I know it well.” He agreed.

11:30pm

When the sun set, so did Selene’s last scrap of optimism. She still hadn’t seen Daryl, even after finding excuses to hang around in the studio after hours in case he wandered past, looking for her. She had been around him for months now and over the course of the last few weeks, he hadn’t failed to at least walk past once. It had become a kind of unspoken rule since he’d confessed to parking across town from his workplace so he could take the opportunity to see her even just for a minute. Now, she waited for him, offering a wave or a smile. He’d sometimes bring her a coffee or breakfast or she’d run into him in the diner, pretending she didn’t know he’d be there. It had become part of her morning routine and if on the rare occasion she didn’t see him in the morning, she could count on him stopping by after work, even just for a few minutes.

His absence was obvious and it was feeding Selene’s gut feeling that something was wrong somehow. She needed answers, reassurance that she was just overreacting. Picking up her cell from the side table by the front door, she wandered across the thick rug and threw herself on the bed, rolling over onto her back and finding Daryl’s number in her call log.

Her heart began to beat faster after the sixth ring. He usually answered on the third of fourth, knowing it’s her calling for their now normal late night chat. Her fingers drummed on the paperback book she had tried to read multiple times before giving up and accepting that her mind was too jumbled to even finish a sentence let alone understand it.

Her baggy sweatpants clung low on her hips as her exposed stomach growled under her short, black tank top. She hadn’t eaten all day, Daryl’s absence taking her appetite with it. She knew she should eat something, but the burning desire to get drunk and wallow in self pity was too overwhelming. Having no alcohol in her apartment anyway, she figured it was probably a good thing.

Still no answer. Then, his voicemail kicked in.

Selene took the phone from her ear and hit the end call button. She threw the cellphone down on the covers and covered her face with her hands.

“Shit” she hissed.

Reluctantly admitting defeat, she crawled into bed and tried to sleep but spent the night awake and consumed by paranoid thoughts and jumping to conclusions along with flashbacks of their first time together. Perfect but seemingly damaging at the same time.

Wednesday 9am

Ray, Axel and Shorty were throwing random insults at each other across the tattoo parlour when Selene thumped down the stairs in her heeled, knee high boots and short, black, denim skirt. She
smiled thinly at them as they quickly scurried about, tidying away breakfast wrappers, cups of coffee and latex gloves that had been tossed across the room.

Selene went straight to her desk, propped her elbow up on the surface and placed her chin on the heel of her hand. A loud sigh escaped her as her eyes moved to the view from the window. A view that should have Daryl in it, but hadn’t for the past three mornings.

Shorty slapped a pile of sketches on the desk in front of her, jolting her from her depressing daydream.

“OK, what’s wrong?” He wanted to know.

“Nothing.” She brushed off immediately.

Ray sat down on a stool nearby and scooted across the floor on it, it’s wheels squeaking as they moved. He stopped at the end of the desk and crossed his arms over his chest, pursing his lips and scowling at her expectantly. Axel appeared behind him, leaning on the partition wall.

“What is this?” Selene asked, feeling as though she was being put on trial.

“An intervention.” Shorty replied. “What’s going on? You’re not yourself. We can’t work like this, the atmosphere is shitty.”

As she peered up at him stood over her, her eyes began to well with tears and she cursed herself for being so bothered, for being so hurt and not being able to just move along and go about her days without her concentration wavering or her stomach feeling as though there was a pile of bricks in it.

Instinctively, Shorty reached out a hand and crouched down in front of the desk. He took hold of her fingers and gently squeezed them. Ray shot to action and plucked a Kleenex from a box under the desk and held it out to her. She took it with her free hand and tried to turn her head away from them.


Axel stepped forwards, planting himself between Shorty and Ray on the arm of the couch, he rubbed at his chin, his face etched with concern.

“Daryl is ghosting me.” She sniffed.

“You still ain’t heard from him?” Ray asked.

“No. I’ve not seen him. He’s not answering my calls either.” She told them as she dabbed a stray tear away from her cheek.

“You still call him every night?” Axel questioned.

Selene furrowed her brow at him, her eyes now too full of tears to control. The rolled down her cheeks, leaving tracks in her make-up.

“How do you know that?” She squeaked.

“He told me.” He answered.

Although a part of her wanted to know why Daryl would disclose something like that to Axel, now wasn’t the time for her to begin probing the nature of the very few conversations they’d had. She wanted to assume that Daryl had discussed such information because he liked the fact that she
called him every night and not because he was complaining about it.

“I’ve tried. He doesn’t answer.” She said sadly.

“You guys have an argument or somethin’?” Axel pressed.

Selene looked at Ray, now nibbling on his fingernails. Without speaking a word, he could tell that she didn’t want to have to say it and that her eyes were pleading with him to tell them, because she couldn’t.

“They had sex for the first time on Sunday and he left before mornin’. He’s bailed on her.” Ray stated plainly.

“What the hell? Dudes really into you. Why would he do that? He say anything?” Shorty queried.

“No. Nothing that would make me think he was going to do this. He was a little quiet. Then he asked me if I was happy.” She admitted.

“And were you?” Shorty continued.

“Yes. It was amazing.” She sighed. “Certainly felt like it was for him too.”

“I don’t get it.” Axel expressed. “You meet a hot girl, catch yourself some feelings and all that crap, you have some good sex…why the fuck would you bail before morning and pass up a repeat performance before work? Dudes crazy!”

“I hear ya. I don’t get it either.” Shorty agreed, still holding onto her fingers across the tabletop.

“I’m sorry, Selene.” Axel said sincerely “But what a douchebag. To think, I actually liked the guy” Ray picked up a pen and began tapping it thoughtfully on the stack of designs Shorty had dropped in front of Selene. She could see in his eyes that he was carefully evaluating something in his head.

“Maybe there’s another explanation for this.” He mused.

Selene knew in her heart that her father’s interference was a possibility, but she wasn’t sure which reason she preferred; Daryl ghosting her or Daryl being hurt somehow. Neither was appealing and both of them struck her with fear and worry. Shorty let go of her hand in order to let her stand up and accept a prolonged and tight hug from Ray as he and Axel looked on, baffled and angry for their friend and boss.

**Wednesday 11pm**

The microwave beeped loudly and Selene emerged from the steamy bathroom wrapped in a towel and with her hair pinned up into a bun. It was late and she had spent most of her evening with her eyes on the TV screen, but not actually taking anything in. If someone asked her what she’d watched, she honestly wouldn’t be able to tell them. Her attention kept wavering towards her cell phone, beside her on the arm of the couch.

Eventually, she decided to take a shower and try and occupy herself with something other than being sat, immobile and vulnerable to being eaten alive by her own, negative thoughts. Having not eaten much in days, Ray had bought her a microwaveable mac n’ cheese and made her promise to eat it. If she didn’t, he threatened to post a picture online of her as a child, dressed as a sushi roll.
As much as she thought she looked cute as a sushi roll, she was surrounded by seven other little girls at a birthday party dressed as princesses. That was the story of Selene’s life. Never afraid to be different. To stand out. To be a sushi roll in a world of Disney princesses.

After putting on a band T-shirt and a pair of black shorts she threw the plastic container of melted cheese and additives onto a plate and began picking at it with a fork, barely making a dent in it while she tapped her leg furiously under the table and locked her vision on her cell phone which was still sat on the arm of the couch.

The urge to call him was overwhelming. She thought maybe if she kept trying he would finally answer and give her some kind of explanation for his behaviour, some reason why he would ignore her calls and apparently vanish from the face of the earth. She hoped there still was such an excuse but her faith was rapidly depleting.

She sprang up from her seat at the kitchen table, snatched her phone from the couch and threw it down in front of her as she settled back in front of her tasteless dinner for one. Rolling her eyes at her own lack of discipline, she unlocked the phone, found Daryl’s number and hit call, followed by speakerphone. The sound of the ring tone made her feel the familiar sting of anxiety that she had become so familiar with over the last three days.

*He’s not going to answer.*

Six rings. Then seven. Then eight. She pushed the food away, lowering her head and covering her face with her forearms. She fought with the desire to cry again, suddenly feeling a flash of rage that she had been reduced to this. Sitting alone in her apartment, wondering what she did wrong.

**Friday 8pm**

A hard knock at the door stirred her from a deep sleep and she awoke on her couch, uncomfortable, with a crick in her neck and her hair plastered to the side of her face with drool. She groaned and checked the clock on the wall. 8pm. Blinking away sleep, she rubbed a finger under each eye, wiping away any excess eyeliner or mascara that may have migrated from her upper eyelids as she slept.

She couldn’t remember falling asleep, only that at one point everything seemed to get blurry and quiet and her body felt heavy with exhaustion and mental fatigue. She closed her eyes, just for a moment, only for sleep to carry her away and force her body to rest.

She dragged herself up from the couch, her long, black skirt sweeping along the rug as she walked, bare-foot. She tugged at the sleeves of her black, knitted, off the shoulder sweater and yawned, emitting a sleepy sigh afterwards. She wasn’t rushing, until she remembered that it had almost been a week since she’d last seen Daryl and the only people to ever knock on her door in the evenings were her friends and they always announced their presence at the same time.

Spurring into action, she took her last few steps quickly and began fiddling with her keys in the lock.

*Please be Daryl.*

Hauling the door open, her jaw almost hit the floor. Stood in front of her was a healthy looking, bright eyed Ritchie. His dreads gathered back into a thick alice band and his skin almost glowing, a world away from the pallid grey she had seen on him before he went to rehab. Shocked that he had
just turned up when she wasn’t expecting it and by the much-improved sight of him, her hand flew to her face.

“Oh my god, Ritchie.” She gasped.

“Hey” He grinned.

Selene couldn’t help but beam at him, her eyes sweeping over him from head to toe. He looked so much better, so much happier and as much as she tried to push the notion away, she thought recovery made him look pretty damn good.

“What’s a guy got to do to get a hug, Selene?” He jested with a raised eyebrow.

She chuckled as she opened her arms, wrapping them around him and kissing his cheek. Keeping things conservative and respectful, Ritchie merely gently rubbed her shoulder blades and stepped away.

“You’re out.” She stated quietly.

“Yeah. A little early, I’ll admit. But I’m doing really good. I promise, I’m good.” He assured her.

“I wanted to see you so I hope you don’t mind but I ordered pizza and I brought um…”

He shrugged off his backpack and shoved his hand inside. She could hear keys jangling about inside before he pulled a thin, green, plastic box out.

“…Mortal Kombat.”

For what felt like a few seconds but was probably more like a couple of minutes, Selene stared at him with a wide smile on her face and it dawned on her that she hadn’t genuinely smiled at all for five days. Ritchie was a gamer, as was Selene and many a night had been spent in front of her TV, both of them jeering at one another, locked in fierce competitions on various games.

“Pizza and Video game night?” He asked.

“Absolutely.” She replied, stepping aside and letting him in.

Over the course of the night, Selene had found it increasingly hard to hide her true feelings about Daryl from Ritchie. She had grown more and more quiet even during their gaming session and even lit a cigarette at one point which Ritchie knew was very unusual for her. Smoking inside her apartment wasn’t something she usually compromised on. So, when she’d got to her feet from her spot next to him in on the rug front of the TV and simply opened the window, he knew she wasn’t herself. Eventually, she broke down and told him everything. He watched her start to cry with a ball of churning rage in the pit of his stomach, knowing that he wouldn’t never make her cry like this and wishing he could do something to take it all away for her.

That night, she fell asleep curled up next to him on her bed where they had spent over an hour talking. Her wet cheeks dampened his T-shirt but it failed to bother him in the slightest. He waited for her breathing to deepen before slipping out from beside her, covering her with a blanket and taking the couch. He told himself that staying too close to her would be detrimental to his recovery, now being more knowledgeable about his own demons than he had ever been.

Saturday 10:45pm
Phone calls were not her forte. She hated the awkwardness of it all. The talking over one another, never knowing how many times saying the word ‘bye’ was acceptable, the signal cutting out or simply one person not being able to hear the other. She avoided them at all costs, even tasking Ray with answering the phone at work. But with Daryl, things had been different. She didn’t really know what it was that had encouraged her to pick up the phone and call him that first time, but as soon as she’d heard his voice, she was convinced she’d made the right choice. She liked the gravelly tone he had, how he was a man of few words that somehow managed to say a lot without actually saying much at all. She liked their chit chat, or how he would sound when she could hear him laughing at something she’d said. A breathy, rasping sound that she craved so much after almost a week passing since she last saw him. She missed everything about him and was in a state of conflict with herself. She wanted to see him, but at the same time was starting to hate him for what he had done to her.

At times, one half of her conflict would override the other and as she sat on the window ledge in her apartment with the window wide open, she sucked in a drag of her smoke and pressed ‘call’ again.

This time, it didn’t even ring. Cutting straight to his voicemail. She panicked. Should she leave a message? This was different. She had never left him a message before. By the time she’d had time to calm herself, the tone had sounded, signalling for her to record her message. She took a deep breath.

“I just want to know what I did wrong.” She said sadly. “You at least owe me that.”

Monday 10:30am.

Ray handed her magazine, folded open onto a specific page as he noisily chewed gum from beside her. She slurped from her coffee cup and glanced down at the page. Staring back at her was a highly attractive, award winning and notoriously hard to get an appointment with tattoo artist. She scoffed and raised an eyebrow at Ray. Not only was the man in the images good looking, he was also gay and Selene had rumbled Ray’s plan straight away. He was seeking another guest artist and had carefully selected one which would make his life a little more interesting.

“You’re so predictable.” She told him.

“You tellin’ me you wouldn’t wanna look at that fine specimen all day?” He argued. “C’mon, let me at least email him and ask.”

“Fine, go for it. You guys are all gorgeous but I could use a change of scenery.” She reasoned, turning her chair towards the computer and tapping the name of Daryl’s workplace into a search engine. She picked up the phone and began dialling the number, seeing Ray’s mouth hang open.

“Are you-are you making a phone call?!” He craned his neck to see the screen behind her and immediately shot her an impressed look. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. I’m usually a fuckin’ genius.”

She steadied her nerves as she waited for someone to answer the call, twirling a pen around in her hand to try and quell her anxiety and fore it into something physical so it wouldn’t gnaw away at her bravery.

“Rocket City Auto Repairs” A man answered. It wasn’t Daryl. Her heart dropped but she stayed collected, determined to try and get some information.
“Hi, um. I was wondering if I could speak to your motorcycle mechanic there. Daryl, is it?” She asked as casually as she could.

“Sure is ma’am. But he ain’t around. Not been in for a few days now.” He stated.

“Oh, that’s a shame. I was given his name by a friend who recommended him. Do you know when he’ll be back?” She pressed.

*Come on, give me something. Anything.*

“’Fraid not. Between you and I, he put in some last-minute vacation time. So, I can’t say when he’ll be back. There’s another motorcycle mechanic a few blocks down from us but I’ll be honest, Daryl’s the best bike mechanic around these parts, so I’d wait for him if I were you. If you want, you can leave a number and I’ll get him to call you?” The man offered.

Words failed her for a few seconds at the realisation that even his workplace didn’t even know where he was.

“Ma’am?” The man urged.

“Oh, I’m sorry I got distracted. I’m at work. That would be great, thank you. I’ll give you my work number. It’s 518-5074.” She said.

“What’s your name and what kind of motorcycle is it you need looking at? Oh, and the problem just so I can write it all down.”

*My name. Shit. I can’t say my real name.*

She skimmed the page of the magazine in front of her, desperately searching for a female name but finding nothing. She picked up the glossy pages and frantically scratched about the pages, her eyes rapidly looking over any paragraphs of text she could find until finally, she found the magazine editors name.

“My name is um…Katie and my bike is a Harley street bobber. It just needs a full once over, it’s making some odd noises”

Ray sniggered from her side and she caught his eye, mouthing the words ‘shut up’ at him. He just leaned back in his seat, flipping his hands up in the air in disbelief at her brazen and sudden change in behaviour.

“OK ma’am. I’ll see that he gets the message when he comes back. Thanks for callin’.” The man said.

“Thank you for your help.” She replied before putting the phone down and blinking at the table in silence while she processed what she’d learned, which wasn’t really much at all. Ray waited for her to speak.

“He’s not been to work.” She mumbled. “Put in vacation time apparently.”

“Oh” Was all Ray could manage at that point. She slowly turned towards him, lowering her voice and quickly checking no one else was listening.

“Do you think my father has anything to do with this?” She questioned.

Ray knew he had to be careful with this one, accidentally convincing her that her father had
murdered Daryl and chopped him up into little pieces somewhere would only lead to her flying off the handle and charging into the Velvet Rabbit with a kitchen knife, ready to slice up anyone that got between her and the man that she had a most complex relationship with.

“It’s possible. But I really don’t think anything that dramatic if goin’ on. Sounds like he just went off grid for a while.”

“I think I’m going to have to go see my dad.” She expressed, ignoring his logic. “If you put glitter in Axel’s car air conditioning again, at least we know it’s good service at rocket city” she said blankly as she got up from her seat.

Monday 13:00pm

The Ink Cabinet staff were not used to being asked to keep secrets from one another and if they were, they were neither good at it or happy about it. Selene’s request to keep Daryl’s disappearance from her brother had been a sensitive one that Shorty, Ray and Axel had all agreed on after being talked into it. Ritchie had agreed straight away despite not being back to work and spending any time with bear anyway.

Selene knew that if Bear were to find out what had happened and by some miracle, Daryl was to show up out of the blue, he would beat the holy hell out of him without so much as a blink. In her head, she hated Daryl and thought that he almost deserved it, but her heart still pined for him and his rough exterior, his quiet nature and his surprisingly caring side.

Bear had only asked in the afternoon during a casual chat if she’d seen Daryl, to which she replied that he’d just been busy with work and that they saw each other in the evenings. As she’d spoken to lie, Shorty could be seen just past bear’s shoulder, shaking his head and gritting his teeth as he tattooed a client, outwardly uncomfortable with knowing his friend was being lied to.

Wednesday 8:50am

The sun was bright and warm despite the air being crisp and biting in the shade. Bear pulled the zipper up on his baseball jacket and rubbed his hands together. He wasn’t having the best morning after having to get the bus downtown due to his truck breaking down and having to spend over an hour trying to breathe some life back into it. Eventually he had given in and grabbed a thicker jacket in order to be able to walk to work in a reasonable amount of comfort.

He did a 360 turn when he’d left the bus and realised, he was halfway across town and at least a ten-minute walk away from work. So, after calling Ray to let him know he was going to be late, he began a wide stride through the streets to his destination. The revving of a motorcycle engine caught his attention and he looked up to his left, passing a large open gate that led onto the forecourt of one of his father’s businesses. Rocket City Auto Repairs.

Daryl stood over a large, black matte custom cruiser mounted on a frame that elevated its wheels from the ground. He had one hand on it’s clutch and the other on the throttle as the tyres span and the engine roared. Shutting it off, he looked up in time to see Bear pass and hold up a hand in greeting.

His back stiffened and he swallowed hard.

He doesn’t know. She hasn’t told him.
Daryl also half waved back as he picked up on a strained smile from Selene’s big brother before he disappeared from sight.

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When he arrived at The Ink Cabinet, Selene was alone in the piercing studio unpacking a new delivery of body jewellery. Usually, she would hum to herself or sing along to whatever music was on but Bear had picked up on her change in mood and seen her lost in thought on more occasions than she sang over the last week.

“Hey. Sorry I’m late. The tin can on wheels gave up.” He complained when he reached the top of the stairs.

“Hey. It’s fine. You really need a new truck though. Or take that thing to a mechanic. A good one.” She suggested. She delicately placed rows of tapers and plugs into a glass cabinet in the corner as she spoke.

Bear slumped down in the piercing chair and rubbed his face, trying to warm his ice cold skin from the walk. “Funny you should say that, saw your boyfriend just now. Didn’t know it was rocket city he worked at.”

The sound of metal stretchers and plug scattering across a glass shelf rang out from where Selene stood. She made no attempt to collect the items she’d dropped and disturbed. Instead, she stood up straight and stared at the black, painted wall in front of her, through the transparent barrier of her jewellery display. Bear did a double take, his eyebrows pinching together.

“He—He’s alive?” She croaked.

“What?!” Bear exclaimed. “Course he is.”

She backed up, her hands blindly feeling around behind her as she eventually stumbled when she reached Ritchie’s desk and leaned on the surface “Oh, thank god.” She said under her breath, her hand coming up to her chest.

Bear tilted his head back slightly, looking knowingly at her and beginning to figure things out for himself.

“Selene, I know I aint smart but I ain’t blind either. I do notice stuff. I noticed he’s not been around here much in the last week. He’s usually here every day and you’ve been real quiet. What’s goin’ on?” He asked.

She sniffed and quickly wiped under one eye with her fingertips. Her vision slowly moved around the room, falling on her brother who was waiting for an answer with baited breath.

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to hurt him.” She whispered.

“Alright. I promise.” He agreed, quicker than she’d anticipated.

“We slept together for the first time a couple Sunday’s ago. It was wonderful and amazing. But I woke up and he was gone. I haven’t seen or heard from him since.” Her voice cracked as she spoke. “He’s ignored all my calls. I thought maybe dad might have done something to him.”

Bear’s mood rapidly changed. His eyes became harder and he went to say something but stopped himself, leaning forwards in the piercing chair and raking his fingers across his scalp. When he looked up, Selene could see the anger written all over his face.
“He just left you? Just like that? No contact, no nothing?” He questioned.

“Yes” She squeaked, feeling as though she were about to get a verbal battering.

“Who else knows about this?!” He cried.

“All of the guys. I’m sorry, I asked them not to say anything. Don’t be mad at them. I just knew you’d want to punch him or something. I don’t want him hurt, Brad.” She tried to explain.

“You’re fucking right! I do! You’re my sister!” He shouted, his booming voice thundering through the room and making her jolt with surprise at it’s volume.

“I can’t deal with you and your temper on top of this, Brad. Please.” She pleaded.

When he saw the bloodshot eyes of his younger sister and the deeply saddened look on her face, he switched again, forcing himself to calm down after a couple of deep breaths.

“Well, he’s definitely alive. Wouldn’t have been for long if I’d known this when I saw him.” He mumbled to himself.

“Brad. Please.” She snapped tearfully.

“Don’t protect him, Selene. What he’s done makes him an asshole! He ain’t no different from that scumbag brother of his after all.” He reasoned.

At his comparison to Merle, the floodgates opened for Selene. She hated the fact that she’d cried so much over someone and in front of all of the people that she loved and wanted to think she was strong and capable. Bear quickly got up and shot across the room to her.

“Alright. I’m sorry. I know I ain’t helping.” He soothed quietly, stopping in front of her.

“I was so worried about him. I thought of maybe going to his place but it’s been dark every time I’ve been and I don’t actually know where it is. Then, I thought of going to the club and asking Merle, or dad. Hearing that he’s alive… I’m relieved. But I’m also devastated. This means he’s actually ignoring me. I don’t understand, I-I thought he really liked me. Was I not good enough? Was this all to get me into bed? Is this it? Is it over?” She rambled, her hands throwing up in the air and her chest heaving.

He grabbed her wrists and pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly and smoothing a big hand over her shoulders. He lowered his head, breathing against the top of her hair.

“Shh. C’mon. Don’t cry. This isn’t because of anything you did. It can’t be. So, stop thinking like that.” He said, his voice muffled.

“I miss him.” She uttered against his chest.

He held her tighter, feeling her grip the back of his shirt in her fists behind his back. Her shoulders jumped as she breathed and a sob wracked her lungs.

“I need to ask you something.” He said quietly.

She pulled back and he wiped a tear from her eye with his thumb.

“Do you love him?” He asked.

She peered up at him, the answer was in her eyes but she wasn’t going to give him a straight up
response “I don’t want to answer that.” She said.

He sighed, his heart aching for her and his temper still flared at the man that hurt her. He held her tighter as she continues to sob against his chest, leaving a large, darkened patch on his shirt.

Thursday 9am

She gawped at the vase of twelve black roses in the middle of her desk. A small card settled in the middle of them. The Studio was quiet, having just opened and Selene had just stepped foot down the stairs and into the waiting area.

“What are those?” She asked Ray, who she could sense was stood just behind her.

“Flowers, honey.” he remarked.

“What are they doing on my desk?”

“Read the damn card.” He huffed, flicking a hand out and gesturing to the small white square in the middle. Her mouth quickly curled into a wide smile at the words printed on it.

You’re a badass bitch

With her other hand, she pinched a petal between her fingers and tried not to cry again. Sure that by now she couldn’t possibly have any tears left to spare. Turning around, she found Ray, Axel and Bear all looking sheepish and adorably awkward. Axel was fiddling furiously with his cell phone, rotating it between his fingers over and over.

“You guys didn’t have to do this.” She smiled.

“Uh…It was ray’s idea. We all put some cash together. He kinda made us do it.” Axel shrugged noncommittally as if it were nothing to him, but Selene could see that it wasn’t, because he was still stood there instead of running away bashfully and pretending he was busy.

She let out a choked laugh and threw her arms around Axel, kissing his cheek before moving onto Bear and finally, Ray who was eyeballing her with a sense of satisfaction.

“Uh-Uh” he grunted, wagging a finger from side to side in her face “hold up before you get all physical with me.”

She stood in front of him and looked at the others for a second, they both looked clueless, this part was never spoken about or rehearsed.

“You’re a good boss, y’know that?” Ray said sternly.

“Thank you.” She just mouthed the words.

“I wanted to tell you somethin’ else too.” He said, appearing quite uncomfortable but soldering on regardless “You and I, we been friends a long time. I seen you at your worst and I still think you’re fierce. You got balls the size of grapefruits and a heart that’s even bigger. No matter what happens, we got your back, alright?”

“What he said.” Axel commented.

“You.” Bear agreed. “I always been shit with words.”
“Also” Ray continued. “Me, Axel, Shorty… we all encouraged you to sleep with that douchebag. We’re sorry for that. If I’d known he was gonna do you like this I’d have scratched his pretty blue eyes right out and kept ‘em in a jar.”

“You didn’t know. I didn’t know. I don’t blame anyone but Daryl.”

Salty tears ran tracks down her face, once again creating lines in her freshly applied Make-up. Apparently, she had enough tears to cry herself a whole ocean, let alone a river. She stepped into Ray’s waiting arms and he hugged her so tightly her feet lift from the floor.

“Where the hell did you find black Roses?” She wanted to know.

“Can find anythin’ in the deep corners of the internet, my pretty.” Ray grinned, offering her a wink.

Friday 18:30pm

The door slammed shut and Selene didn’t bother looking up from her notepad, assuming Axel was bringing in the A-board from outside ready to close up. The only thing that stirred her from her ‘to do list’ was the defensive tone of Axel’s voice shooting through her head.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me! If you think I’m letting you near her, you got it real wrong, buddy.” He warned.

Her body felt heavy, her veins flushed with white hot rage. Her eyes bore into his soul as he looked across Axel’s shoulder at her. She was holding her pen in her fist, sure she might break it, considering breaking it if it meant it would expel some of the anger that was boiling away inside her. Her nails on her other hand were digging into the flesh inside her clenched fist.

“Selene, you want me to remove him from the premises?” Axel asked, not bothering to even look round at her. His gaze not leaving Daryl for a second.

She couldn’t reply. She couldn’t speak, even swallowing felt like an enormous effort.

“You got some sack on you, comin’ in here.” Axel glowered.

Daryl was still staring at her, visibly reacting to the confrontation from one of her best friends as his chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Can we talk?” He asked her.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you. Get out before I throw you out. Don’t think I won’t knock you the fuck out, man.” Axel threatened.

“She can answer me herself. Right Selene?” Daryl rasped as he tried to skirt around her friend, finding that he was unable to remove the tattooed, irate and muscular form before him with just words and a side step alone.

“Stop talking to her. You gave up that right when you bailed on her like some fucking pussy.” Axel spat.

Daryl’s vision shifted and his jaw tightened as he looked back at him. His fierce defensiveness of Selene not surprising him in the slightest. Daryl was a decent judge of character and he had been able to see right from the start that Selene had something rare in her circle of friends. Not only were
they all male, but they all adored her just as much as she did them.

“I don’t wanna fight you. But I will if you don’t get outa my way.” Daryl snapped back.

“Axel, you can step aside” Selene finally managed, her voice sounding a lot louder in the aggressive atmosphere than she’d anticipated. “It’s alright. Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Why did he leave? Should she forgive him? Will her circle of friends ever accept him again even if she does?
Her body language spoke volumes to Daryl. She was stood behind the desk, a pen gripped in her hand like a vice, knuckles white and her face stony. Her eyes bore into him, threatening him and striking a fear into him that he wasn’t anticipating. He was certain that she wasn’t about to give him an easy time and he didn’t think he deserved any leeway, but standing there before him was a woman with a wrath so fierce he could tell he had totally underestimated her.

“What do you want, Daryl?” She snapped. Her voice pierced his thoughts like a bullet.

*I’ve fucked everything up.*

“Just wanna talk” He choked, his voice cracking.

“Oh, now you want to talk? Did you have amnesia?! You suddenly remembered you have a girlfriend?” She shot at him sarcastically. He looked away briefly, as if struck by her words but put up no protest.

“Please.” He pleaded.

“Fine. But this is purely morbid curiosity. You have ten minutes.” She barked as she left the desk and headed for the stairs.

Axel moved aside, allowing Daryl to pass and locking him in a warning glare. “I’ll be right here, Selene. Yell if you need me.” He called out to her.

She flung the door to her apartment open, storming into the main living area and crossing her arms. Daryl gingerly followed on and closed the door behind him. He scanned the room, noting how untidy and stuffy it was, she had obviously been spending a lot of time here and hadn’t made much effort to perform any basic housework duties.

His vision blurred for a split second and his skin lit up like a fire when she slapped him round the face so hard it made her hand hurt. He almost stumbled, more from the shock than anything but managed to hold his ground and blinked rapidly before opening his mouth and massaging his jaw.

*Alright, I deserved that.*

“Selene” He said sadly, moving closer to her and reaching out.

“NO!” She yelled. “Don’t you fucking dare touch me!”

“M’sorry.” He uttered.
“Is that it? I really thought you were smarter than this. Did you really think you would get away with treating me like one of those girls from the club? Your boss is my father, you fucking idiot!” She hissed. Her tone was scathing, biting at his nerves while her body language was closed off, defensive and unpredictable.

“What? Naw! It wasn’t like that. I didn’t.” He tried

“-No! Fuck you, Daryl! *Fuck you!* You just got what you wanted from me and left. I trusted you and you broke my heart.” She raged, her voice faltering at the end of her sentence. She turned her head away from him, reluctant to let him see her weakness in the tears that were forming behind her eyes.

“Selene, I would never-”

“.But you did. Is this what you do? Is this what you did to Amy? Made her think you liked her, screwed her and left her?” She questioned, her eyes now narrowed and accusing.

Daryl stepped towards her, dismayed to find she backed away from him. His heart ached and his stomach flipped.

“Why did you do this to me?” She squeaked, her resilience now thinning and her sadness peeking through.

“I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t like how you’re thinkin’.” He told her.

Her hands flew up into the air, taking a few strands of her long hair with them and making the gesture seem even more dramatic.

“Don’t give me that shit! It was like that, Daryl! You just fucked me and left me!” She cried. Her boots thumped along the floor when she walked off towards the window.

“Don’t say that” Daryl pleaded, following her but only half way. He didn’t want to get too close to her, the level of rage she was displaying told him she wouldn’t appreciate it.

“Why? It’s true” She grunted with her back to him.

“It ain’t true!” He argued, now his own temper was flaring and no matter how much he tried to say the right thing and find something to make her understand, all he could come up with were words that appeared to be making things worse.

“Yes, it is.” She spat. “You just fucked me and tossed me aside.” Her back was still turned to him. He wished he could see her face, try to read what was going on in her head so he could make things right. Under no illusions that this conversation was going to be difficult, he had predicted that she might react this way and promised himself that whatever happened, he would be honest with her. She had begged him for a reason in her voicemail and she was right, she deserved it. He took a deep breath and searched the corners of his mind for the right words.

“It wasn’t like that. I fucked you and felt…” He trailed off.

“What?” She demanded, now facing him with an unimpressed raised eyebrow.

He stepped back and sank down on to the edge of the bed, lowering his head and covering his face with both hands. He rubbed at his eyes and growled at his inability to communicate when he needed to. He dropped his hands into his lap and looked up at her. She realised how tired he looked.
“...I felt somethin’. I ain’t been scared of nothin’ since I was a little kid. But this, it scared the hell outta me. I freaked out and bailed. I know it was wrong and I screwed everythin’ up.”

Selene’s fury seemed to quieten and she leaned back on the window ledge, tugging the sleeves of her jacket down and winding her hands around inside the cuffs.

“You should have talked to me.” She uttered.

“I didn’t know how. I still don’t.” He admitted. “But I gotta try ‘cause ya deserve to know. I aint ever felt this way ‘bout anybody before. It’s confusin’ n’ it’s all I can fuckin’ think about. I can’t stand the what-if’s. I don’t know if I can trust or if I’m gonna be any good for you. When somethin’ seems to good to be true, it usually is.”

She studied him wordlessly, his shoulders slumped forwards and his head dipped. He looked defeated and there was no doubt in her mind that he was telling her the truth.

“A relationship means we deal with things together. You don’t just run away.” She commented. “So, you didn’t just not want to stay with me? I’m not the same as Amy and Delilah?”

“No! Hell no. I wanted to, but my head was a mess and I didn’t know what I was doin’. I had to get away and think.” He told her, shifting on the bed to face her better.

He watched as she played with the cuffs on her jacket, pulling at them and twisting them around. Her gaze was on the fluffy rug under her boots, she studied the soft, black texture as it bloomed around the edges of her boots and wished she could rewind time, back to before they’d been intimate so she could drag all of his worries out of him beforehand.

“I thought you manipulated me into it or the sex was bad or something. I didn’t know what to think, Daryl. You crushed me.” She confessed, her eyes welling with tears again.

Daryl released a loud huff and shook his head straight away, even moving closer to her and perching on the corner of the mattress. He leaned towards her, his hands almost touching her knees.

“I didn’t mean to hurt ya. I’m not my brother, Selene. I’d never manipulate you into anythin’.” He assured her before pausing briefly and nibbling on his bottom lip “and it wasn’t bad. You know it wasn’t.”

“What do you think you felt?” She whispered.

Selene had her own suspicions about what he had felt that night but wanted him to figure it out for himself.

“I dunno. When we were together n’ when I saw you sleepin’ next to me... was just real intense.” He said, almost to himself as if it were the first time he’d pondered it aloud.

“You still feel it?” She wanted to know.

“Yeah.” He responded straight away, glancing up at her.

“Remember that day you let me touch your scars?” She queried, meeting his eye and seeing him nod, a brief but very slight curl at the corner of his mouth conveyed that it was as fond a memory for him as it was for her.

“You let me in. You showed me a part of your past and you trusted me with something extremely
personal. You can trust, Daryl. You already did.” She held eye contact with him, his icy blue stare stirring various happy memories in her mind of time they’d spent together. “I knew I loved you from that moment.”

His eyes widened and she could see something happen in him. He appeared scared but intrigued and there was still a softness to his eyes. He had no idea what to say but it dawned on him that there was a very real possibility that what he had been feeling was love. He looked away, stood up and slowly paced about in front of the bed, rubbing his chin with his hand. Selene stayed put, watching his every move. It was a long time before he said anything but she figured she’d waited over a week, so what was a few minutes more?

“You mean that?” He asked.

“Yes.” She said with a small, unavoidable smile “I’m not afraid to say it, Daryl. I am so in love with you.”

“Ya can’t be. Not after what I did to you.” He dismissed.

Selene laughed a little, surprising him enough for him to shoot her a confused look.

“It’s not really a choice. You can’t switch something like that on and off.” She stated.

“No. I’m an asshole. You can do better.” He rasped.

“Look, I understand why you did what you did. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. I’m angry with you. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you. I don’t think you’re an asshole.” She surmised.

He stopped walking and stood glued to the spot, his fingers on one hand playing awkwardly with the bottom of his winged vest.

“M’sorry” He said sincerely. “I was just meant to go huntin’ for a couple days. But time went on and it just got easier to stay and harder to come back and face this. I know I fucked up with ya. I guess I just aint cut out for relationships. Don’t want ya to think I took ya for granted, I never did. Been lucky to have anythin’ to do with ya. Thanks for hearin’ me out.”

He turned on his heels and headed for the door. Selene sprang up from the window ledge and raced after him, slapping a hand on the door and forcing it back into its frame after he tried to open it. He wouldn’t look at her, refusing to meet her eye and averting his gaze.

“If I call you, answer the damn phone.” She demanded.

**Saturday 9am**

The team at The Ink Cabinet all clutched coffee cups and munched on various take-out items of breakfast food. Axel polished off three croissants in a row that Ray had his eye on since they sat down. He was rewarded for his exceptional eating efforts with a playful punch in the arm and a reminder that if he kept eating the things that Ray wanted, he’d switch on his car air conditioner to find it full of glitter for the second time.

“That’s like the gayest prank Ever, dude.” Axel laughed.

Ray leaned down from the Arm of the couch and nudged Axel’s shoulder “You gonna be drivin’ along thinkin’ ya in the front row at a Barbara Streisand concert.” He told him.
“OK!” Selene announced from the desk. She was perched on its surface, her heavy boots swinging back and forth under her. “If you could all shut the hell up that’d be grand. Axel and Ray, thank you for coming in on your day off, this shouldn’t take too long. I have a couple things I need to go through. First, we have a visitor. You can come on out.” She called out to the stairwell.

Everyone looked confused and swapped glances and shrugs, a small murmur rumbled around the room as Ritchie emerged from behind the partition wall and held up a hand in a meek wave at them all.

“Ritchie is out of Rehab and will be returning to work in a week or so. Rich, you wanted to say something? She asked.

“Yeah. Um. Thanks.” He stammered “Ray, Bear… I wanted to say I’m sorry for what I did. I was outta my mind and I don’t really remember a lot of it. I do know I tried to hit you both. It won’t happen again.”

Bear crossed his huge arms across his chest. “S’ok, man. As long as you’re clean now.”

“I am. And I’m going to stay that way.” He promised.

Ray held up a hand, gesturing that he was about to speak.

“It takes a lot of effort to look this good” he told him, motioning to his face “so I don’t take kindly to junkies trying to slam their fists into my perfectly shaped eyebrows. You do anythin’ like that again and I will drag ya ass back to rehab by ya dreadlocks. You hearin’ me, noodlehead?”

Ritchie smiled and nodded at Rays usual humour laced warning. It was rare for Ray to say anything without turning it into a joke, but they all knew that his effortless ability to make people laugh was not to be confused with him not wanting to get his point across.

“Loud and clear. Axel, I’m sorry you had to deal with it all too.” Ritchie continued, shifting his vision to Axel who was smirking back at him.

“It’s cool, man. Wasn’t all bad, I got to see Selene’s rack.” He blurted out.

Selene’s head snapped up and she opened her mouth in shock. Embarrassment had risen in her chest and she could sense her face beginning to redden.

“Axel!” She exclaimed.

Everyone started to chuckle and snort much to her irritation.

“Someone wanna explain that one to me?” Shorty asked while bear grumbled something inaudible to himself behind everyone.

“He barged into my apartment without knocking. It was an accident.” Selene stayed plainly, her face refusing to copy their smiles. Sniggers continued to fill the room and even Ray was laughing behind his coffee cup.


“Right. Yeah. I’m just sorry. To all of you. You guys are my friends, I never meant to cause so much shit. I was messed up.” He explained.

“Welcome back, man.” Shorty offered, extending a hand.
Selene watched as they all exchanged handshakes and masculine hugs and back slaps while she thought of how nice it would be to have Ritchie back. It meant she would have more free time during the days and that her small tribe was back together again.

“OK. The second thing I want to make you all aware of is…um…is Daryl.” She announced. The five faces in front of her dropped at the same time and instantly, the atmosphere changed. “As Axel knows, he showed up here last night.”

“What?!” Bear boomed. Selene hand a hand up to silence him and he complied without argument.

“I decided to hear him out. I needed to know why he did what he did to me.” She informed them, pausing and looking up at them all staring at her like she’d gone insane.

“Daryl is a very complicated person. He comes from a dysfunctional background and he has been subjected to a lot of violence and abuse as a child. I am the first woman he has ever felt anything for, let alone started a relationship with. The whole thing is new and complex for him because no one has ever really cared about him besides his idiot brother. He doesn’t know how to handle feelings of affection because he’s never experienced it and it’s a lot for him to process emotionally. I understand why he left and buried his head in the sand, I’m not excusing it, I’m still angry… but I understand it.”

Ritchie was glaring at her and she noticed his tense expression before anyone else’s. She had never forgotten the day that Daryl had informed her that Ritchie’s feelings for her might have surpassed friendship and may have been part of the reason he’d delved so deeply into the world of drugs. As his friend, she felt she had no choice but to ignore the information, telling herself she would never bring it up unless she felt like she had no choice. She wanted to protect Ritchie’s feelings and while she couldn’t do anything about his view and opinion of her, she could carry on being his friend as if nothing had changed.

“When he was with me, he felt something and it freaked him out.” Selene added.

“He’s in love with you.” Ritchie suddenly said. His voice was firm, loud and crystal clear. Everyone turned to look at him but his gaze didn’t falter. Fixed on Selene. The others began to exchange awkward glances and a couple of them shifted and cleared their throats.

“He just doesn’t know it yet.” Ritchie added. He was sure about what he was saying because he had been there and still was standing firmly in the realm of being in love with someone himself.

“You might be right, I’m not sure.” She admitted.

“Do you love him?” He pressed.

Axel shot Ray and Shorty a worried look while Bear looked down his nose at the dreadlocked piercer that seemed to know a lot more about being in love with Selene than he was comfortable with. He didn’t like this personal line of questioning one little bit.

“Dude.” He warned.

“It’s OK, Brad.” Selene assured him. She studied Ritchie’s now filled out face, his weight gain in the past few weeks serving him well and leaving his skin with more colour and his eyes brighter. He looked healthier all round and up until that moment, happier.

“Yes. I love him.” She answered.

She could see him swallow hard and for a fleeting second his eyes flickered away from her,
looking at nothing in particular but it was as if he’d been struck and needed a moment to process it.

“Then you should be with him.” He mumbled.

Silence crept in between them all, the uneasy atmosphere provoking a few sighs and uncomfortable fidgeting. Ritchie’s feelings for Selene were well known to everyone by this point and it was a surprise to them all that he would push her so publicly towards Daryl. Bear watched from the side-lines as Ritchie dropped his head and toyed with the bracelets on his wrist. It occurred to him that to push someone you feel so greatly for, towards someone else because you know it will make them happy, is something you only do if you really love them. He had discovered a new-found respect for Ritchie and suddenly understood why, for so long, he had sought the comfort of drugs to take away the sting of what he could never have.

“I agree” Shorty said “if you’re dropping the ‘L-bomb’ and you think you can trust him not to do this shit again, then it’s worth a try.”

Axel Nodded in agreement.

“I’ll admit, I wasn’t happy you even asked me to let him in last night. But I guess it makes sense. We’ve seen how miserable you are without him. Do what you think is right.” Axel suggested.

Selene looked over at Bear, who turned his head to her but his eyes still pinned on Ritchie for a moment before he returned her expectant stare.

“You know what I think.” Ge grumbled.

“No, I don’t.” She corrected.

“I think he’s an asshole. If he’s that broken, he’s gonna do this shit again. Or something similar. I don’t trust him. I haven’t seen you as happy as you were with him but I also haven’t seen you as sad as you have been this past week, except when mom died. It’s your choice, but I don’t have to like it.” He said, stepping away and slowly wandering about behind the group. She didn’t know his exact opinion on the matter, but she could have guessed his stance regardless, she just needed to hear him say it out loud.

Next, she looked at Ray.

“You ain’t gonna like what I have to say.” He warned

“I can handle it.” She challenged.

“You’re sittin here, asking us for our opinions on if we think you should take the guy back or not. But really, you’ve already decided. What you really want from us, is justification and you need to ask yourself why. Are you really sure you can trust him again? Because from where I’m sittin’ I don’t think you are.”

He paused briefly, noting her face quickly turning defensive but carrying on anyway, she’d said she could handle it, after all.

“I want you to be happy as much as everybody else in this room does, but you gotta protect yourself. This guy may be a snack, but if he’s as damaged as you say you have to think about if you wanna love him, or save him. Because some folks just can’t be saved and it ain’t your fuckin’ job to put yourself out there and do that.”

Her back prickled with irritation and her defences went up. Ray was always her voice of reason and
usually backed her up with everything she did. Now, he was pushing back against her because he
didn’t agree with her, but she was well aware that it was because he cared about her.

“You’re right. I already decided. But I wasn’t looking for justification. I didn’t ask for advice or
even anyone’s opinions. You guys offered that to me out of your own free will. I know he’s not
everybody’s favourite person right now. But he is mine and he does make me happy. He screwed
up because he’s imperfect, just like everybody else. I googled this shit last night. He's an abuse
survivor. It was fight or flight so he flew. He left because he couldn't handle how exposed and
vulnerable it made him feel. I gave Ritchie a second chance because he made a huge mistake. So
did Daryl.”

Ritchie looked around and saw Shorty and Axel shrug at one another. Bear was still skulking about
behind them. He guessed that Selene did make a good point after all. He knew he was lucky to be
sat where he was, with a boss that had decided to go out on a limb and trust him to stay out of
trouble and not to bring any more of that trouble into her business.

Selene leaned forwards, setting Ray in her sights and singling him out.

“Did you not hear what I said earlier? I love him, Ray. I can’t just give up on this.” She said
seriously.

Rays eyebrow flickered briefly and he sat back on the arm of the couch, holding his hands up in
surrender.

“Alright. But I ain’t havin’ you getting hurt again. You’re my main bitch and I am sick and tired of
worrying about the frown lines it’s gonna leave me with.” He sighed.

“I hope he was real fucking sorry.” Bear expressed, his voice overshadowing everyone else.

“He really is.” Selene confirmed. “He didn’t turn up expecting me to take him back. He just
wanted to try and explain himself.”

Bear grumbled once more under his breath before walking off to his workstation. Selene dismissed
the others and went to work behind her desk. She thought that maybe it would have been better to
address the Daryl situation at the beginning of the meeting, rather than the end to avoid such a
tense atmosphere, but she concluded that her brother was never going to be happy about this and
Ray would soon come around.

Hearing the breeze outside hammering against the A-board just outside the door, she raised her
vision to the window to see Daryl ambling along the other side of the street, coffee in hand. She
waited for him to spot her and when he did, the butterflies that spent so much time fluttering about
in her stomach every time she saw him, returned for the first time in over a week and a smile
emerged on her face. He nudged his head up in acknowledgement and carried on walking.

He parked across town from where he works.

Her optimism was finally starting to return.

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The sound of the phone ringing had become a noise that induced nothing but unease in Selene after
having had so many calls gone unanswered and the feeling of being unwanted still lingered in the
back of her mind as paranoia clouded her mood and she wished with everything she had that her
call would be answered.
One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four.

“Hey”

She covered the speaker with her hand and let out a huge breath, unaware she had been holding it.

“Hi. Are you busy right now?” She asked.

“Um, I’m out.” He replied.

It was almost 10pm. She concluded that him being out this late at night pointed to him dealing.

“OK, I was calling to ask if you’d meet me in Marty’s. I need to talk to you. But if you’re working it’s fine.” She said, wondering why she was suddenly bending over backwards to accommodate him when he’d put her through hell for the past few days. Then, she remembered that he was her weakness and she would do just about anything for him.

“I’ll meet ya. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” He stated.

“It’s OK if you’re busy.”

“I’ll be there, Selene.”

She could hear it in his voice, a subtle desperation to see her, to talk to her. Hoping that things might be about to change for the better, he would have dropped anything to meet her at that point.

“Alright, I’ll see you there in twenty. The booth at the back of the bar” She said quickly.

She hung up the phone and quickly breezed over to the mirror, checking her make-up and hair. She didn’t know why she felt pressure to look perfect, he had made it clear on more than one occasion that he thought her to be beautiful and that wasn’t likely to change after a week. Still, she did want to remind him of what he’d missed out on since he’d been ignoring her and so she had chosen a black pencil skirt, fishnet tights, heels and a black button-down shirt with an under bust corset.

Yes, she was overdressed for Marty’s but she didn’t care. She needed to feel like a force of nature when she sat opposite him, not a blubbering wreck.

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Marty’s was quiet and Daryl breathed a sigh of relief at that fact when he’d entered the bar. He held up a hand in greeting to Marty and pointed to the booth in the corner at the back of the room. Marty looked slightly confused at his interest in that particular table, knowing he usually chose to sit at the bar, especially when he was alone. But he agreed nevertheless and gave him a nod as he opened the refrigerator behind him and grabbed a bottle of beer.

He stopped by the booth when Daryl sat down, handing him the bottle and guessing he shouldn’t ask about his reasons for sitting where he was, the look on his face told him everything he needed to know; it was none of his business. Marty continued on his journey, collecting glasses and greeting Selene warmly as she walked through the door. She kissed his cheek and asked him to get her whatever drink Daryl was having before taking a deep breath and heading towards the booth. She picked up on Daryl’s double take when she approached and was glad she’d decided to make an effort for this conversation.

*Shit. She looks amazin’.* He thought.

She slipped into the seat opposite him and threw her cell phone onto the tables surface along with
her keys. She didn’t need a bag, she lived five minutes away and wasn’t planning to be out all night.

“Thanks for meeting me” She mumbled.

He could see she was still clutching onto a lot of anger that was directed towards him and he didn’t blame her at all. But he hated seeing her downcast and wanted to take it all away and make everything right again.

“No problem.” He replied.

Marty placed another beer on the table and Selene thanked him, sensing that he’d most likely realised this was a conversation that she didn’t want anyone overhearing. She waited for him to get a safe distance away before picking up her drink, taking a large gulp and placing it back down between them.

“You know what people do when they love someone?” She started “They find a way to forgive each other’s mistakes.”

“Don’t deserve that” He muttered.

Selene’s eyes became hard and she shifted closer to the table, leaning over it.

“You don’t get to decide that. Did you think about me? In the past few days?” She wanted to know.

She tried to ignore it. Tried to shove it aside or not pay it any mind but she couldn’t help it. She actually felt a little sympathy for him. He had admitted that he didn’t believe he was cut out for a relationship and that he felt lucky to have had anything to do with her. But it didn’t sit well with her. She thought as much of him as he did of her which had resulted in her foul mood and emotional turmoil in the days previous. She blinked away the rage in her eyes and checked her attitude. He had apologised and explained and that was all she could ask of him. Now, she just had to take a risk on whether he was likely to break her trust again.

“You’re all I ever think about.” He said.

“Do you want to be with me, or not, Daryl?” She questioned clearly, the directness of her question not causing her to shy away or tiptoe around anything. She wanted an answer as uncomplicated as the question.

To Daryl, everything was always complicated when it came to emotions. He led a reasonably simple life with a few acquaintances and a solitary hobby that meant he rarely had to think about the thoughts and feelings of other people. Since he’d been involved with Selene, he had never been more confused in his life, never felt feelings like it before and never been so terrified of what it all could possibly mean. But he was certain of one thing; she was the most important thing in the world to him.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. Course I wanna be with you.” He told her.

“Can you promise me that this isn’t going to happen again? I’m going to need you to communicate with me. I know it’s hard for you, but I have all the time and patience in the world if it means I don’t have to go through this again.”

“I promise.” He said.
She studied his expression for a moment. Not a hint of insincerity. So, she slipped out from her seat and sat down next to him, placing her hand over his on the table top. She saw him briefly close his eyes.

“I missed you so much.” She whispered.

“Missed you too.” He expressed.

“I meant what I said to you in my apartment last night. It was scary for me too at first. But when I look at you, all of that goes away and things just make sense. You don’t have to say anything back, I don’t want you to say it unless you mean it.” He looked sideways at her, his lower lip clamped between his teeth.

“I love you, Daryl.”

His eyes flickered, moving rapidly all over her face, then to the table, then past her into the bar, then back on her face. She could sense his shock and fought the urge to jump on him when she saw his lips part and his mouth quirk up into a crooked smile.

“Really?” He croaked.

“Yes, really.” She nodded.

His hand withdrew from under hers momentarily and he laced their fingers together, squeezing them gently. Selene moved closer to him and reached up with her free hand to his face, grazing her thumb over his cheek. His grip on her fingers tightened and he connected their foreheads. She could see his chest rising and falling with jagged breaths and she thought she can almost hear the faintest of whimpers from between his lips.

“Thought I lost you.” He breathed.

The weather was starting to change and Daryl had no issues with that, it meant he could work outside on the forecourt more comfortably with all the space he needed and he could scatter his tools about to his hearts content without having to endure the incessant whining of his manager.

The sun brought with it good hunting trips and nights spent sat on the front porch with Merle, when he was in a good mood. They’d drink and smoke and take sly digs at each other and it was only ever at times like those that Daryl thought he actually liked his brother from time to time.

Selene had kept her distance for the past couple of days, telling him she needed time to figure things out in her own mind but not to doubt that she loved him and that she still wanted to see him on his way to work every morning.

Love. It was such a strange concept to him. He’d grown up in a house where the word had never been uttered once. Not even in a drunken stupor. It had never crossed his mind as he’d grown up that love might be something he’d experience for himself one day. The idea was far too foreign and there was little point to entertaining it. The past abuse he’d endured meant that being vulnerable to another person wasn’t going to happen easily and it was the only thing that he could blame for his departure from Selene’s life for a week.

However, when he thought about her, everything had meaning. She hushed the noise in his head and made him feel like he was worth something for once. In his heart, he knew he was in love with her and what he had felt while in the throes of passion with the girl he had admired from afar for so
many years, was genuine and powerful and scary. What he didn’t know, was how he was supposed to tell her or even come to accept it himself. Once the words were spoken, that would be it. He would be completely at his own mercy and as well as hers and he didn’t know if he was ready for such a big step.

Using a red rag from his back pocket, he wiped at the chrome of the motorcycle he was working on, bringing it back to a shine when movement in his reflection on the bikes exhaust caught his attention. Someone was walking towards him. He got to his feet and turned around to find Bear barrelling across the forecourt at him.

“Hey! Dixon!” He shouted.

Oh, shit.

He bowled towards him and Daryl readied himself. He knew this look. He knew what was coming. Bear raised a fist and the world span when it connected with Daryl’s eye. She stumbled backwards and felt his body being forced into the air, his boots leaving the ground. In his ears, all that could be heard was the insane growling of his girlfriends enormous brother as he hauled him across the forecourt and threw him into a wall. His back thrummed with pain and he buckled over, but not for long. Bear grabbed at his shoulders, throwing an arm across his chest and pinning him to the brickwork. The vast height difference between them meant Daryl was aware that any efforts he made to wriggle free would only be met with more violence. So, he bided his time and waited, his eye throbbing and his back tensing up. Over bear’s shoulder, he could see one of the other mechanics panicking and pulling his cell phone out ready to call the cops. Daryl managed to hold out a hand out and waved his hand back and forth, motioning for the guy to stop what he was doing.

“You stupid or something, Dixon?” Bear hissed in his face. Saliva sprayed from between his teeth as he spoke.

Daryl said nothing, almost accepting it as a kind of punishment. He wasn’t usually one to back down from a fight, but brawling with Selene’s big brother was undoubtedly a risky move and was likely to jeopardise the progress he’d made with her.

“Cat got your tongue? I SAID ARE YOU STUPID, DIXON?!” Bear roared.

“No” Daryl finally grunted.

If you weren’t related to her I’d pummel your ass into the ground.

“See that’s funny, because I really thought you’d know how fucking dumb it would be to treat my little sister like she’s a piece of trash!” He raged. “Is that what you think she is?! HUH?!?”

“You don’t know nothin’ about me and her.” Daryl responded.

Bears grip on him tightened and he felt his chest constricting. Any harder and he would be blocking his airflow.

“I know you and Merle ain’t so different after all. You’re just a better liar.” Bear spat.

Feeling his head lighten, Daryl struggled against him, sucking in a breath and bearing his teeth from the pain as he tried to shove Bears arm away from his chest. His efforts were not in vain, the belt of pressure across his lungs becoming less intense.

“You can beat the holy crap outta me if it makes ya feel better.” Daryl wheezed “But I still ain’t
gonna talk about this with you. Back the fuck off, man. This is between me and her.”

After a few seconds of aggressive eye contact, Bear finally let go of him and Daryl heaved in a huge breath from his lungs, before coughing violently, all the while keeping his angry stare fixed on Brad.

“The only reason I haven’t pummelled your face into the fuckin asphalt is because she made me promise not to hurt you. I may have just screwed that up but it was fucking worth it. You’re lucky that she’s a better person than both of us. You mess with her head anymore and I’ll make you disappear. I swear to god.”

Daryl stood up straight and dabbed at his eye, pain seared through his entire face. He glared at Bear, tempted to charge at him and catch him off guard.

“You done?” He snapped instead.

“Fuckin’ prick.” Bear muttered to himself as he walked away.
Black Eyed

Chapter Notes

Hi! Apologies for the delay. I'm currently dealing with an ongoing health issue that is zapping my energy so I’ve had to take a break. But I am back with another chapter. :) Not safe for work, a little smutty a little fluffy.

Bear was drawing up an intricate and large design for a client he had the next morning, wanting to make sure he had everything present and correct before they arrived so he could get straight to tattooing and not have to bother with too much chit chat. He sat forwards in his tattoo chair, one leg either side and the design flat on the surface in front of him. So far, he had managed to hide his bruised and grazed knuckles from his sister under his latex gloves and while he sketched, he pulled his jacket sleeve all the way down and made sure to position himself so that she wouldn’t catch sight of it if she looked over from her computer.

He was already beginning to regret his impulsivity and lack of control over his anger as he listened to Selene hum and sing contentedly to the music that was playing in the studio. She was a completely different person to the miserable and snappy woman that had sat at the same desk the week previously and he had to admit it was because she had chosen to give Daryl another chance. Bear had been surprised that Daryl hadn’t made much of an attempt to retaliate and also hadn’t volunteered any kind of reason why he had ghosted Selene for a week. When he firmly expressed to Bear that it was between him and Selene not once, but twice, he was forced to ponder the fact that his sister was right and Daryl hadn’t intended to cause any harm or hurt feelings with his actions. He liked that even in such an extreme circumstance, Daryl had kept his cards, and their relationship very close to his chest.

He glanced up when he heard the door open and sat, statue-still when he saw the Angel wings of Daryl’s vest.

Oh shit. Time to ‘fess up.

“Oh my god!” He heard Selene cry as she shot up from her seat and ran up to Daryl. Through the gap in the partition wall he could see her tenderly place her hand on his cheek, just below his deeply blackened eye that still appeared swollen.

Woah, I hit him really hard.

Daryl closed his fingers over hers on his face and shut his eyes. His skull was still throbbing with pain around his eye socket and his chest was tight from the impact of Bear slamming his arm across it. His back was also bruised and reddened over his shoulder blades. He figured the damage would have been lessened had he been wearing his leather vest at the time, but he had been at work and it was against the rules.

“What happened to you?!” Selene whispered.

“Got jumped last night.” He mumbled “Wrong place, wrong time.”
She didn’t really need to be told much more, automatically jumping to the conclusion that it was some kind of warning or punishment for crossing over into someone else’s dealing territory. She didn’t want to know the details, her heart already aching at the sight of his eye.

“Look what they did to you” She said to herself, gently brushing a thumb over the swollen flesh under his eye. He didn’t wince or try to move away. In fact, she was so gentle he barely felt a thing despite the sensitive wound she was touching.

“Looks worse than it is.” He assured her.

“Did you put ice on it? Because we have ice.” She said.

“Already did, it’s fine.” He told her.

Her other hand was resting on his bicep over his shirt sleeve. She squeezed it slightly and he observed her worried features as she looked up at him. Her eyes began to scan the rest of him for more wounds.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” She questioned

Daryl spotted Bear walk over to the desk behind her from the corner of his eye and collect an IPad from a drawer. He paused and listened to Daryl’s response.

“Some bruisin’ on my chest and back. Nothin’ major. I’m alright, really.” He shrugged

“Let me see.” She demanded, moving the front of his shirt with her index finger. Daryl took both of her hands and held on tight, accepting that he was bordering on enjoying Bear seeing how upset his sister was as she examined his injuries.

“Selene. I’m fine, OK?” He promised.

“I don’t like you getting hurt.” She expressed sadly, thudding her forehead on the cold leather of his shoulder. He embraced her easily, ignoring the pain it induced in his chest. She threaded her arms around his waist and held him, kissing his lips lightly. Bear met Daryl’s vision for a split second and quickly made himself scarce. Not only had he not expected Daryl to have reacted the way he did about any of it, he definitely didn’t expect him to lie for him.

“Give me a few minutes. I just need to finish up upstairs.” She mentioned as she stepped away from him and headed to the staircase.

Daryl settled on the couch and began rolling himself a cigarette on the table. He usually bought packs but recent funds only allowed for the cheaper option, which didn’t make much difference to him, except when Merle, who preferred rolled cigarettes, would find his packet of tobacco and steal it for himself.

Bear stepped out from the partition and cleared his throat. Daryl looked up from his task and waited expectantly for him to say something, not doubting for one second that he would have some kind of comment based on what he’d just seen and heard.

“You lied to her” Bear stated.

“I didn’t lie, I just left some shit out.” Daryl responded, his voice taut with irritation. “You want her to know the truth? ‘Cause I ain’t got no problem tellin’ her.”

“It’s right. For now.” Bear admitted. “Thanks”
“I ain’t doin’ shit for you. I’m just protectin’ her. Last thing she needs is her brother goin’ all hulk smash on her boyfriend.” Daryl snapped.

Bear sighed loudly and rubbed at his eyes with one hand. Daryl wondered if he might get some semblance of an apology for a second, but knew it was wishful thinking at this stage.

“I’ll tell her myself. When the time is right.” He mumbled.

Daryl slowly rolled the thin paper between his fingers, the slither of tobacco rolling into a line between the two halves. It was almost like a ritualistic process as he used the delicate creation between his fingers as a distraction to calm his anger and focus his control.

“Ain’t that good of ya.” He spat sarcastically.

Bear stared at him, his face looked regretful and Daryl enjoyed every second of it. If only he’d thought of his sister before he’d ran into Rocket City with his fist raised and his temper making his decisions for him. Daryl looked him square in the eyes all the while continuing to roll the makeshift cigarette back and forth.

“I ain’t no stranger to a fight, Man. S’all i’ve ever known. You pull that shit again n’ it won’t matter how big ya are, ya gonna get ya ass handed to ya. I get that ya lookin’ out for her, but this…” he pointed to his black eye “…this is really gonna piss her off.”

Selene could be heard descending the stairs, the clunk of her boots on the wooden steps signalling that the conversation between Bear and Daryl had come to an end. Brad quickly went back to his workstation and began packing up. When he headed for the door, he gave Daryl the fakest of polite nods and said goodbye to his sister, disappearing into the night.

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That night, Selene’s eyes kept wavering from the TV screen to Daryl’s black eye as they sat on opposite ends of the couch, facing one another with a bowl of popcorn between them. A serial killer documentary played on the screen, but neither of them had afforded it much attention with daryl constantly catching her looking at him from his peripheral vision and Selene unable to ignore the blackened ring around his eye. She wasn’t ignorant about Daryl’s tendency towards violence or his abusive childhood but it didn’t make it any easier to swallow the notion that someone had hurt him.

It had taken a few days to settle, but figuring out that she was in love with him had been a strange and overwhelming mixture of exhilarating and terrifying that she had opted to keep to herself until the right time to tell him arose. Now she had voiced her feelings to him, they had only increased, becoming rawer and more intense than she ever thought possible and it was now dominating her every waking thought.

“I’m alright.” He said in response to yet another glimpse in his direction.

“Will you show me the other bruises, please?” She requested

“Ya don’t need to see ‘em”

“I think I do. Somebody hurt you and I can’t stand it so please, please just humour me and let me see.” She expressed.

He turned to discover the serious and pleading look on her face. It prodded at his heart so much he wasn’t going to be able to say no to it no matter how much he tried.
“Fine” He sighed, swinging his legs from the couch and standing up. She also stood and waited as he slid his vest from his shoulders and began unbuttoning his shirt. She dragged in a breath through her nose when she saw the angry, dark line across his chest, blue and dark purple hues in a clouded pattern on his skin. He turned around and mixed in with the scars from his childhood, was more bruising spanning his shoulder blades.

He wasn’t used to it. Someone caring so much that they looked so forlorn and devastated at him being injured. When he turned back to her, he was almost sure he could see her eyes go glassy before she looked down and walked to him, lightly draping her arms over his shoulders and kissing his collarbone.

“Does it hurt?” he heard her muffle against his skin.

In truth, it did hurt. His eye throbbed with pain every time he blinked and his chest spiked with each deep breath he took. But Daryl was used to pain, used to hiding it and used to pushing through it.

“Naw. It’s fine. Really.”

He lifted his arms and slipped them around her waist as he nudged at the side of her head, smelling the fruity fragrance of her hair and leaving a small kiss on her temple.

“I don’t like this.” She sniffed.

Now, he was sure she was becoming emotional. Her breaths became heavy and she tickled over the back of his neck. He remembered Shorty’s wedding, when she’d flirted with him on the dancefloor and everything around him fell away when he felt her fingertips on his neck in the same way. Such a small but tender motion that he didn’t know could mean so much. With her in his embrace in the present, she was doing it again and it was saying everything she couldn’t get past her lips.

*I’m hurt because you’re hurt.*

“It’ll heal soon. It’s gonna be OK.” He whispered.

She backed up, nodding sadly and sinking back down onto the couch. Daryl wanted to tell her the truth but there was a huge part of him that was certain it would make everything complicated and difficult for her to find out that it was her own brother that had inflicted those wounds upon him.

He took up his previous spot having put his shirt and vest back on and took a handful of popcorn from the bowl.

“I had to explain to the guys that you’re going be around again. Ray and Bear aren’t exactly pleased but they understand it’s my choice.” She admitted as she chanced a look up at his reaction.

“Wasn’t expecting a free pass from ‘em anyways.” He commented. He threw a few pieces of popcorn into his mouth, his vision trained on the TV, and crunched loudly.

“They were all real good with me. Put up with being emotional punchbags for over a week.” She recalled, picking up the bowl and shaking it, coating all of the pieces in salt. She took her own handful and examined the bulging and deformed shape of each one before popping it into her mouth and munching away. Silence from beside her peaked her curiosity and she looked around to find Daryl watching her.

“M’sorry.” He muttered.
“You don’t need to keep saying that.” She told him. She offered him a small smile and it instantly put him at ease. He pondered how a smile from her never seemed to grow tiresome, he could look at it all day. While he admired her pretty face, her lips curled up further and she threw a piece of popcorn at him. It bounced from his shoulder and he collected it from the couch and devoured it in a split second before falling quiet.

Time passed and try as she might, she couldn’t concentrate on the TV. A fat, bald detective was talking about body part found in a vat of acid, typically a topic she would have found extremely interesting, but that night all she was interested in was Daryl. She saw him looking around the room, checking all the artwork on the walls.

“You not got any pictures of ya mom?” He asked.

She tilted her head to the side thoughtfully as she wondered where the question had come from and why he wanted to know.

“No.” She replied. “The last time I saw her she was in the hospital, dying. Every time I looked at a photo of her after she was gone, I just saw her laying in that bed, bald and skinny and… that wasn’t my mom. My father has all the photographs of her.”

Daryl regretted asking as soon as he heard the words echo in his mind. Instantly feeling the question may have been too intrusive. But Selene had taken it well and offered a response as sad as it was honest.

“I get that. My ol’ man had to identify my mom’s body. Dragged me with him n’ told me to stay in the hall. I waited until somebody walked outta the room, slipped in the door and there she was. So badly burned she didn’t even look human no more. Only reason my ol’ man knew it was her was because one of her front teeth was chipped. He punched her in the face when he was lit and damn near knocked it out. I didn’t wanna remember her like that, so I told myself it wasn’t her and she just left. we ain’t got no photos or nothin”

She nodded knowingly, a pain they’d both felt at different part of their life but for the same reason uniting them and proving that they had more in common than they realised.

“Why do you ask?” She questioned.

“Wonderin’ if ya look like her.” He admitted.

Selene’s eyes wandered, settling in the distance somewhere and glazing over as if she was recalling a memory.

“I do.” She said. “In some ways. Brad looks nothing like either of them. I have her eyes, her hair. Her tendency to fall for bad boys.”

She winked at him and it sent a shockwave of lust through him. He loved it when she did that.

“That what I am to you?” He wanted to know.

“Yes.” She answered without hesitation. “Underneath the short temper and the drug dealing is a man with more layers than I ever would have thought. You’re fascinating.”

He could only manage a shy laugh but he found himself unable to tear his eyes from her. The way she saw him didn’t necessarily strike him as a bad thing. In fact, he figured he could live with it as long as it made her happy. Selene shook her head at him and nibbled on her thumbnail.
“What?” He asked

“What? I ain’t…c’mon…crazy ass woman.” He exclaimed with a crooked smile. Selene thought this rare and playful side of him was possibly her favourite thing about him. How he subdued his grins and played them down, making out he was nowhere near as amused as he actually was. She thought it was devastatingly sexy and the little glint in his eye when he flashed her such a smirk always managed to make her want to stare at him all the time.

“Ungrateful, my ass.” He scoffed as Selene giggled at him from across the couch. “I don’t talk much, but I wanted to tell every son of a bitch I saw ‘bout what you did to me that night.” He smiled.

He knew very well that he wouldn’t have breathed a word to a single soul in reality. It was his secret to keep and he wasn’t about to share any part of Selene with anyone, least of all such intimate details. But that didn’t stop him from wanting to boast. He thought about how Merle would have been insanely jealous, how the guys at work would have gawped in disbelief. But it wasn’t in his nature to gloat or disclose any information about himself or his private life to anyone. If he did, it was usually only to Delilah, who he had eventually grown to trust reasonably well over the years.

Selene chuckled and threw a cushion at him, he batted it away sending it flying onto the rug a few feet away. Daryl picked up the bowl of popcorn and slid it onto the coffee table before crawling over her and nuzzling into her neck. She sank down further on the couch, her head on the arm with him propped up over her. His expression suddenly became slightly bashful and he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth.

“My girl got skills.” He uttered.

She couldn’t help it. She broke into fits of giggles and felt her cheeks blush as he smiled down at her.

“Oh my god. Stop.” She gushed, covering her face with her hand.

“You brought it up” He jested, leaning down and ghosting over her lips. “But I think ‘bout it every day.”

He pulled back and studied her two-toned eye, not wanting to take his gaze away from her in case she disappeared. He was bowled over by her confidence with him in bed, especially after she’d confessed to him that she was nervous and worried about disappointing him. He’d known all along it wasn’t possible and was more than proven right in the end. If that one time was anything to go by, he was going to have to pinch himself from time to time to make sure he wasn’t imagining it all.

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Daryl didn’t know that such intimacy was possible. Yes, it was unnerving and new and unfamiliar and he didn’t anticipate to be locked in such a powerful embrace. But he didn’t want to be
anywhere else. He rubbed his nose against hers, kissed her lips and cheeks and forehead and used his hands to caress every part of her he could reach. Slowly, deliberately and with a lingering and delicious touch that made her moan and grip onto him further.

It was nearing midnight and the room was lit only by a dim glow from a candle on the kitchen counter which cast a barely-there glimmer of light over Selene’s bed. She had been entwined with Daryl under the sheets for almost an hour, both of them revelling in the skin on skin contact with him on top of her, buried inside her, gently pushing and pulling through a slow rhythm. He stopped only when he felt himself craving release or when she tensed around him and increased the volume of her pleasant moans.

There was no need for any extra stimulation, the both of them remaining as physically ready for one another as they needed and Selene was sure she had never been more turned on by a man in her life. The simple brush of his calloused hands on her hip was enough to engulf her entire body in tingling want and his kiss and husky breaths in her ear made her close her eyes and wonder how the hell she managed to get lucky enough to end up there, with him.

Daryl wasn’t one for dirty talk, but in the midst of what he could only describe as a lazy, late night sex marathon, hushed desires and whispered encouragement turned out to be a surprising and much enjoyed part of the experience. He found himself stopping at one point so he could look down and admire her, tracing patterns on her face and over her lips with his fingers and it dawned on him that he hadn’t felt nearly as much pain from his bruises while he had something as perfect as this as a distraction. His breath was laboured and his lips were reddened by his reluctance to stop kissing her and his insatiable need for more.

“You OK?” She whispered as she ran her fingers through his messy hair.

“You’re so goddamn pretty.” He uttered, his lips barely moving as the words had travelled from his mouth on a breath. In the back of his mind, was the notion that for years, since before he had left high school, he had wanted this and by some miracle, it had happened. She smiled lovingly up at him, resisting the urge to tell him she loved him over and over for fear of sending him running to the woods again.

She slid both hands down his strong and scarred back, her fingers reaching down through beads of sweat and encouraging him to push further into her.

“Keep going.” She breathed “Slow is so good”

He complied, gradually easing in and closing his eyes. He hung his head, resting it on her forehead and released a throaty growl. Amazed he had lasted as long as he had, he was well aware that regardless of how unhurriedly he moved in and out of her, he wasn’t going to make it to the hour mark. She felt a solid pulse from him as he slid back in and whimpered quietly, the sensation making everything below her waist ache with heat and yearning.

“You’re close, I can feel it.” She purred, lacing a hand into his hair and gripping it between her fingers. He nodded a wordless confession.

His balls were tensing and he was so hard he was on the verge of teetering between pleasure and pain, his body screamed at him to just let go, but he had managed this long and had savoured every single, delectable second of it.

She tilted her head so she could seek his tongue with hers. He increased his pace only slightly but it was enough to flick the switch and he shuddered and began to moan against her mouth before gripping her hips and pressing himself deep inside her. He throbbed against her sweet spot and she
gripped him as he came with her pelvic muscles. He slammed a hand on the headboard above her.

“Uh… fuck.” He rasped.

Selene watched his chest flex and the tendons and veins protrude in his neck and considered it may be possible for him to bring her to orgasm just by her witnessing this carnal and masculine sight alone.

*Oh my god. He is so hot.*

Looking down at her, he bit his bottom lip and tried to steady his rapid breathing. She shot him a knowing half smile and he huffed and returned the gesture, his chest and arms breaking out into goosepimples at the raging sensitivity that swept over his skin.

“Good?” She asked.

He nodded shyly, kissing the tip of her nose. “Your turn.”

Before she could say anything, he sank down under the covers and she instantly felt his warm tongue slide between her folds and flick up, over her clit. The more he did it, the more she gripped the sheets and rose her hips to him, her pleasure heightening further when he covered her sensitive spot with his mouth and gently sucked on the whole area.

*This isn’t going to take long at all. She thought.*

She had no real sense of time, but she knew it couldn’t have been more than three minutes before she gasped and wasn’t able to warn him before her high hit. It was sudden and so strong she cried out and scrambled up the bed away from him, shaking with sheer bliss. Her entire body was coated in perspiration and she clamped a hand between her legs to stop him from touching her anymore. Everything now far too sensitive to touch. She managed to catch her breath as he appeared at the side of her, a lazy and smug smile on his face when he reached out to her only to find that she moved back, shaking her head.

“I need a minute.” She panted.

The bed began to vibrate subtly and Selene furrowed her brow and glanced to her side to see that it was being caused by Daryl, sitting with his back to the headboard and chuckling to himself. She hadn’t seen him laugh properly like that before, having always veiled his amusement and even most of his smiles. But as he sat there beside her, his eyes squinted and his chest shuddered as the sound of him laughing filled the room.

“What’s so funny?” She asked, relishing the sound of his genuine and unashamed laughter.

He shook his head and rubbed a hand over his face in an attempt to clear the sweat from his vision, his mouth curled into a white grin.

“Just… fuckin’ wow.” He chortled.

His amusement wasn’t born from finding anything particularly funny, it was more from complete disbelief and Selene knew it as she began to giggle herself.

“I know, right?!” She agreed. “Think it’s safe to say we’re sexually compatible.”

“For sure.” He agreed.
Felling her body relax completely as the wave of pleasure washed away, she slid across the mattress to him and sighed with relief when he drew her into his arms. Sweat coated them both and dampened the sheets but neither of them paid it any mind, focusing only on each other and the fatigue that was now setting after so long of being enveloped in a passionate tryst. He slowly brushed his fingers through her hair intermittently and heard her exhale happily against his chest.

He wanted to say it. To tell her there and then. To reveal to her that she was the most important thing in his life and that he had never been so happy. She had already braved those three little words. Now, he wanted to tell her that he loved her too, so much so that his lips parted and he took a deep breath, readying himself for what would be the biggest admission of his life. He glanced down at her, realising that the moment had passed and she had succumbed to sleep.

She’d always been an early riser, usually being awake, up and dressed before 8:30am to open the studio. Even on her days off, her eyes flickered open just as the suns first rays would start to dart through the drapes. She didn’t necessarily always see this as a good thing but on this occasion, she had been glad she’d woken before Daryl who was laying on his front, his face turned to her with her hand gripped in his in front of his lips. The slight, warm trickle of his breathing against the back of her fingers had been the thing to stir her from her slumber and the first sight she saw was his tousled hair and peacefully snoozing face. Even with his black eye, she thought it was the most striking and attractive of faces she had ever seen. Trying to ignore the bruising on his back, she focused on the ripples of the muscles in his upper arm that were highlighted by the slither of light from the window and smiled to herself.

Yeah. That’s mine.

He roused and released a drawn-out breath, snuggling closer to her hand. She smiled to herself and slinked closer to him. His eyes opened as soon as she moved and he pushed his face into the pillow, groaning to himself but still held onto her hand. He blinked sleep away from his eyes when he settled his head back down and looked into her eyes.

“You’re still here.” She whispered.

Sadness and regret struck his heart and he was able to grasp just how dejected and abandoned she must have felt when she had woken to an empty bed and apartment after the first time. Her eyes were filled with adoration and contentment, simply because he was there.

“I’m still here.” He croaked in response.

She hooked a leg over his and he partially rolled over, pulling her to him and pressing her against his body. She didn’t bother to stop him when he began to kiss her and feel all over her naked skin under the covers, she intended to make the most of her time with him while he was still there.

After a morning of rucked up, twisted sheets, satisfied moans and pillow talk, Daryl had all but decided that whatever had had planned for the day was going to have to wait. He was going to be late, and he was more than OK with that fact.

When Selene got up and covered herself with his black shirt, he couldn’t tear his eyes away as she rummaged about in the kitchen making coffee. Her inked and lusciously toned legs provided a great view, along with the occasional flash of the space between her breasts due to the lack of buttons done up at the front. She reached up while she waited for the coffee machine and combed
her fingers through her long, black hair. The shirt moved up and threatened to expose more than intended, Daryl refused to look away in case he was graced with such a happy accident.

He sat up in the bed, the sheets covering his lap and checked the clock on the nightstand. 7:30am. He found himself unable to move or look away from her when she handed him a coffee and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. She did a double take at him, noticing him glaring at her.

“What is it?” She questioned.

“Nothin’.” He grumbled, sipping his coffee and diverting his attention.

“You can tell me anything, you know that, right?” She urged.

“Yeah”

“So, what is it? You look like you want to say something.”

He swallowed hard and looked down into his drink before he raised his eyes to her.

“You freaking out?” She asked

“Naw.” He responded finally. “This is…nice.”

“Yeah, it is.” She grinned.

She leaned over to him, pressing her lips to his.

Why can’t I tell her?

Music played quietly in the background as was usually the case in the Velvet Rabbit during the day. The girls were around but no shows started until the night hours although the bar was always open. Suited security men milled around the shiny flooring despite the club’s lack of clientele and the heavy, purple, velvet drapes were drawn as normal. Lights lined the edge of the stage that housed the main pole and at that particular moment when Selene descended the stairs from her father’s office, Merle Dixon too.

He nodded a hello as she passed and received the same gesture back. As she made her way to the main door, she noticed Daryl sat at the end of the bar with an attractive redhead. Amy. He immediately clocked her presence as he glanced up from his drink and shot up from his bar stool.

“Selene” He called out.

She beamed at him as he approached, Amy’s raised eyebrow and unimpressed look behind him not lost on her. She stopped in her tracks and waited for him to reach her. It had been two days since she’d last seen him and although she’d called him on both nights, she missed being around him. His eye was starting to lighten, it’s dark blue now turning green at the edges and looking less painful.

“You’re here.” She stated, unsure why she was surprised about his presence in the club, it wasn’t new knowledge to her that he spent a lot of time there, she had just assumed he’d been there less and less since being with her.

“Yeah, just havin’ a drink with Amy while I wait for Merle to finish work, not seen him in a while. He owes me a few drinks.” He explained.
“Oh, OK. My father wanted to see me. I only turned up out of curiosity really.” She shrugged.

Daryl studied her face, she looked troubled. He’d known her long enough to know when there was something on her mind. His stomach started to feel heavy with dread.

At the bar, Delilah glowered at Amy from the opposite end of the counter where she sat with her sparkly clutch bag in her lap and the stiletto heel of one, polished shoe tapping in irritation against the footrest of her barstool. She got up and crossed the bar, sitting in Daryl’s seat.

Amy, who was winding a finger around her deep red hair and chewing on her bottom lip was so engrossed in watching Daryl and Selene that she didn’t even notice when Delilah perched next to her and leaned close to her ear.

“Don’t you dare.” She growled.

“Excuse me?” Amy asked, starting at the sudden warning and shooting Delilah an innocent look through her long, fake eyelashes. Freckles and green eyes also stared back at the older woman, who was not about to be taken for a fool.

“Daryl is spoken for. By Bills daughter too. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay the hell away.” Delilah spat.

Amy scoffed and picked up her drink, her ruby red lips finding the straw while her eyes moved back around to Daryl and his angel winged back.

“We’re just friends, you know that.” She stated plainly, putting her drink down and grabbing Delilah’s clutch from the bar in front of her. She used its mirrored clasp to check her lipstick.

“I don’t look at my friends like you look at him.” Delilah pointed out.

The two women swapped a frown for a few seconds. They’d known each other for a long time and Amy wasn’t under any illusions that Delilah couldn’t see through her. She knew everything about everyone that stepped over the threshold of the main door. Their darkest secrets, their kinks, their pasts and their intentions.

“You screwed him for free too.” Amy mentioned. Twiddling her long red hair through her fingers again.

“You screwed him for free too.” Delilah corrected.

Selene stepped closer to Daryl and cocked her head to the side. His eyes dipped down to her clothes. A black harness under a tight, tank top and black, wet look pants with high heeled boots. Her clothing wasn’t out of place in such an establishment, but how she wore it was. He had seen other men looking at her as she passed through the club and what once made him prickle with anger, now made him feel a kind of self-satisfaction. She was his girl now and they could look as much as they damn well wanted.

“I need to talk to you, but if you’re waiting for Merle it can wait. I won’t barge in on your night so maybe we could meet up tomorrow?” She suggested.

Panic rushed through him and he instantly began to conjure up all manner of scenarios in his head
to explain why she looked like she had bad news to deliver.

“I’ll cancel tonight. It’s fine.” He said quickly, not even entertaining the thought of having to wait to find out what she wanted to talk to him about.

“No, no. Just… enjoy your night.” She urged. “Please”

He could see it in her eyes, she wasn’t going to give in and he was better off honouring her request and accepting that whatever it was, now was not the time for him to hear it.

“Alright, um…” He inched his fingers into her hand at her side and looked down at her. “…you gonna call me tonight?”

She smiled at him and for the first time since he’d spotted her, she looked genuinely happy.

“Not tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She said with bright eyes.

“OK. Take ya out for dinner.”

“Sure. See you then.” She broke away from him, turning her back.

“Wait” he blurted out, grabbing her wrist and turning his back to everyone as much as he could “Did I- did I do somethin’ wrong?”

Cursing his own vulnerability, he hoped that no one around them could hear what he was saying to her. The question was out of character for him, worried, pleading almost.

“Oh, no. It’s OK, Daryl” She promised.

Still not entirely convinced, he resisted the temptation to ask again and point out her unconvincing behaviour.

“Alright.” He nodded instead.

She turned again, this time managing to take a step towards the door but he hadn’t let go of her wrist. She stopped when she realised he was still holding onto her.

“Daryl, you have to let me g-”

He kissed her suddenly and released her arm. Her face grew warm under his hand as he caressed her cheek and held her to him. Selene was stunned, this kind of public display of affection outside the Tattoo Parlour was almost unheard of. But here he was, kissing her in front of his brother and stripper friend and every other member of staff that knew exactly who the both of them were.

Then, there was the fact that her father was probably watching them from his office while he cleaned his plethora of hidden guns but Daryl didn’t seem to care about any of it. His bold and knee weakening move proving to be exactly what she needed. When his lips left hers, she whimpered slightly and it took her a while to lift her eyelids open to see him. She had to position a hand on his arm to steady herself.

The bartenders stopped what they were doing briefly, exchanging a small nudge and a grin. Merle, who was now in the corner by the door, scowled at them while shaking his head.

Amy hadn’t responded to Delilah’s earlier comment. Merely turning her back to her and joining everyone else in observing Daryl kissing Selene in the middle of the club. Delilah leaned in again, tapping a long-nailed finger on the bar in front of them.
“Ya see? He’s obsessed with her. Ain’t no way he’s gonna stray from his girl, sweet cheeks. You can look, but if you try to touch… mark my words, you will regret it.” She warned.

When Selene was finally able to leave, Daryl sat back down with Amy and Delilah retreated to the other side of the bar again, back to her previous vantage point so she could keep a close eye on the young redhead sat with the better half of the Dixon brothers.

“Everything alright?” Amy asked

“Yeah. Fine.” Daryl replied, signalling to one of the girls behind the bar that he wanted another drink.

“How’s it goin’? With you and her?” Amy continued with a nudge of her head towards the door Selene had just exited through.

“Good. Real good.”

“Been a few weeks now, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Screwed her yet?”

Daryl froze up for a couple of seconds before remembering who he was talking to. Amy was not only a stripper, but also a prostitute who had no qualms about being seen as having no shame. It was a direct and very personal question for Daryl, but he laughed quietly regardless, having got used to her brash nature over the years.

“None of ya god damn business.” She huffed.

The bartender slid a bottle of beer across the surface to him and he thanked her by lifting it up and tilting it to her, he took a gulp and studied the label on the bottle. Not his usual choice but if he was intending on spending a night drinking with Merle, he would have to start off slow before hard liquor and cocaine was thrown into the mix.

“Well that’s a clear yes.” Amy concluded.

Daryl glanced to the side at her. “I ain’t talkin’ to you about that.” He said with an air of amusement at her interest in his sex life.

“Oh my god, she was good too, huh?!” Amy cried, her hand coming up to her mouth.

“Jesus. Shut up.” He scolded, lowering his voice and feeling his face redden.

Amy sat back and let her eyes sweep over him. His bashful reaction to her probing for information about his personal life had only made him more attractive to her. Having always thought he was different, she gravitated towards him and the two had shared a seemingly uneventful and simple friendship for a number of years. That was, until she propositioned him one night and the alcohol in his veins and the drugs in his system had urged him to say yes. But it hadn’t changed anything, at least not for Daryl. He never wavered or treated her any differently. Amy however, only grew more attached but kept her feelings to herself. Delilah was the only one that seemed to be able to read her like a book. Like she did with just about everyone else.
“Seriously, I’m happy for you…. She’s a lucky girl.” Amy said

He managed a small smile in between sips of his beer and she caught his eye.

“Thanks.” He says sincerely. “But I’m the lucky one. Must have done some good shit in a past life.”

“C’mon, Daryl. You’re a catch.” She argued.

He scoffed and put the bottle down, glancing around the room and realising Delilah’s line of vision was right on them. He tilted his head up at her in acknowledgement and received a small wink in response. “Yeah. Alright. I’m just waitin’ for her to come to her senses”

“At least you’ll always have a backup.” Amy mentioned.

“What?” He asked, furrowing his brow and wondering why she was shifting closer to him. Red flags started to go up in his mind and his gut was telling him that having drinks with Amy maybe wasn’t the best idea anymore. Or was he just being paranoid? She placed her hand on his forearm and his skin stung from her touch.

“Me.” She purred.

Quicker than she’d anticipated he pulled his arm away and stared at her, open mouthed while he leaned back, creating distance between them.

“Relax, I’m kidding.” She grinned, glancing up at Delilah who was glowering at her through the chattering bartenders, tapping her glass with her long, red nails and playing a tinkling chorus of disapproval. Daryl registered the tension between them and figured there must be something he wasn’t aware of and didn’t really have much desire to find out about. Amy got up and collected her drink, leaning over the bar and plucking a cocktail umbrella from a container on the other side of the counter. She dropped it into her glass and slowly walked around him, dragging her nails across his shoulder blades. He stiffened and grit his teeth.

“Although I wouldn’t say no if you asked.” She purred in his ear before she headed to the dressing room.

Delilah sighed and rolled her eyes, collecting her drink and following Amy to the back room. Daryl attempted to put the whole thing down to Amy being on her fourth extremely strong drink and assumed she wouldn’t remember much tomorrow. The alternative was too complicated and odd to bare thinking about. He carried on working his way through his beer until Merle joined him 30 minutes later.

A light rapping on the glass of the door. She had only just heard it as she charged around the studio like a whirlwind, cleaning down surfaces and tidying up. She was alone and had been singing away to the song playing over the speakers, filling the room with heavy guitars and drums. She had treated herself to an early night the night before, settling in her bed with a book just after darkness fell but had spent the night mostly awake and trying to make sense of things. Above all else, she missed Daryl being beside her. Missed being able to reach out and touch him, kiss him and climb on top of him whenever she wanted.

24 hours earlier
Bill picked up the remote on the desk in front of him and reclined in his chair. It creaked under the pressure even after having been oiled. He made a mental note to task someone with getting him a new one. Something with a higher back rest, more support and able to lean back with no issues. Comfort helped him think clearly and feel important.

Selene stood before him, her hand on her hip in a display of disinterest and inconvenience. Her eyes were narrowed at her father, who had invited her to visit him through Luigi, who she had discovered was still being made to follow her around and check in on her from time to time. She had been in his office for at least 5 minutes and had said nothing to his pathetic attempts at chit chat. Eventually, he had given up, instead pouring himself a glass of liquor and sitting down at his desk.

“Why haven’t you and Daryl seen each other much recently?” He began. Straight to the point, just the way she would want it, he figured.

Selene had no idea that he had been informed of Daryl’s absence after they’d taken the next step in their relationship and gathered that she would have to proceed with the conversation while exercising extreme caution so as not to get Daryl put in danger.

“We decided to spend a week or so apart. Neither of us are used to relationships and all the feelings that come along with them. It was good for both of us to take some time to adjust. Not that it’s any of your business.” She told him. Her response had been as convincing as she could make it and she waited for the onslaught of accusations about lying that never came. He simply nodded, pursed his lips and took a sip of his drink while tapping the remote on the desk with his other hand.

“He hasn’t hurt you?” He wanted to know.

“No. He wouldn’t do that.” She replied firmly, her voice laced with an icy cold hint of iritability.

Bill aimed the remote at the wooden cabinet on the wall and began pressing buttons. The door slid back and the TV behind it flickered to life, a grainy but still reasonably decipherable image appeared on the screen.

“Please explain this to me.” He said as he pressed play.

Selene recognised the image immediately. It was Rocket City Auto Repairs and Daryl was on the forecourt tending to a motorcycle. Her stomach twisted into a knot when from nowhere, a distinctive looking man appeared from the side of the picture and landed a hard punch square into Daryl’s face. It was evident that it was her brother. Daryl stumbled back, but didn’t fall and she couldn’t help but wonder how he’d managed to take such a powerful hit. Her mouth dropped open when she saw Brad lift him from the floor and slam him into a nearby wall, crashing his arm to Daryl’s chest and quite obviously yelling in his face.

Her eyes flickered and she forced the urge to cry away. She wasn’t going to cry in front of her father. The result would only be both Brad and Daryl being taken away from her. The pit of her stomach grew heavier each time she replayed the punch in her mind. She thought of the moment Daryl had simply told her he’d been jumped while Brad was in the same room. She also thought of how much self-control it must have taken for him not to fight back.

Bill switched off the video after Brad had let Daryl down from the wall and stormed off. He watched as his daughter nibbled on a thumbnail and mulled over what she had just seen. He wanted nothing more than to be able to rise from his seat and offer her a comforting embrace. But the last time she had let him touch her was before her mother got sick. Since then, she had kept him firmly at arm’s length.
“Daryl told me he was jumped. I didn’t know it was Brad. I can see why he’s kept that part to himself.” She mused.

“Why would Brad want to beat up your boyfriend, Selene?” Her father demanded.

“Because he doesn’t like him. He probably jumped to the wrong conclusion when Daryl stopped turning up to see me every day. Like father like son, huh? Sadly.” She sighed.

“Hmm” Bill hummed, his vision locked on her and trying to see any cracks in her story. She remained confident and sure of her responses, his intimidation techniques having worn off a while ago. “I know Dixon. He’s worked for me for a long time. It is most unusual for him to decline a fight. Why didn’t he retaliate when Brad punched him?”

Selene shot him an exasperated look and held her hands up, fanning her fingers out as if holding an invisible vase.

“Really?! What planet are you on?! Because he’s my fucking brother, dad! Daryl cares about me, surely, you’ve seen enough proof of that by now? He let him throw him against a wall and then he didn’t even tell me what happened because he knows I would have been angry and upset with Brad. Which I fucking am!”

He leaned towards her and extended a podgy index finger, pointing at her.

“You promise me, Selene. Promise me that Dixon boy hasn’t hurt you.” he commanded.

Selene gawped at him. “Oh my god, you’ve not listened to a word I’ve said. I’m leaving.”

She turned on her heels and strode towards the door, flapping her hands by her sides and gritting her teeth. To her, he really was insufferable regardless of him revealing the true source of Daryl’s injuries to her.

“Selene!” He called out. But it was too late, she was already throwing the door open and stomping outside onto the overhead walkway of the club

Now

She clicked the lock open on the door and greeted Daryl with a bright smile. He gently kissed her cheek as he passed into the tattoo parlour and she closed the door behind him. She pulled the remote for the speakers out of the back pocket of her black, skinny jeans and lowered the volume of the music. Daryl scanned the room, noting how untidy it appeared and how unusual that was. Selene usually ran a tight ship and had little tolerance for tardiness or messy tendencies. He looked over his shoulder at her and she stepped up to him, feathering her fingers over his eye.

“This is looking much better.” She observed.

The painful looking bruise had now turned a strange shade of green and brown which indicated it was in the final stages of healing. He could now blink without pain and only felt discomfort when pressure was applied to the area, meaning he still couldn’t sleep on his side.

“Gettin’ there.” He mumbled.

“Sit for a minute.” She said, holding out a hand and gesturing to the couches. He shuffled beside the low table between them and sat down, his arms propped up over his legs. He leaned forwards
and Selene couldn’t help but pick up on how sad he seemed.

“OK, so we need to talk.” She began.

“Alright. If ya don’t wanna do this no more, just say it.” He suddenly said.

Selene visibly winced at the comment, sliding forwards on the couch opposite and dipping her head to try and see his expression. When he looked up at her, his eyes were filled with sorrow.

“What?” she asked.

“You finishing’ this?” He countered.

She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it with enough grip to tell him that she has not happy with his train of thought.

“You think I’m breaking up with you?” She uttered in disbelief.

“Are ya?”

“No! God no! There’s something I need to talk to you about, that’s all.” She explained.

He took his hand away from her and rubbed it over his face, his shoulders relaxing and his expression changing, now displaying nothing but pure relief.

“God, Daryl. I’m so sorry if I made you think that. I wouldn’t just throw this away. You know how I feel about you.”

Guilt shot through her body and she thought that maybe she made the wrong decision by leaving him to his night with Merle instead of disclosing what had happened in her father’s office. But she didn’t want the eavesdroppers, the distractions or the strippers swinging around poles while she was trying to discuss something so important with him. She also hadn’t ignored the fact that he always dropped everything for her. Everything she wanted to do, no matter when, he would be there and so, she had wanted him to enjoy a night with his brother without interruption.

“S’ok. Ya didn’t. Just me bein’ a dumbass. Overthinkin’ shit.” He shrugged.

“You’re not a dumbass, don’t say that. Maybe you did overthink it, but that’s probably my fault. I’m sorry.” She said sincerely, seeing him nod subtly. “OK, well… I need to tell you what my father wanted to see me for.”

Still saying nothing, he tapped into his self-discipline and waited for more information before trying to make any more assumptions.

“He showed me some CCTV footage.” She looked down into her lap and played with her hands awkwardly before peering up at him again. “Of my brother attacking you at work.”

Daryl cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. He couldn’t deny that if she wasn’t breaking up with him, Brad’s attack might have had something to do with the reason she wanted to have such a seemingly serious chat. He knew of the cameras around his workplace and everyone was aware that they fed straight back to a central watch room in the Velvet Rabbit. Trying to evaluate her opinion of the situation, he took a moment to watch her. Her eyes darted about the room as if she was uncomfortable and her hands wrung in her lap. Eventually, she made eye contact with him.

“Didn’t wanna lie to ya. Just left some shit out.” He uttered.
“I think I know why you did.” She mentioned. “You knew I’d be angry with him.” Her body slumped forwards when she dropped her head into her lap and laced her fingers into her hair for a few seconds. When she sat up, she offered him a sympathetic look. “I am angry with him. I’m angry that I asked him to promise he wouldn’t hurt you and he broke that promise. I’m angry that he punched you in the face and blackened your eye and threw you against a wall. I’m angry that he’s supposed to be my brother and he is screwing things up and I’m also angry that you had to hold back information for him”

“I didn’t do it for him. Did it for you.” He corrected.

She reached out for his hand again. He complied instantly, needing the contact himself as much as she did.

“Told me he was gonna tell ya.” He mumbled.

“I’m so sorry my brother attacked you, Daryl.” She sniffed, her eyes welling with tears.

“Ain’t ya fault.” He told her, now holding onto her hand with both of his, sandwiching it between the rough, mechanic’s skin of his fingers. “You gotta know though, I’mma fuckin’ kill him if he touches me again.”

She let go of him, rounding the table and sitting beside him. He draped an arm around her shoulders and they sat back, using the backrest as Selene rested her head on his chest.

“I’ll help you bury the body.” She said.

“Ya ol’man, what he say?” he wanted to know, skirting around her comment about burying her brother’s body that had obviously come out of pure anger.

“He wanted to know why you hadn’t been around for over a week. I said we’d decided to spend some time apart because things got intense pretty quickly. Told him Brad attacked you because he just doesn’t like you. I don’t know if he bought it, it was all I could think of at the time.” She explained.

She could feel him nuzzle his face into the top of her head and hear him draw in a long breath. She knew he did this to smell her shampoo and it made her smile every single time. There were many small things he did repeatedly that struck her as sweet and conveyed his feelings towards her. His desire for physical affection had come on leaps and bounds and she had picked up on how he seemed to like to hold her hand or graze her fingers with his or how he dutifully kissed her cheek when greeting her or departing from her.

“Should have told him the truth.” He expressed.

She sat up so she could see his face properly and held his gaze. Against her better judgement, she thought of what it might feel like to find out that her father had hurt Daryl. She remembered the feeling of heavy, gnawing worry in the pit of her stomach when she contemplated that there might be a chance his recent disappearance may have had something to do with him and his henchmen. She couldn’t tolerate the idea or the feeling of nausea it struck in her.

“I will die before I let that man hurt you.” She promised.

Daryl didn’t know what to say and he was aware that it was as plain as day to Selene, who sympathetically squeezed his leg. No one had ever shown such a fierce defensiveness of him before. He’d seen how capable she was of caring about the people she loved and the lengths she’d gone to in order to make sure they could be together, but he still couldn’t wrap his head around
why anyone would do it for him. When he thought about her feelings towards him, how they’d progressed into something real and meaningful, his heart nearly skipped a beat and he still found the idea to be totally unbelievable but altogether incredible.

“That’s all I needed to talk to you about. You’re not going anywhere.” She smiled, playfully tapping his leg.

“K” he muttered shyly, pleased that his negative assumption had been squashed.

“I gotta change. Gimme a half hour and I’ll be ready to go.” She said, jumping up and vanishing into the stairwell.

Sometimes, we encounter someone in our lives that just makes us feel comfortable. We can talk to them about anything, disclose our deepest fears, our fantasies and our insecurities. We know we might not always say the right thing, or be what we can only assume others want us to be, but the ability to really be ourselves with the person that makes us happy is a truly unique experience. There is nothing rarer, nor more beautiful, than being unapologetically yourself in your own perfect imperfection.

It was a daring move for Daryl. A curious decision from him that left him feeling as though he were watching himself from the corner of the room, unable to control his actions but not necessarily wanting to. He pushed open the door to her apartment, finding her stood at the dining table, slipping silver rings onto her fingers. She hadn’t noticed his presence and was humming tunefully to herself. He didn’t intend to seek her out for any one reason, but he did know that he needed to be close to her.

He walked into the room, his boots causing a floorboard to creak under the pressure and she slowly looked up at the wall opposite with a small smile, not needing to turn to see him and safe in the knowledge that they were the only two people in the locked building. Without a word, he approached her and took in the short, leather skirt she wore and the black shirt with the low reaching V-neckline. He began nuzzling against her neck from behind, nipping and kissing at her skin while his hands roamed over her hips and up her torso, just stopping short of reaching her breasts. She moaned happily and reached a hand back to push her fingers through his hair. He breathed heavily against her and she could sense the rising level of want in him. It made her feel special and proud that he felt able to let go and endeavour to initiate something like this.

“Tell me what you’re thinking” She whispered.

“You know.” Was all he said.

She smiled lazily and closed her eyes while enjoying the lustful kisses he peppered over her neck and shoulder.

“What is it you want?” She tried, knowing he could back off at any moment, overwhelmed with shyness. Or, he could simply ignore her request for him to open up to her. It took him a while to reply and she noticed that in the interim his hands seem to apply more pressure to her skin, becoming more urgent.

“I want you” He rasped.

Selene grinned to herself with her eyes still closed and her fingers still slotted into his hair.

“How?” She asked, stepping up her game.
Daryl paused and she opened her eyes and felt a flash of panic at his stillness in response to her question. She counted five laboured breaths in her ear before he finally spoke.

“Bend over the table.”

She couldn’t help it, she slowly turned her head to him with eyes widened in shock and a hint of a mischievous smile on her face.

“You asked” he stated. “So, bend over the damn table.”
Thanks for the comments! I’m back for a little update! Still not 100% well but this is a good distraction. :) Fluff and ssssmut.

He wasn’t pushy but something in the way that he spoke and the words that he used told her could be if he wanted to. The idea excited her. Knowing how quiet and reserved he could be only made the situation she found herself in all the more enticing. He was showing her a side to him that she was certain he would never have shown to anyone else and as a result she had the gratification of bringing something out of him that he hadn’t had a chance to explore yet.

She placed her hands flat on the cold surface of the glass dining table, hearing her rings clink as she lay her fingers flat and decided not to look back for a while, wanting to leave him to adjust to his new-found dominance.

She felt fingers slide up her thighs, gathering her skirt up as they went and leaving a trail of warm, tingling enchantment before the click of a belt buckle rang through her ears and lips were once again on her neck. Pressing himself against her, he reached around to her front, unbuttoning her black shirt and pulling it down, off her shoulders and down her back before he hesitated and the sudden silence struck concern into Selene. She craned her neck to peep at him over her shoulder. He was looking right back at her, his lips sucked into his mouth and his chest rising and falling rapidly.

“It’s OK.” She whispered “I trust you” It was exactly what he was seeking without having to ask for it. Permission. Leaning over her, he kissed along her spine, tormented her with a brief touch between her legs and tugged her underwear down. It was all happening so fast for Selene, she wanted to savour every moment, etch the memories into her brain so she could always recall this, the moment Daryl threw away his inhibitions and did what he wanted to her. It occurred to her that she wanted to know, that she didn’t want to wait for some big reveal, she needed to be allowed to enjoy the build-up.

“What are you going to do to me?” She asked.

A hand swept through the space between her thighs again, grazing her skin and sending a tidal wave of pleasure rippling through her. He was deliberately holding back from any real and purposeful contact with the knowledge that it would drive her crazy. She could sense his light smile behind her, not even needing to see it for herself to know it was there.

“Ain’t decided yet.” He muttered quietly as he persisted in feeling every inch of her with his fingertips and leaving kisses and licks over the inked artwork on her shoulder blades “Any requests?”

“What you want” She purred. Her hand found his while he was skimming a line upwards from her knee, along her inner thigh and she attempted to guide him further up, wanting him to allow her the relief of a slightly more intense touch between her legs. He slipped his hand away from hers and let
out a huff and small giggle in her ear.

“You in a rush, girl?” He breathed.

“You’re teasing me” she groaned.

“And you ain’t ever teased me?” He reminded her. He raked his fingers through her hair with one hand, drawing her bra straps down with the other, she tilted her head back as her scalp lit up, electrified with sparks as he wound his hand around the entirety of her hair and gripped it with his fist. His hips pressed her further against the table where she felt the unmistakable shape of his erection, hot like a fire raging on the skin of one cheek. She tried to reach back to him, needing to pull him even closer, but he caught hold of her wrist with a sharp slap.

“Hands on the table.” He ordered.

Selene exhaled a jagged breath at the sound of him not only owning the situation but owning her and telling her what to do. It was enough to turn her on completely and he’d barely touched any of her sensitive spots yet. She was close to begging him, pleading with him to do something, anything that meant she could have a few seconds without her body screaming at her to provide some semblance of respite from the raging lust in her veins and mind. Finally, he began to work his way around to her front again, giving her just one fingertip slicked between her folds. Her knees went weak and she was suddenly glad he’d told her to put her hands on the table. Grateful for the stability, she felt her palms sweating against the glass as she held on and tried not to collapse when he took the flesh of her neck between his lips and lightly sucked, creating a sensuously painful pleasure along with the now circular motion of his fingers between her legs. She heard him suck in a breath against her neck when he was forced to wrap his other arm around her middle to prevent her from bending her legs in response the weakness he had instilled in her. Her reaction was turning him on more than the actual contact and he revelled in seeing her eyes tightly closed, her shiny lips parted and the red tint to her neck and chest as he let go of her torso, regaining his grip on her hair and gently tugging it back.

Further down, please. Move further down. She yelled in her mind, the words on the tip of her tongue. She tried to tilt her hips so his efforts would be forced to move lower, but he noticed her plan and smiled against the side of her face.

“What?” He whispered with a small grin.

“Lower” she managed to croak.

“Lower, What?”

“Lower, please.” She pleaded with a husky breath.

“Like this?” He said, sliding his fingers further down and pushing one teasingly into her entrance before stopping.

“Y-Yes.” She stammered

“You want more?”

Her mind raged, a million and one thoughts firing through it like lightning bolts, incredulous and eager

You really are in control here, aren’t you?!
“Yes. I want more.” She affirmed

She stumbled against him and the table when he gained access with one finger, then two and began the highly enjoyable process of making her jolt and moan with every move. Twice she tried to break free from his hold only to be manhandled back to her previous position. Dazed by how confident he now seemed with her, she realised that this wasn’t going to be slow and tender lovemaking. This was going to be something completely different altogether. That was, if he ever let her have her way. When he let go of her hair, his other hand still worked, seemingly with minimal effort to keep her firmly planted of the edge while he plucked a condom from his jeans pocket. Selene didn’t think she could get any more stunned by what was happening until she saw the empty foil packet fall to the floor through the glass table and it dawned on her that there was a good chance that he now walked around prepared because at some point, he’d contemplated the chances of a situation like this occurring. The backs of her legs and everything else felt cold and abandoned in the brief seconds he stepped back from her. She let out a complaining moan and attempted once more to turn and take a hold of him. He stopped her with ease, simply stepping back further and shaking his head.

“Nah uh.” He scolded. “No touchin’.”

“Daryl, please-“

“-No.”

Being told what to do wasn’t something Selene had ever liked, but this was different in a lot of exciting and new ways. It made her feel like she was in safe and strong hands but still with an element of danger, like he could get rough with her if he wanted to and she would just have to trust him. The not knowing and anticipation was driving her to comply along with the tingling in her clit as a result of his talented fingers.

She turned back to the table and heard his jeans drop before he was back on her again, seizing her waist and turning her around on his own terms. He lifted her and propped her on the table, her naked backside smarting from the cold surface at first. Taking a firm grip of her thighs, he forced them apart and positioned himself between them while kissing her with such force she felt teeth clank and graze and her piercings drag. He was amping things up, running his hands up to her bra and yanking it down at the front. She untangled her arms from the straps and caught the hem of his T-shirt. He lifted it over his head as quickly as he could before grabbing her wrists as she went to drape them over his broad shoulders.

“You not hear me or somethin’?” He scolded with a crooked and devious smile.

Her eyes locked with his and her gaze was packed with intensity and a seriousness that told him he might not get his way with this one.

“Please” she uttered. The word small and quiet but enough to tell him that she needed something. Needed to be able to hold onto him somehow.

He eventually nodded.

She crossed her wrists behind his head as he resumed kissing her with a frenzied desire, his tongue caressing hers while he lined up with her entrance, teasing her with his tip until she began to shift forwards onto him.

“Oh my god, stop teasing me” She groaned.
“Said to do what I want. So, shut up” He said in his typical southern drawl, biting his bottom lip and prolonging his merciless torment, making her squirm and moan against him.

Daryl hid a surprised and powerful grin as he nuzzled at the side of her face and considered how amazing it felt to have her practically pleading for him like this. It was almost impossible to imagine that this would have ever happened to him and as long as he lived, he would remember this. He now trusted her implicitly and as a result, was able to provoke a carnal craving from her, a craving for him, all of him and all of his faults.

He kissed her nose and grazed her lips as he drew a lascivious line up and down, up and down over and over between her legs until she began to shudder and whimper with each stroke. The blue of her irises was suddenly fixed on his.

“Please” She uttered.

As soon as the word left her moistened lips, Daryl had to take a moment to compose himself. He needed it as much as she did and would have been lying to himself if he tried to carry on without giving in to his needs. Selene gasped when he eased himself inside and stopped halfway, her arms drew him into a firmer grip around his shoulders and she purposefully held her chest to his. He took a moment to gain control of his body’s response and inhaled deeply before giving her the rest of him and gripping her against his torso with his strong arms. He shifted her hips, pulling them forwards so he was able to press himself deep inside of her. She tensed momentarily and he could hear her small gasps as she kissed along his shoulder, immersed in the satisfying rush of pleasure building from her core when he retracted and went for a second thrust. She closed her fist over his hair at the back of his head, forcing him to look at her before she kissed him and sensed his momentum building. He moaned against her, his lips falling from hers but still brushing over them as they both started to pant and his fingertips left little white marks on her hips as a result of him hoisting her up from the surface of the table and shuffling across the small space between the table and the bed, his belt buckle clanking on the wooden flooring as he went. Selene held on tight with her legs and was both surprised and delighted when he managed to lower her down onto the sheets, still inside her and with such skill that the pressure radiating from between her legs did not wane once. She opened her legs further, letting him thrust into her with a mounting speed. He used one hand to pull her arms from around his neck, positioning them above her head and pinning both her wrists to the bed.

His movements became harder, and she shot him a dirty half smile coupled with a subtle lift of one eyebrow. He couldn’t help but return the gesture but finding that he was holding back a small huff of amusement at her obviously impressed expression.

“Could get used to this.” She whispered.

He quickly kissed her. A long, drawn-out kiss while he carried on pushing into her, seemingly harder each time until she was crying out each time he hit into her hilt. Eventually moving back from her lips, he rested his forehead on hers.

“Shh.” He hushed.

He had already silenced her words with a kiss, but now he was affirming that there was no need for conversation. With her arms still locked above her, she felt totally at his mercy and the thought was exhilarating. Everything was on his terms and so far, she was fast becoming addicted.

Pain began to combine with pleasure when he sat up slightly and using one hand, hooked it under her lower back and encouraged her to tilt her hips to him, the varied position meaning he was practically slamming into her, looking down into the space between them and watching as her body
took everything he gave her, the sound of flesh colliding rang through the room. She noticed his eyes flicker up to her face, checking on her. But she was arching her back in ecstasy, freeing her hands from his grip and reaching up and out above her head, gripping onto the edge of the mattress. He leaned over her, pushing her legs up higher, bending them and holding onto her shins when he just had to pause. A loud, feminine, almost musical sigh left her lungs when the sensation of him pulsing in her entrance started a frenzied need to touch herself. She quickly managed to shoot a hand between her legs before he could stop her and circled her clit, her cries and moans continuing even while Daryl took a minute to pull himself together. But she wasn’t helping. His vision was fixed on her fingers, occasionally travelling down to brush over his cock and making him grunt and release a short breath. When his eyes crept up to meet hers, she gave him a quick nod and he plunged back into her, no longer strong enough to hold back. He crawled over her, propping himself up on his elbows either side of her shoulders and licking at one nipple as he passed, he let her close around him. Her legs linked over his back and her arms wrapped him in a firm embrace. Faster and harder with each slam, he knew he was taking a risk with the intensity of his treatment of her but out of the blue, he was rewarded with a breathy declaration that she was careering towards her high. He took it as permission to loosen control on his own release.

Selene’s eyes had been closed briefly but they snapped open when she sensed herself coming undone. She could see him above her, neck muscles taut and skin reddened, strong arms either side of her that she couldn’t help but close her hands around. He was nuzzled against the side of her face, panting in her ear and covering her hair with sweat. Her skin flushed in a prickly, icy wave that shot up from her core, reaching her toes and fingertips, engulfing her mind and rolling her eyes back in her head before everything began to convulse with pleasure. She tried not to make too much noise, but to no avail. Her loud, throaty groan sounded out from between them and Daryl lowered himself onto her, obviously enduring his own orgasm as he growled against her neck and gently pushed his hips up, filling her as much as he could and making her clit pulse with every twitch and involuntary jolt.

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” She gasped, dragging in as much breath as she could.

He didn’t move for at least two minutes, taking time to catch his breath, kiss her jawline and use one hand to feel up and down her body. Selene closed her eyes and exulted in the opportunity she had to just lay there with him, his hand still fondling her gently and his cock still tensing inside her.

“You only come up here to have sex with me?” She grinned.

He turned his head to see her and studied her face. He brushed her hair from her cheek with the back of his hand.

“Think any less of me if I said yes?” He asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “No.” She said firmly.


“You were packing.” She mentioned, alluding to the condom he had conveniently kept in his pocket. “That normal for you?”

“Naw.” He replied. “Merle threw it at me last night in the club, thinks he’s fuckin’ funny.”
“Thought you might as well use it now, huh?” She questioned with a wink.

His expression started to change and his brow furrowed slightly, his lips pressing into a thin line. She knew this look, she had seen it before and was sure it was because something was troubling him. She smoothed her palm over his chest and rested it over his bicep, waiting patiently for him to speak. He sat up, pulling his jeans up and sat on the edge of the bed. Selene crawled up behind him and slipped her arms around his waist while she tenderly kissed his scarred shoulder blade.

“I ain’t no freak or nothin’.” He muttered.

It was an odd statement and one she wasn’t expecting.

“Why would you say that?” She enquired,

“Just…the way I was with ya. I ain’t usually like that.” He confessed.

“Then why did you do it?”

His head hung low and he stared at the grain on the wooden flooring below his feet, which were positioned between the bed and the large, black rug that lived in front of her nightstand.

“Could tell ya liked it.” He mumbled.

She fidgeted about behind him, settling with a leg either side of him and her arms crossed in front of his stomach. His shoulders were so broad she couldn’t see over them so she simply rested her head on his back and listened to his heartbeat.

“I did.” She replied confidently.

“Guess ya bring somethin’ out in me.” He mused.

“Your adventurous side.” She dragged the tip of her nose over his scars and he closed his eyes, holding onto her clasped hands around his middle.

“I aint got no adventurous side” He scoffed.

“Maybe, but you do have a dominant side.” She hummed, tightening her embrace. “And I like it.”

“Ya do, huh?” He asked.

She hauled herself to the side, releasing him from her legs and standing up. She tugged her skirt down and caught sight of her discarded underwear under the dining table, a smug feeling of satisfaction swelled in her chest. Turning to him, she stepped between his legs and ran her fingers through his hair, forcing him to look up at her. Standing there topless before him, his unique, tattooed and beautiful girlfriend smiled down at him and he gently rubbed the back of her legs.

“Yes. But you’re not the only one that can be bossy” she affirmed, leaning down and kissing him softly. When she pulled back, she noticed his pained expression.

“Stop it.” He uttered.

“Stop what? I’m not doing anything.”

“Standin’ there half naked tellin’ me ya gonna boss me around.”

“I think we should order in instead.” She suggested.
It was unusual for Selene to emerge from upstairs any later than 9am, opening time. By 10:00am, everyone had arrived at the Studio and were beginning their days. Ray, who had just started a thigh tattoo on a young, female client was embroiled in a debate with her over how Kurt Cobain died. His feminine cries of disagreement loud enough to draw everyone else into the same debate from time to time. Shorty was munching on a bowl of cereal in his tattoo chair and Axel was hunched over his desk, drawing. All of them were silenced by the sight of an exhausted Selene staggering down the stairs and struggling across the floor to her desk, legs taking wide strides and her face twisted in discomfort.

She eased herself down into her leather chair as if she were a hundred years old and tried to ignore the sniggers from her tattooists and the one client in the building. Everyone had exchanged glances and failed to hide their amusement. Hushed whispers flitted around the room, mainly from Ray to the others. Selene knew that whisper anywhere.

She ran her hand through her hair and yawned as she grabbed the mouse and checked the days appointments. Having found not a single scrap of energy, she wore barely any make-up, just her eyebrows and some eyeliner and mascara which was highly unusual, even on days off spent sat in front of the TV. Her choice of attire was also indicating that something was off. Simple black jeans, black sneakers and an Ink Cabinet jacket over a Slayer T-shirt. No harnesses, no PVC, no leather and no studs. She could still hear them whispering but chose not to pay it much attention. Her head was too busy trying to adjust to the loud rap music playing and everything between her legs was providing her with a highly distracting ache. She briefly wondered if she missed an early morning dance off and thought herself to be extremely lucky if she had.

Shorty got up and wandered into the kitchen, placing his bowl in the sink and hitting the button on the coffee machine, rapping along to the lyrics while filling a cup. When he emerged, he wandered over to Selene and thudded the drink down on the desk in front of her. She slowly lifted her minimally made-up gaze up to him and he could see for himself how tired she looked. He leaned down to her and quickly looked behind him at everyone else, they all diverted their attention quickly and more obviously than any of them knew.

“You got the clap or something?” Shorty whispered.

“What?!” She hushed back. “No!”

“You sat in that chair like a geriatric and you’re walking like John Wayne.” He pointed out. “Not to mention you look like you died and someone brought you back using some sage and a vial of goats blood.”

“Thanks, buddy.” She scoffed, picking up the coffee and taking a large gulp.

“I’m serious, you alright?!” He asked.

She put the coffee down, rolled her eyes and nibbled on her thumb before beckoning him closer. She wasn’t about to lie, nor was she going to be let off without telling them anything. She knew them all well enough to expect that she would be badgered about it all day long unless she let them have a snippet of information to go on. Sometimes, she thought the bunch of men she worked with were worse than a bunch of stepford wives at a country club lunch.

“Remember when you first slept with Maria? Remember what it’s like when you can’t keep your
“hands off of someone?” she questioned.

“Um, yeah?” he replied with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Well” She began, blinking at him as if she was expecting him to understand without her having to say anything else. “Daryl stayed last night.”

“Oh.” He grunted, his eyes widening “OH!”

“Shh!” She hissed.

He rubbed at his chin before awkwardly pulling at the bottom of his black uniform shirt. Although he liked to act like he was confident and knowledgeable about sex and women in front of the others, Shorty was probably the most reserved and somewhat shy one out of them all. He piped up with the odd vulgar remark over a few beers but deep down, Shorty was sensitive and Maria had even told Selene herself over a bottle of wine that he was actually quite nervous when it came to his between the sheets personality.

“Um, you guys have some weird, acid induced sex party or something? I mean, you look exhausted.” He remarked.

“No!” She cried.

“You can hardly walk, Selene.” He pointed out, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Yes, it was that good.” She proclaimed, seeing him push his lips into a line and glance towards the stairs.

“Daryl look as bad as you?”

“No idea, he’s still asleep upstairs.”

Holding her gaze for a moment, she smirked at him and was relieved to get the same in return. He chuckled to himself and turned to the others. “You were right, Raymondo. She’s got one hell of a friction burn by the sound of things!” He called out across the tattoo parlour.

“I know sex injuries when I fuckin’ see ‘em!” Ray yelled back thoughtlessly, suddenly realising where he was. “Excuse my potty mouth, darlin’.” He said to his client. She giggled in response.

“It’s fine, really. This taking my mind off the pain.” She laughed.

Axel’s head popped up out of nowhere at the top of the partition wall, his eyebrows pulled up with interest.

“Rough night? Or was it a super slow session of sexual healing you gave him?” He questioned loud enough for everyone to hear. Ray began to snort and had to pause his tattoo for a few seconds as his client also continued to laugh.

“And when I get that feeling, I want sexual heeealing, makes me feel so fine!” Axel sang loudly as everyone else erupted into thunderous laughter. Selene, who was most unimpressed, grabbed an orange from the desk that she could only assume belonged to Ray and threw it at Axel’s head with all her might. He ducked just in time and the fruit collided with the far wall, leaving a wet, citrusy splat mark on the paintwork.

“That’s my god damn lunch!” Ray complained.
“Shut up and have a fucking burger.” She mumbled. Looking back at Shorty. “You’re a traitor. That’s the last time I tell you anything.”

****

Daryl emerged around midday, showered and dressed. The buzz of tattoo guns rang through his ears and he wondered why everyone stopped what they were doing when they saw him stood at the foot of the stairs. His skin began to crawl with anxiety when Shorty and Ray started to whisper. He cursed the fact that the only way out of Selene’s apartment was through the actual studio as he took a deep breath and walked over to Selene’s desk.

“Mr. Dixon.” Ray purred as he walks past. He lowered his glasses down his nose and shamelessly admired Daryl’s ass. Shorty tutted at him which earned him a dismissive wave and a pout.

“Hey.” Axel said as he stepped out from behind his tattoo chair, leaving his client for a moment. He ripped off a latex glove and extended a hand and Daryl immediately shook it without a single bad feeling from their last meeting. Axel had been protecting Selene and there was no way Daryl was going to hold that against him. He wasn’t the one that had stormed into his workplace and attacked him, after all.

“Axel.” Daryl grunted.

“Good night?” Axel smirked.

“Oh my god, stop before I fire your ass!” Selene yelled from the desk.

Axel chuckled loudly and held up his hand, Daryl knew this meant he was supposed to high five the guy and did so without protest, his mouth curling into a small smile.

"Yeeeaah boy!” Axel cried as Daryl rapidly carried on his journey to Selene, willing his cheeks and ears to stay their normal colour. He found the whole thing to be mortifying and wanted the ground to open up beneath his boots and drop him into a void where no one else could make any jibes at him over his sex life. When he reached Selene, she looked just as tired as she did when she’d finally got out of bed. She looked up at him sheepishly.

“You told them?” He asked quietly. To her relief, His tone wasn’t angry, more disbelieving.

“I can’t walk, Daryl. They’re guys, they guessed.” She whispered.

“Huh. Shit.” He huffed, trying to disguise a smirk.

“It’s not funny.” She sulked while slapping a pen on the desk and crossing her arms in defiance.

“Kinda is.” He mumbled, catching her eye. She noticed his cheeks had reddened and the tips of his ears had turned a deep shade of red.

“Oh, shut up. This is your stupid fault anyway.” She expressed.

“How’d ya work that one out?” He asked, placing his hands on the desk in front of her and looming over her.

“You and your stupidly hot arms and ass and eyes and- and everything. Go home, you’re making me a source of ridicule here. I’m the boss for god sakes.” She complained.

“Alright, Alright I’m goin’.” He agreed, leaning down to her and leaving a soft kiss on her
She reclined in her chair and laced her fingers into the hurriedly brushed strands of her hair on either side of her face. When she closed her eyes, she relished the memories of the previous night that were still crystal clear and fresh in her mind. Her mouth curled up into a small smile when she remembered how she’d woken to him clutching her hand again after having held onto it all night as if she might vanish from his life at any given moment. She loved the way he touched her, the way he was shy and apprehensive about sex and intimacy but had opened up and trusted her enough to experiment. She also loved the way he whispered things in her ear, kissed her and tickled his fingers along her inner thighs. The more she thought of him, the more she wanted to spend every waking minute with him.

*****

Daryl had spent the day at home after having to write off a day at work altogether. If he strolled in after 12pm he’d only be told to go home by his manager anyway. Not wanting to get on Bill’s bad side, he had at least had the sense to call in and tell them he wasn’t well to cover himself. Merle was also home and was sat on the floor carving lines of cocaine on a mirror on top of the coffee table when Daryl walked through the door.

“Really, Merle? Aint ya got work tonight?” He asked, closing the door behind him and shoving his keys into his jeans pocket.

Merle shrugged and tapped the card he was using on the glass.

“Good day to you too, boy scout.” He muttered. His fingers toyed with a rolled-up dollar bill that was fashioned into a thin tube. The first narrowed line of pure white power vanished up into the paper straw and Merle sniffed loudly, twitching his nose and wiping away any residue. Daryl rummaged around in a grocery bag on the arm of the couch and found a pack of beef jerky, cigarettes, a six pack of beers with one missing and a box of condoms. He pulled out the beef jerky, ripped the plastic open and began throwing pieces into his mouth, chewing loudly and with his mouth open. Merle held out the dollar Bill.

“Hit?” He grunted.

“Naw” Daryl replied.

“Pussy.”

Merle sneered at him, picking up a can from the floor beside him and took a long gulp. He flashed his teeth at Daryl as the liquid ran down his throat to his stomach. Ignoring his last remark, Daryl plonked himself down in the armchair opposite and took out his cell phone. He opened a new message and began typing.

'Merle’s home. Should have stayed with you.'

He hit the send button. It was unusual for Daryl to text anyone, let alone Selene and he knew that as soon as his name popped up on her phone’s screen, she’d be surprised.

“What’s with the shiner?” Merle questioned, alluding to Daryl’s black eye.

“Some sommbitch that refused to pay up the other night.” He lied, knowing that it was best all round if he didn’t drop Brad in it. Merle would likely turn up at the Tattoo parlour and try to knock seven bales out of him, not that he’d stand a chance in succeeding against Brads enormous frame.
“Been gettin’ you some o’ that vamp ass?” Merle questioned with a smirk. Daryl’s eyes lifted from his cell to his brother in irritation and he felt himself becoming testy at the thought of him trying to dig about in his personal life.

“Mind ya fuckin’ business.” He grumbled.

“Aint like I gotta ask. That big ass hiccy on ya neck is a giveaway.”

Daryl had noticed it just before he’d left and tried to convince himself that his shirt collar would cover it but Merle had proved him wrong. He briefly let himself recall when she had drawn his flesh between her lips and sucked just enough for him to throw his head back and grip onto her hips even tighter. He thought such marks were a juvenile, high school thing that he’d bypassed due to being a loner. Little did he know the pleasure they could evoke when done properly and his enjoyment of receiving one from someone he cared deeply about had been a new discovery, much like his preferences between the sheets that Selene had helped him discover. With her he was bolder, more relaxed and curious than he had ever been and it had opened up a whole new world to him. A world he couldn’t wait to explore and found himself thinking about on a more regular basis than he ever had before. She had heightened his low libido and now he was sure that wouldn’t change as long as she was in his life. He opted not to answer his brother’s attempt to prod at his temper and instead, lit a cigarette and opened the text message that popped up on the cellphone’s screen.

’Come back tonight. We can try and finish watching that movie we started. No promises though ;)’

“Can’t work out how ya brains aint all over the rabbit by now.” Merle remarked, snorting another line and making Daryl wince at the sight.

The use of hard drugs wasn’t something that Daryl was usually sensitive about due to it being prevalent in his life from an early age. Both of his parents and his brother had always used so it was only natural that Daryl would follow suit. A lack of any stable or wholesome role models in his life meant that he had spent many days and nights doing the exact same thing as he was witnessing Merle do in front of him at that moment. Being drug runners for Bill had its perks to the average recreational drug user as it came with the agreement that a small amount could be written off for personal use. But since he’d had Selene to focus on, drugs hadn’t been given a second thought and he had been careful not to disclose how much of a role they had played in his life up until that point. After witnessing her friend hit rock bottom from Meth, Daryl considered that telling her how many lines of coke he could do in one night was unwise.

He typed a message back and sent it.

’Haha. I’ll be there. They quit teasing you yet?’

“What’s that sposed to mean?” He asked Merle who was now tilting his head back and rubbing at his nose with the back of his hand. His eyes were pinned and it was only a matter of time before he got even more irritating. Daryl hated being around him at times like this, when he was sober and Merle was high.

“You givin’ her some sugar in the middle of the club like that. Surprised the boss didn’t go all out. Aint like Bill to give out blessin’s. Must be some serious shit, you n’ her.” He expressed, motioning to the cigarette packet perched on the arm of the chair Daryl was sat in. He picked it up and threw it at him, along with a lighter, both of which Merle caught with surprising accuracy.

“Should invite her over. Y’know, with her clothes on this time. But if she wants to take ‘em off I aint gonna argue.” He chuckled.
“No” Was all Daryl could say out of a strong reluctance to talk about such a topic with him.

“Why not? You ashamed, boy?”

Daryl felt his phone vibrate in his hand and he opened the message straight away. It was all he could do to stop himself from losing his temper with Merle and he’d only been sat in the same room as him for a matter of minutes.

‘Nope. I’d really rather be teased by you. Hint. Hint.’

“Really think I want her here with you, snortin’ half a ton of blow and eyein’ her like she’s some kinda whore?” Daryl snapped.

He dropped his vision to his cell again, typing out a reply to Selene.

‘Oh yeah? Tease you all you want.’

“I can be a fine, upstandin’ member of society for a night. I’mma get high first, mind. C’mon, Darlina. I need to know what the hell she see’s in you. Aint a pot too crooked that a lid won’t fit, huh?” Merle grinned.

The room was now filled with smoke from the two lit cigarettes emitting a thick cloud that gathered above them. Daryl tilted his head back and let out a frustrated sigh. He needed Selene here with Merle like he needed a hole in the head and he had promised Bill to keep him away from her, but he couldn’t escape the fact that Merle was not only his big brother, but the only family he had left and if he wanted any semblance of a normal life, he might have to bite the bullet and ask her if she would be able to tolerate it for one night. He fiddled with his cell in his hand, using his leg to rotate it while he pinched it between his thumb and middle finger. Merle was finishing off his beer and crumpling the can in his vice-like grip. His white vest sported large semi-circle shaped patches of sweat and his weathered and wrinkled face boasted small scars from fighting along with short, grey stubble.

“Dunno what she sees.” Mumbled Daryl, almost to himself. “Says she loves me. Be damned if I know why.”

Merle visibly startled at Daryl’s comment. It was the first time he had ever uttered anything of the sort and while Merle had always maintained that he cared about his brother and knew in his heart that he would die for him, he was never, ever graced with such a personal admission and could do nothing but sit there, shocked.

Daryl’s phone buzzed again and he looked down at the words on the screen.

'I look forward to another night of screwing your brains out.'

He awkwardly cleared his throat and rapidly shoved the phone in his jeans pocket before Merle asked who he was texting.


“Fuck you.” Daryl grumbled as he pushed himself to his feet and headed to the door that lead to his bedroom.

“Little brother.” He heard from behind him. Merle’s gravelly voice had lowered and his tone had changed. Daryl turned and looked down at him sat on the floor with one line of coke remaining in
front of him and a smoking cigarette poised between the fingers of one hand and the dollar bill in
the other. “You say it back?” He asked, his eyes meeting Daryl’s in a rare and unexpected serious
moment. Daryl shook his head solemnly. “But ya do, right?”

“Yeah”

“Don’t be no pussy, boy. Gonna be kickin’ yaself if ya don’t tell her.” Merle offered. Daryl had no
idea what to say. He was aware that Merle had once been head over heels for a girl with a nose ring
and bright red hair he’d met in a bar off the interstate a number of years ago. After a short but
intense relationship, she caught him cheating on her in a club and had stormed back to the house to
collect her things so she could leave and never come back. When she found Daryl sat in the living
room high on acid and rambling about how the drapes were talking to him, she blurted out that she
loved Merle and wasted her time believing that he loved her too because he’d never said it and was
too busy being ‘balls deep in some other slut.’ Romance was always dead in the Dixon household.

Swallowing hard, Daryl simply gave his brother a short nod, signalling that he’d got the message
and was actually grateful for the advice he never expected to have been given.

*****

That evening Selene was pottering about the tattoo studio with burning feet and heavy eyes after a
unexpectedly busy day. All she wanted to do was sit at her desk and draw designs, update social
media, book appointments and welcome customers. But instead she found herself with a waiting
room full of piercing walk-ins, a phone ringing off the hook and a whole load of mess to clear up.

Daryl arrived just after closing and stepped over the threshold into the studio with his head dipped
and a dreamy smile on his face when Selene wrapped herself around him and covered his lips with
velvety, luscious kisses that made his head spin and his hands want to wander.

“Hi.” She uttered against his lips between kisses.

His reply was a subtle growl from deep in his throat that he didn’t know was there and so did
nothing to stop it. A dirty giggle followed from Selene who smoothed her hands down his bare
arms and stepped back, admiring him.

He noticed that she looked tired but the bleary eyed, messy haired woman stood before him looked
just as candidly beautiful as she did when he glanced down at her underneath him during her post
orgasm glow. He gently brushed the side of her face with the back of his fingers before she set off
across the waiting area, picking up magazines and coffee cups and starting to waffle on and on
about her day as if she’d been waiting for someone to vent to for a while.

“I just don’t know where everybody came from today, we’ve never had that many walk-ins, it was
crazy! I did like six thousand piercings! I’m going to have to call Ritchie and ask him to come back
tomorrow, we need the money and things got too busy for me to handle alone. And my… my lady
parts were sore because of you. It was torture. But I can walk now, everything’s better. The guys
were all trying so hard it was just like it was one after the other and then one of Rays appointments
was late so that meant he left late and I just felt bad for them all so I told them to go home and that
I would clean up. I didn’t realise just how much there is to do, I haven’t even started on social
media toda~”

She was silenced and instantly stopped what she was doing when he grabbed her wrist so rapidly
and tightly that the connection made a small slap. She peered at him with shock, her eyes wide and
darting between his face and his big hand closed around her wrist. With his other hand, he gently
placed his index finger over her lips, telling her to cease talking, that she didn’t need words
anymore. He chewed on his bottom lip and breathed heavily through his nose. Selene was baffled, he had never acted like this with her before and if she didn’t trust him with her life, she’d have backed away. Remaining still and compliant, she realised when his eyes flickered down and his lips parted that he was trying to speak.

“…Love you…."

His voice, nothing more than a gravelly whisper had delivered the words that would change her world forever, words that meant everything to her. She hadn’t ever felt it before, the wonder and breath-taking comfort of loving someone and being loved in return. She knew this was no easy feat for Daryl and it would have taken everything he had for him to express it.

He intended to say ‘I’ but it had got lost somewhere in his struggle to speak. But the words were there and Selene heard them as if he had shouted them from a rooftop. She grinned against his finger and saw a hint of a smile grace his lips although he appeared completely confused and out of his depth. He dropped his hand and shied away from her, turning his body and taking a deep breath while closing his eyes.

She felt the need to let him compose himself before she said anything to him and so it was a while before either of them spoke. Selene chewed happily on her thumb nail, unable to dismiss the bubbling excitement in her chest.

“I love you too, Daryl.” She whispered.

His gaze seemed to be everywhere all at once, bouncing from the floor to her face to around the room and down to his boots. He shoved his hands in his pockets and felt his ears burning.

“Little out of the blue. Sorry.” He muttered.

Selene lunged forwards and placed her hands on either side of his face, willing him to look at her.

“No, no. Don’t ever be sorry for that. You can say that whenever you want.” She beamed.

He laughed slightly and she could feel the hot embarrassment radiating from his ears, his cheeks had now tinted pink and she wondered if she’d ever see anything else more adorable than this in her life.

“Took me like four days to get that out.” He admitted.

She moved her hands to his waist, taking hold of his leather vest and easing him close to her so she could connect her forehead with his. Her smile was still going strong, he’d given her the best reason to smile that she’d ever had.

*****

Ray threw another carrot stick into his mouth while Selene kept a confused vigil at his side. The front of the tattoo studio was quiet after walk-in’s had closed half an hour ago. Axel was finishing up his second name tattoo of the day while Bear paced back and forth and flicked through a tattoo magazine while he studiously avoided having to sit down and draw up tomorrow’s designs. His attention span was short at times and he found it difficult to apply himself to sitting still and drawing when the mood didn’t take him. Selene knew to leave him to his devices and eventually he would settle down and get some work done.

Crunch. Another carrot stick was snapped in half by Ray’s brilliant white teeth stirred a slight cringe in Selene and she reached around him, taking the box away and placing it on the other side
"Ya only had to ask if ya wanted one. Should cut those fuckin’ mitts off. Stealin’ my damn food.” Ray complained while Selene wrinked her nose and waved a hand at him.

“You're like a fucking rabbit sitting there eating those. I hate carrots. Why don’t you have any candy? You’re getting boring in your old age.” She complained.

“I told ya, I’m watchin’ my figure. Takes effort to get an ass as good as mine.” He informed her as he shut off the tablet he had been tapping away on and closed the cover over it. Selene picked up her cell and opened up a text that she’d received some time ago but hadn’t bothered to read, figuring it’d be Ritchie asking about his shift or Shorty telling her he’d beaten her score on the Pacman arcade machine in Marty’s on his day off. But she was pleasantly surprised when she read the single word on the screen.

‘Hey.’

Daryl. The thought that she was on his mind enough to have resulted in him texting her out of the blue during the day, turned her into an excited mess. She giggled to herself as she pressed a series of letters and sent her reply.

‘Hey you. Why the text?’

“Guess what.” She whispered to Ray as she scooted her leather chair closer to him.

“You’re gonna give me my carrots back before I pitch a fit?” He grumbled as he side eyed her. She sighed and thudded the box of carrots down in front of him.

“Daryl told me he loves me yesterday.” She said casually as she sat back and reclined in her seat.

Ray slowly swivelled his chair around to face her and blinked at her with a small but genuine smile on his face.

“I’m so happy for you, honey.” Came his genuine response. Selene was somewhat mystified by his lack of a humorous or mocking reply but had to admit, it was nice to see such sincerity in him, even after he had expressed his disapproval of her taking Daryl back.

“Really?” She questioned.

“Yeah, I know he’s fucked up before, but it’s plain as day that he adores ya.”

Her phone pinged again and she quickly unlocked it and opened the message.

‘Thinking about you.’

She grinned at the three words on the screen.

“He’s started texting me the last couple days. He never texts me.” She mused as she stared down at the screen of her cellphone. She wasn’t about to complain about the extra contact. In fact, she liked hearing the sound of her phone every time she got a message, knowing it was him and feeling a sharp sting if disappointment if a couple of hours passed without her message tone catching her attention.

“Guys only text if they’re thinkin’ ‘bout ya. Especially the likes of Daryl, quieter than a frickin’ mouse anyways.” Ray announced.
She blinked at him for a moment before tilting her phone towards him, allowing him to read the words on the screen.

“Would ya look at that. I’m just right about everything. You uh… you still love me though. Right?”

“Always.” She grinned.

Her fingers fluttered over the touchscreen keyboard and she responded to the message straight away. There were no rules about waiting certain lengths of time with Selene, she didn’t care if she seemed keen, they had passed a hurdle in their relationship. He loved her and she loved him.

‘I’m always thinking about you. You and your arms. Can I see you tonight?’

Her vision raised in time to catch Bear wandering past the desk carrying a bag from a local Deli, his knuckles were coloured with fading bruising and a graze. She followed the offending injury as he rounded the partition wall and vanished from sight. Still glaring at the space where he had left her line of sight, she breathed out through her nose and grit her teeth. She hadn’t said more than two words to Brad that day. It was the first time she had seen him since finding out the truth from her father and confronting Daryl about it. She wanted to think about how to handle it, What she should say and how she could convey to him how bitter her disappointment in him was.

“What’s wrong?” Ray asked as he munched down on another carrot stick. Selene shifted closer to him and lowered her voice. She was fully aware that the chances of them being heard over the loud rock music that played was slim, but she was taking no chances.

“That black eye that Daryl has? It wasn’t his only injury. He has a mass of bruising across his chest and back.” She explained. Ray gave her a blank look as if he were waiting for more information.

“It was Brad.” She added.

“What was Brad?” He questioned.

“Brad attacked Daryl. At work. My dad showed me the CCTV footage.” She sighed.

Ray’s mouth dropped into an ‘o’ and his eyes bulged in disbelief.

“You’re shittin’ me” he hissed.

“No. My brother did that. After promising he wouldn’t. I’m so mad I just don’t know how to handle this.”

She picked up a pen as she spoke, clicking the end and drawing thick, black shapes on a post it that soon morphed into some kind of sea creature with horns and a long, elegant tail. She cocked her head at the drawing, figuring it was a relevant representation of her anger toward Brad.

“Wait a minute, Daryl lied for Brad?” Ray assumed.

Ping. Her phone interrupted their conversation and she wasted no time in opening the message even though Ray was waiting for an answer.

‘Don't get the arm thing. But aint nobody touching em now cept you. Not sure bout tonight. Gotta work late. If I don’t, call me.’

She ran her tongue over her lower lip, bumping over the thin rings and tried to continue her conversation.
“He didn’t lie, he left out information and it wasn’t for Brad. It was for me.” She eventually corrected.

“Holy cow. Can’t say I agree with that shit. What a dumbass thing to do. Then again, Bear ain’t the brightest.” Ray reasoned.

“You’re beefy, you wanna hold him for me while I do to him what he did to Daryl?” She asked with a mischievous smile.

“Damn. You are angry.” He giggled. “My strength is only used to hold guys down for a much more enjoyable reason.”

Selene chuckled and typed out another message.

‘OK. Have a good day. I love you.’

Seconds after she pressed ‘send’ her phone went off again and she knew then that Daryl must have been sat with his cell in his hand, the same as her, waiting for each message and wearing the same stupid grin she was.

‘Love you too. Pretty girl’. 
She stood with her hands on her hips, glowering at him after waiting for Axel and Ray to leave the tattooing area and go into the waiting room.

Brad was scrolling through his cell phone, his thumb pushing up the feed of a social media site and resulting in him chuckling to himself at various photos and memes. The injury on his hand stared back at Selene mockingly and she felt a stab of rage as her eyes swept over it.

"Hey, Selene, Look at this!" He laughed, showing her his cell phone. "I fucking love monkeys in clothes!"

“Your next appointment isn’t for forty minutes. Come upstairs with me, please.” She said firmly.

Brad immediately froze but didn’t dare to question her stern tone. He got up from the chair and grabbed his uniform jacket, throwing it over his huge shoulders and partially zipping it up at the front. Rubbing a hand into his dusty blonde hair, he followed his sister up the stairs to the next floor.

Her boots stomped across the wooden flooring, stopping in the middle of the room and spinning around on the heels to face Brad, who followed with some trepidation, all the while wondering what she wanted to talk to him about that warranted removing him from the listening ears of the others.

“You’re my brother. I love you. You’ve always been there for me and as far as I know, you’ve never broken a promise to me.” She started.

Ever since they were children, Brad had defended and protected Selene with a fierce enthusiasm. Selene was never one to walk away from confrontation concerning her brother either, standing up for him on more than one occasion where she had discovered him being ridiculed. Even being a star football player and a hit with the ladies hadn’t meant he escaped the cruelty teenagers inflict upon one another.

But Brad was angry and thought with his fists before he engaged his brain which had got him into a lot of trouble over the years. Selene was always in his corner, but scolding him for his impulses was second nature to her. He knew that look she had when she was about to put him in his place and she was using it at that very moment.

“Are you OK?” He asked

Her eyes dropped momentarily to his bruised hand which hung by his side.

“How did you hurt your hand?” She probed.

Quickly, he managed to put two and two together and realised that any attempt to lie to get out of
the situation would be met with an even angrier sister and that just wasn’t worth it. She knew the answer to her question. She just wanted him to say it. He wondered if Daryl had given in and told her and figured that if he did, he could hardly be blamed for that.

“Shit. Um… OK I hit Daryl.” He confessed, subconsciously tucking his hand behind his back, almost able to tell that the sight of the graze and bruises was pressing Selene’s buttons even more.

“Why?” The volume of her voice increased and her jaw pulled tight.

He lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender, showing her his palms and encouraging her to stay calm.

“I was mad. I hated what he did to you. I still can’t believe you took him back.” He offered honestly.

Her face twisted in vexation and she threw her hands up in the air, stepping back and releasing a small, sarcastic laugh.

“Because you don’t understand why he did it, Brad! Don’t be so fucking narrow minded! This was not right! You promised me you wouldn’t hurt him and you broke that promise! You attacked him! I love him, Brad! I am so disappointed in you!” She fumed.

His shoulder sagged and the heavy weight of regret sat in the pit of his stomach like a lead weight.

“I’m sorry. I just lost my temper.” He sighed.

“Dad has the whole thing on CCTV, I had to stand there and explain why my brother was punching my boyfriend. I had to lie, I said Daryl and I were taking a break for a week or so and you just misunderstood. I don’t even know if he bought it. This shit could have got Daryl killed, Brad! You know that!” She reminded him.

“I dunno what else to say. I’m sorry. Looking back, Yeah it was wrong. I’m sorry I broke my promise.” he pleaded.

While her anger wasn’t dissipating, she knew she would have to at least try and swallow it going forward. Staying mad at him would only be at a detriment to herself, but the task felt almost impossible. She crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight to one leg.

“He’s going to hate every second but you’re going to apologise to Daryl.” She ordered with the point of a black, polished finger in his direction.

Brad nodded, knowing better than to protest.

“OK. I will.” He agreed.

*****

Marty’s was quiet that night with a small gathering of women at one end of the bar and only three tables occupied with other patrons. The red, LED tape lighting around the top of the bar gave the place the cherry hue of a typical late-night bar with sticky floors and unwashed tables. The countertop was scattered with nut shells while Marty’s priorities obviously lay with a tall red head in a Metallica T-shirt.

Axel and Brad chatted amongst themselves while Selene looked on, acting as though she was interested when the truth was, she was still hopping mad with her brother and could barely look at
him without wanting to yell in his face. She wasn’t sure how she had managed to keep her cool for the rest of the day, except for the helpful lure of having to do her finances. It allowed her the luxury of removing herself from everyone equipped with a calculator, noise cancelling headphones and a large coffee. Everyone knew not to bother her when numbers were concerned, it had never been her strong suit and meant she had to adopt an unwavering concentration to get anything done that involved maths.

The ping of her phone meant both Axel and Brad glanced over at her. Her cell, which sat on the table in front of her, displayed a bright white light at the arrival of a message, but her eyes merely moved from Brad for a second to register the notification before she resumed her irate vigil.

“That Daryl?” Axel enquired curiously.

She sat forward, taking hold of her beer glass and throwing the rest of the liquid down her throat. She released a satisfied breath and slammed the glass back on the table. A small look at the name on the cell’s screen had the power to quell her anger.

“Yes” She replied casually, picking up the phone and opening the message.

‘Where r u?’

She quickly text back, her fingers flying over the touch screen keyboard and making sure to tell him who she was with as well as where, so he had the opportunity to make up his own mind if he wanted to see Brad or not. Secretly, she hoped he would say he’d meet her, so Brad was forced to apologise in front of Axel too.

‘Marty’s with Axel and Brad.’

She wasn’t surprised in the slighted that Brad was noticeably quiet. Axel had been trying his best to work him up and try and get a smile out of him by pointing out the various attractive women at the bar and encouraging him to go and talk to one of them. But he was met with a disinterested grumble about the last girl he picked up in the bar trying to steal his wallet.

Selene’s phone pinged again and Axel shot her a puzzled look. She usually never texted anyone unless it was to avoid having to make a phone call. Without Daryl, Axel knew there was no one else that she would be texting except the entirety of her friendship group that worked with her at the studio. She wasn’t one for large groups of acquaintances, frequently making small talk with regulars at the bar and coffee shop but never turning any of those interactions into anything more. She never had any qualms about rejecting the friendship of women, citing them as ‘conceited’, ‘bitchy’ and ‘too much drama’. Axel sometimes wondered why she was best friends with Ray if she wanted to avoid those things.

‘Be there in 5’.

She felt a small sense of smugness, knowing that Brad was going to absolutely detest having to say sorry to Daryl at all, let alone so publicly. She slid her phone back onto the table and crossed her arms over her chest, showing her brother the most sarcastic smile he had ever seen.

Daryl arrived minutes later and walked over to where Selene sat. He gingerly gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, something which he knew he was starting to get used to doing in front of people. Even during whispered, flirtatious conversations held in the parking lot or corner of the tattoo parlours waiting room, Daryl was always on the lookout for observers. Affection being such a
complex subject for him to get his head around only made things more difficult, although he was beginning to find it easier to ignore the sniggering and exchanged glances from Selene’s friends whenever he made any physical contact with her in front of them. He had tried and from what he could tell, he was succeeding.

Without hesitation and wanting to get straight to it, Selene pat the seat next to her and waited for Daryl to sit before she took up her previous stance, crossing her arms over her chest and clearing her throat loudly while she glowered at Brad.

“What?” He questioned with a sigh after seeing the determined look on her face. Daryl sank down in his seat and wiped a hand over his face. He could tell what was about to happen and he could tell he was going to dislike it intensely. But he was also aware that getting up and leaving was not an viable option.

“I could have sworn you told me today that you have something to say to Daryl.” Selene said with a raised eyebrow.

Brad stared back with a blink and Axel leaned back and finished off his beer, his eyes swinging from Brad’s face, over to Selene’s and back again. The tension in the air was suddenly palpable and Daryl couldn’t help but tap his leg with anxiety and indulge in a rapid survey of the bar, noting all the drunk women in a group and Marty, shamelessly leering at one of them.

“I feel awkward. Does anyone else feel awkward?” Axel asked, receiving no reply due to all the focus being on Brad.


“Here. Now.” She verified; her eyes filled with irritation.

Don’t question me, Brad. Just do it.

Brads eyes flickered from Selene to a highly uncomfortable looking Daryl who was now sat with his head dipped but his eyes up and moving to each person at the table around him.

“Allright. Fine. Daryl…” Brad started. Daryl met his gaze and felt Selene rest a hand on his leg under the table when she changed position, quelling the nervous twinge he kept experiencing. His leg stopped tapping immediately and he realised that he hadn’t even noticed he was doing it. Selene leaned forward, taking hold of the straw in the next drink she had lined up and stirred it slowly.

“I’m sorry.” He grunted at Daryl.

“You got amnesia, Brad? Sorry for what?” Selene snapped, raising her voice.

“It’s OK, you ain’t gotta-” Daryl tried to say. Just as she had expected, he wasn’t good with this and she could tell he just wanted her to stop, but it was her belief that if a person was in the wrong, they should apologise and such a huge mistake on her brother’s part was unlikely to be let go without a decent and sincere expression of regret.

“No. He does. Go on, Brad. Sorry for what?” She intercepted.

Axel sat silent and still between them, wishing he could get up and leave the tense atmosphere and go and buy himself a shot of Tequila, but his curiosity kept him rooted to his seat as he remained wide eyed and engrossed. Brad took a minute or so to collect his thoughts and calm his aggravated temper from his sister’s provocation.
“Sorry I jumped you. She’s my little sister, anyone that hurts her, hurts me too. I lost my shit and I shouldn’t have. So, I apologise.” He said to Daryl.

“Forget it, man.” Daryl mumbled quietly.

Axel caught Selene’s eye and she could tell how confused he was. She decided to offer him some context.

“Brad attacked Daryl at his workplace. Punched him and threw him against a wall. All after I made him promise he wouldn’t hurt him. So, to say I’m pissed at him is an understatement.” She told him.

Axel regarded Brad with an air of complete puzzlement, finding he suddenly looked incredibly sheepish despite his huge shoulders and arms.

“Dude. Not cool.” Axel expressed. “I mean, I was ready to fight the guy when he turned up to talk to her, but that was only if she wanted me to get rid of him.”

“Look, it’s fine. Just forget it.” Daryl grumbled from beside Selene.

Both men looked over at him and they all exchanged a glance before shrugs and nods meant it was all over. But Selene was still seething with her brother and rapidly sprang from her seat and snatched up her cigarettes from the table. She charged outside into the cool, night air and leaned back against the front wall of the building, lighting a smoke and closing her eyes as the nicotine rushed through her veins.

Daryl didn’t follow her, neither did Axel or Brad. All three of them stayed seated, knowing better than to poke at Selene when she was already angry. Brad threw a peanut from the bowl in the middle of the table into his mouth and washed it down with a mouthful of beer. He thudded his bottle on the table.

“You wanna play pool?” He asked Daryl. A cleverly cloaked attempt at requesting to put everything behind them.

“Yeah, long as ya don’t mind me wipin’ the floor with ya.” Daryl replied.

“It’s on.” Brad challenged. They both got up, leaving Axel alone at the table, gingerly working his way through the rest of the peanuts and sighing to himself.

“Guess I’ll just wait for Selene then.” He huffed.

When she returned, she paused in the doorway when she realised Brad and Daryl were halfway through a game of pool and a myriad of banter which left her surprised and perturbed at the same time. Being friends with so many men, she understood how much simpler life was without drawn out grudges and emotional warfare. The men in Selene’s life were much simpler creatures than she. It was black or it was white and once something was done, that was it. With the exception of Ray, who used drama as fuel like he needed breathing to live. She slowly wandered back to the table and picked up her drink as Axel was rising from his seat.

“Looks like there’s no hard feelings.” She stated.

“He said he was sorry. Job done, right? We forgave Ritchie.” Axel pointed out.
“True.” She agreed, nudging her head up in the direction of Daryl and Brad and setting off in their direction. Axel followed her and she took up a spot next to Daryl, who was leaning against the wall and rubbing chalk on the end of his pool cue.

“Ya alright?” He asked quickly and in a deadpan tone, keeping it under the radar as a tactic to reduce her irritation.

“As long as you are.” She replied. He side glanced at her stirring her drink with her straw and curled the corner of his mouth into a smile.

“I’m good. Relax.” He said, nudging her with his shoulder. She was relieved to see him a lot more comfortable and finally getting along with her brother as though nothing had happened. “Got somethin’ to ask ya.” He told her.

She just peered up at him expectantly and watched him briefly draw his top lip into his mouth as he thought of the words to use.

“Um… Merle, he wanted me to invite ya over one night. When he’s home.” He said.

She studied his face and panic began to creep in to Daryl’s mind as her eyes scanned his features.

“I shouldn’t have asked. She doesn’t want to. Why did I even ask?!”

“Y’know What, it’s a dumb idea. Ya ol’ man won’t want ya near him anyways. Forget I said anythi-”

“I’d like that.” She cut in. Her face was stern, serious but with a subtle flicker of amusement. This was a turn up for the books to her. As volatile and unapproachable as Merle Dixon was, the fact that he was Daryl’s only living family member and he wanted to meet his little brother’s girlfriend properly was a notion that made her want to grin like a fool.

He wants me to meet his family.

“W-What?” He stammered.

“I said, I’d like that. Just tell me when.” She told him with a light kiss on his lips.

By now, it was Daryl’s turn to take a shot and instead he just stood there gawping at Selene’s casual and noncommittal response to his question. Axel gently took the cue from his hand and told him he’d take the shot for him, his response was a tight nod but any eye contact was firmly on Selene.

“You sure? My brothers an asshole.”

“Oh, I know. My brother is an asshole too” she announced. Brads head snapped around at the thought of being compared to Merle Dixon and Axel waved his hand in front of his throat at him, telling him to cut it out and decline to react, he had done enough damage already. “But everyone has some redeeming features I suppose. Why do you think he wants me to come over?” She asked.

Daryl shrugged. He hadn’t given it much thought but had assumed that it was curiosity on Merles part. A strange fascination with the fact that his little brother now not only had a steady girlfriend, but one that was somewhat infamous and striking enough to draw plenty of attention to their pairing. That, and she was also Bill Taylor’s daughter and Merle just could not get over the fact that Daryl had picked the one girl that was notoriously out of bounds…and had managed to keep her.
“I dunno. Guess he wants to get to know ya or some shit.” He expressed.

“Well, that’s OK with me. I don’t think my father will be an issue. If he is, I’ll handle it. I’ll bring a bottle.” She grinned.

The wooden front porch creaked under her feet as she climbed the three steps to the front door of the Dixon house. A single bulb was a light outside and minuscule flies surrounded the beacon of light, bumping against it in their trance like state. In her hand she clutched a bottle of spiced rum and beside her stood a very nervous and uncomfortable Daryl. He fumbled with his bike keys, shoving them into his jeans and making more of a meal of it than intended.

Selene had opted for simple tight black jeans and a band T-shirt with her leather wrist cuffs and biker jacket. Meeting Merle was not something she felt the need to dress up for. Daryl cleared his throat and sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, feeling her rub gently at his forearm.

“Hey, it’ll be OK.” She assured him.

“He says any nasty shit to you n’ I’m takin ya home, alright?” He confirmed.

“Maybe he won’t.” She suggested.

“Don’t underestimate him.” He grumbled, tugging a key from his pocket and slipping it into the locking mechanism on the door. A loud click followed a groan from the hinges as the door opened and Daryl stepped aside, allowing Selene to pass through.

Merle stubbed out a joint as the door opened and exhaled a plume of smoke, the tangy, sweetness to it hitting Selene’s nose in seconds. Merle got to his feet and swaggered over to his brother, who was stood next to a casually dressed Selene, clutching a bottle of liquor.

“Miss, Taylor.” Merle snarled.

“Mr. Dixon” She responded with a cheery tone.

_He’s seen you naked. No. Don’t think about that. Ew._

He took his time while he dragged his vision over her, from her head to her toes, lingering on certain spots and making Daryl’s back prickle with anger.

“Girl’s expectin’ a good time, turning up with a big ol’ bottle of hooch like that. If ya get a hankerin’ for another model, alls ya gotta do is holler.” He sneered.

Daryl was about to grab her by the arm and frog march her back outside and to the truck, willing to abandon the whole thing to save her the hassle of dealing with Merle. But to his surprise, she stepped forwards, levelling herself with his eyes and standing strong, inches from his face.

“I prefer the younger model. It’s smart, has better bodywork and a hell of a lot more stamina. Thanks for the offer though.” She smiled.

Daryl licked his lips and had to look away to hide a strong smirk as he heard Merle’s gravelly husk of laughter fill the room.

“Well, well, well, you’re definitely Bill’s daughter, aint ya, sugartits? I like a girl with a backbone.
Ain’t no airs n’ graces here. Pick a spot n’ sit ya ass down in it. Cinderella here will get us some juice.”

She turned to Daryl, swapping a grin with him and allowing him to slide her biker jacket from her shoulders. She held out the bottle to Merle.

“Spiced Rum. Was fresh outta Cristal.” She shrugged.

Merle eagerly snatched the bottle from her grasp and squinted at the label. Eventually he nodded, impressed at her choice. Daryl lifted the bottle from his hands and walked into the kitchen, reluctantly leaving Selene with Merle. She skirted around the rough redneck with the stained shirt in front of her and headed over to the couch. Sitting down, she kicked off her boots and crossed her legs. Her comfortable and carefree positioning signalling to Merle that she was not about to be made uncomfortable or intimidated very easily. He slowly sat in the armchair opposite her, studying her like she was some kind of animal in a cage. Daryl quickly returned with three glasses of rum and coke and handed them out.

“Ya hungry?” He asked Selene.

“Stupid question, Daryl. You know I can always eat.” She grinned, receiving a thin smile in return before Daryl looked over at Merle.

“You want food?” He asked his brother curtly.

“If it’s that venison stew ya been cooking’ up then hell yeah.” Merle remarked.

Daryl hesitated and Selene could see that the last thing he wanted was to be out of the room for too long. It was written all over his face that he didn’t trust his brother. He grunted and left the room.

Selene took in her surroundings, the smell of marijuana still lingering in the dense air. But It was a lot tidier than she’d previously seen it and she had no doubt that it was Daryl that had tidied up. The clutter and paperwork on the table was gone, the ash and cocaine residue on the coffee table had vanished and while it still had a strong odour, she could tell a window had been opened for at least some of the day, mainly because she could see the hand print on the glass. Her eyes stopped when she spotted a box with a chess board pattern on the outside. It was up on a shelf on the wall, covered in dust. She could feel Merle’s glare sweeping up and down her body while she looked around but she paid him no mind. She knew he was fascinated by her and the fact that she was with his brother, but knew the novelty would soon wear off.

“You play chess?” She asked.

“Not so much nomore.” He rasped. He was sat back in the armchair, one hand on each of the chairs arms. Selene locked eyes with him and smirked.

“You learned in juvvy, right?” She prodded.

“Good guess.”

“I never played Chess.” She mentioned.

His forehead wrinkled and his eyes narrowed at her statement, a disbelieving expression swept across his face.

“Thought all you rich kids got chess sets for ya fifth birthdays.” He jabbed.
“That what you think I am, Merle? A rich kid? Because you work for my father, a man who buys new shirts every week because he can’t be bothered to wash them? I got a super soaker for my fifth birthday and I spent the day luring cats into the back yard so I could aim for them.” She informed him. “Be careful with your assumptions.” She added as she got to her feet, padded over to the shelf and slid the box off. Blowing the dust from the top, she opened it up and found all the pieces inside. “You and I need to find something to bond over, you being my boyfriends’ brother and all. So, you can teach me how to play.”

She set the box down on the coffee table and waited patiently for her words to sink in. Merle viewed her with an air of suspicion and wondered if she was this bold and self-certain all the time. He figured if she was, he was surprised Daryl hadn’t gone running for the hills in fear.

“Alright. Can teach ya a thing or two.” He conceded, shuffling forward in his chair and starting to stand all the pieces up along the side of the table. Selene sat cross legged on the floor in front of him, the table separating them. She sipped her drink and waited patiently.

When Daryl entered the room with two bowls of food in his hands, he stopped in his tracks when he saw Merle hunched over the coffee table, his voice a husky whisper as he explained all the rules, showing an completely enthralled Selene the directions allowed by picking up each piece and moving them in front of her. In his whole life, he had never seen Merle so subdued and immersed in anything that wasn’t drugs, booze or sweet talking a prostitute. He wished he could snapshot the moment and remind him of it from time to time. Allow him to see how patient and calm he looked and how much he seemed to enjoy the simple task of teaching this woman how to kick ass at chess. But this was Merle and it would be short lived, he expected that much. But he thanked his lucky stars that things had started off more or less on the right foot.

“That’s ya king right there, pick that sommbitch up.” He ordered, wagging a finger over the top of the king. She plucked it from the surface and held it up. Merle took hold of her hand and began to move it to the side, then back and forth and then diagonally. “This guy can move one square either way, like that. Ya got that?”

“Mmhmm” She hummed.

Snapping out of his trance, Daryl continued on his path and lowered one of the bowls down to Selene, then the other to Merle. They both took them and Selene reached up and squeezed his hand.

“Thank you.” She smiled.

“Sure. He’s teachin’ ya?” He questioned.

“Sure am, Darlina. Gonna have her scammin’ her way to victory quicker’n you can say ‘checkmate’.” Merle announced.

“I figured he was going to teach me to cheat.” She reasoned, rolling her eyes and delving into the bowl of hot food with her spoon. Her taste buds exploded with a rush of delicious flavours and she immediately scooted back across the floor and back up to the couch, shoving more and more food into her mouth and ignoring its hot temperature. A groan of approval came from her direction and Daryl tried to stifle the huge grin that was threatening to emerge in his face. Her love for food was never something she bothered to hide.

“Mmmm! That is so fucking good. You make this?” She asked with her mouthful and not one ounce of manners.
Daryl loved her lack of concern for the opinions of others when it came to food. He had seen her demolish a full T-bone steak without so much as a blink before and had been stunned when she’d ordered dessert. Her enthusiasm for decent food was not unlike his own due to him growing up with an empty fridge for most of his life and he always considered how he seemed to like her even more after seeing her polish off a meal and wipe her face on the sleeve of her jacket. She simply didn’t care if anyone thought her to be uncouth or messy. It was all part of her charm and he wouldn’t have changed it for the world.

“Yeah. I made it.” He answered.

“It’s good, huh? Best damn stew in the state.” Merle declared.

“It so is. Oh my god.” She gushed.

“Better than that take out place on 5th. Them god damn Chinese are always packin’ shit with spices and crap.” Merle complied with his mouth full.

“They’re Korean.” Daryl corrected on his way back to the kitchen.

“Whatever!” Merle called back.

An hour later saw Selene choosing the background music, she had drawn a cheer from Merle when he heard Pantera fill the room. Before long, she was locked in a tense mental battle between her and Merle, her next move was about to decide her fate between being ridiculed or being congratulated. Daryl fought to keep his mouth shut every time her hand hovered over the piece he really didn’t want her to touch. On occasion, his eyes would connect with his brothers, who seemed quite taken in by Selene and her willingness to sit with him for over an hour and learn something from him.

She made her move. Daryl winced and Merle chuckled. Grabbing one of his chess pieces, moving it forwards and knocking hers off the board.

“Unlucky, sweetheart.” He chortled.

Selene sighed and looked over at Daryl on the couch. He was smoking and sipping his third drink. He winked at her and she offered a brilliant white grin at him.

“You knew I was going to make the wrong choice, didn’t you?” She wanted to know.

He shrugged one shoulder up and took a drag of his smoke, exhaling away from her even though she was a smoker herself.

“Leavin’ ya to make ya own mistakes” He sniggered.

“Ain’t ya ever played chess with them fancy boys ya got workin for ya up in that tattoo place?” Merle asked.

“No, they’re more into pool.” She told him. His response was a mere grunt.

It was going a lot better than Daryl ever thought possible. Merle had quite obviously met his match with Selene and every dig he’d tried to make at her had been met with a disinterested or stoic dismissal of some sort until he had given in and accepted that he actually quite liked her. She could drink and cuss like a sailor and had two helpings of food as Merle sat and watched her put it away.
like she hadn’t eaten in years. When she got up and went to the bathroom, the room was left in a kind of knowing silence as the two brothers glared at one another.

“Ahh ya smug motherfucker.” Merle growled.

Daryl, who was already loving watching Merle being proved wrong, tried not to smile and chewed on his thumbnail. Jealousy wasn’t a good trait in anyone, he knew that much, but this was a first and he was going to enjoy every single second of his brother’s envy.

“What?” He probed.

“You payin’ her or somethin’?” Merle accused while Daryl let out a snigger.

“Don’t pay for girls, man.” He mentioned. “You know that”

“Must have done somethin to getcha’ a fine ass bitch like that.” He continued.

“I don’t call her a ‘fine ass bitch’ for a start.” Daryl pointed out.

“I like her. She’s got balls.” Merle decided. “Don’t be a dick and go n’ fuck it all up”

Daryl nodded once before taking a deep breath in the realisation that this situation happening was something that would never have crossed his mind. It was proof that his antagonistic brother did actually care about him, no matter how much he disguised it.

“Thanks. For doin this.” He mumbled, rubbing at his chin.

“Ahh shut up.” Merle grumbled.

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When Daryl dropped Selene off at the tattoo parlour, it was almost midnight. Not ready to let him go just yet, she convinced him to join her for a coffee. The prospect of being awake all-night buzzing on caffeine wasn’t a big deal to him, he was going to be awake anyway contemplating the bizarre fact that his brother was actually reasonably nice to someone he cared about and had made a notable effort to do something for him for a change.

As the coffee machine was bubbling away, she had removed most of her make-up and changed into sweatpants. Upon her return, she handed him a coffee and climbed onto the bed, sitting cross legged opposite him and sipping the steaming liquid in the cup. Her hair rested across her shoulders over her T-shirt and her black, baggy pants looked far too big, but somehow managed to flatter the shape of her waist. Daryl relaxed against the headboard, tempted to just stay the night.

“Probably should have waited until you left to take off my eyebrows.” She muttered, tracing a pattern onto the bedcovers with her fingernail. “You’re going to think I catfished you.”

Daryl scoffed loudly and gently kicked at her knee with his foot.

“Cut that shit out.” He scolded. “Seen ya like this before. Still here, aint I?”

In fact, to him her eyes were brighter without the black liner, her skin glowed without its porcelain coating and highlighter and he liked being able to see her natural beauty. She merely shrugged one shoulder and sipped her coffee which resulted in Daryl wondering what had changed in her during the last few minutes. It was unusual for Selene to put herself down or convey any opinions at all about her view of her physical appearance, but this had worried him.
“The mornin’s. Here. I like ‘em.” He said, taking a gulp of coffee and seeing her look up at him inquisitively. “First thing I see is you. Don’t give a shit if ya aint wearin’ all that face paint. Ya pretty anyways.”

His words made her cheeks grow hot and she giggled shyly and muttered a quiet thanks. To him, her attendance at his house in the presence of Merle was a big step and it was also one he was extremely grateful for. He didn’t know how to put into words what it meant to him to see her trying her hardest to find some common ground with his one family member and he knew it wasn’t to further her own gains, she had done it for him.

“Thank you.” He mumbled. “For tonight. Ya didn’t have to say yes, but I’m glad ya did.”

She placed a hand on his foot, over a thick, black sock and squeezed it.

“He’s your brother, it’s only right we learn how to be civil to one another. Besides, I had a really nice night and I don’t actually think he’s all that bad. He’s just got a fucking big mouth.” She explained.

She still held onto his foot, slowly moving it back and forth as she spoke. Daryl didn’t make an attempt to remove it, instead deciding he quite liked this strange gesture of affection.

“Told me he likes ya. Says ya got balls.” He informed her.

“Yep. Huge balls.” She laughed, her face finally lighting up properly, the way he wanted it to.

He finished his coffee, slid the cup onto the nightstand and sat up, rubbing at the back of his neck and nibbling on his lower lip. His foot was pulled from under her hand and she waited, knowing he was going to say something.

“Y’know… you’re like, a million things all at once. But not one of ‘em is bad. Was kinda lost before-before you. Ain’t no more. M’happy.” He confessed.

Selene blinked rapidly at him and quickly opted to savour this moment, aside from telling her he loved her and that he thought she was beautiful, this was something she always wanted to remember. This rare confession of his feelings that was up there with the most wonderful things anyone had ever said to her, seemingly without any encouragement.

“I’m happy too.” She uttered.

“I um, I ain’t the kinda guy that’s gonna say it all the time. But it don’t mean that I don’t feel it.” He admitted.

“Where is this coming from?” She asked.

He thought for a moment, bringing a hand to his face and chewing on his thumbnail “I dunno. Not good with this shit. Just wanted you to know what ya mean to me. I know how lucky I am.”

_I think I might have loved you from the moment I first saw you at high school. I’m just too chickenshit to tell you that._

She was staring at him, her lips quirked up at the corners and her now empty coffee cup clutched between her fingers.

“I can’t believe you want to be with me.” She whispered.
“C’mon” he scoffed “I ain’t nothin’ special.”

“Oh my god you are. You are to me.” She replied quickly and with a wide grin as she got up and placed her cup beside his on the nightstand. Her movements and expression were bashful but she climbed onto his lap, settling between his legs with her back to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, snuggling into her neck and against her collarbone.

“I love you, Selene.”

The words seem to come a lot easier to him this time. His tone is louder, less nervous and he delivered the sentence with ease and sincerity. She finds one of his hands and brings it to her lips, leaving a soft kiss on the back of it.

“I love you too.” She whispered.
Ritchie squinted at Selene’s silhouetted figure against the sunlight. Her arms were rested around Daryl’s neck as they spoke quietly next to his truck. They had been there for around ten minutes and as each 60 seconds had passed; Ritchie had grown more and more dismayed by the sight. Daryl’s presence so early in the morning and the bite mark on Selene’s neck indicated that they’d spent the night together, a notion that Ritchie didn’t want to think about but was forced to endure due to the scene in front of him. He could just get up and go inside, it would be as easy as that. But his skater sneakers were firmly planted in the gravel, as if made from lead and he couldn’t move, a kind of twisted, sadistic curiosity keeping him fixed to the bench.

Beside him, sat Shorty who was leaned back, sipping his coffee with closed eyes behind his mirrored sunglasses. He let out a satisfied sigh as the sun heated his skin, a small luxury in the start to his day. When he opened his eyes, he checked the time on his cell phone by sliding it partway out of his jeans pocket. 8:50am. Ten minutes until opening. He took one last sip of his coffee and glanced to his side at Ritchie, immediately noticing his tensed face and statue still body language. Ritchie quickly looked down into his lap in a noticeable display of discomfort when Shorty saw Daryl slip his hands around Selene’s waist and draw her closer to him, smiling as she kissed him gently.

“Remember Sarah, from high school?” Shorty questioned as he rolled his coffee mug between his hands. He saw Ritchie’s vision lift slightly and scan the gravelled space in front of their feet.

“Uh, Yeah. Sure. You guys were friends, right?” He mumbled.

“Yeah. Sadly, that’s all we ever were.” Shorty responded, lowering his voice in case Selene or Daryl could hear them. Now, Ritchie looked to his side, glancing back at his friend.

“What?”

“Fell for her. Real hard. Told her once too. She put me so far into the friendzone there was no hope for me.” Shorty explained.

Ritchie sat back, fidgeting in his spot and playing with the strap of his bag, looped over one of his knees.

“Uh, OK. Sorry to hear that. Why you telling me this?” He asked.

Shorty paused, observing Daryl get into his truck and Selene back up towards them. He knew that if he had something to say, he had a matter of seconds in which to say it.

“‘Cause I know what it feels like.” He told him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ritchie quickly said. His mind ticked over the possibility that Shorty may be about to bring up the one thing he really didn’t want to discuss. Ever. Even with his therapists in Rehab. When he thought about it, his heart hurt and his shoulders
grew heavy. Resentment and hatred churned in his stomach and a stinging desperation clawed its way through his veins.

“I’m not stupid, dude.” Shorty shot at him, receiving a steady glower in response. He sighed again and turned his body to the side slightly, ensuring that he was speaking into the space behind Ritchie and that even as Selene drew closer, she would be unlikely to catch it all.

“I’m going to give you some advice and I’m going to give it to you straight. She’s in love with him, you don’t have a shot so you have to find a way to move past it. It isn’t her fault and it isn’t Daryl’s either. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just a shitty situation. But if you keep dwelling on this, it’s gonna get worse, man. You already lost yourself once, you got so fucked up you turned up to work high as a damn kite and tried to hit two of your best friends. Can’t let it happen again or this will screw up your entire life.”

Ritchie looked up to Selene, gritting his teeth and considering Shorty’s advice as she held a hand above her eyes, shielding her face from the bright sunlight while Daryl’s truck moves out of the parking lot.

“She’s all I ever think about. Can’t just switch it off.” He said under his breath

“I’m not saying you can. But you have to try and make your life about something else other than her.” Shorty suggested. “You told her to be with him. I was there, I saw it. That told me that you love her enough to let her go.”

Ritchie stopped fumbling with the strap of his bag and rubbed his hands over his face.

“I want her to be happy.” He whispered.

“She is, Rich. Look at her.”

He couldn’t deny that she did look happy as she waved feebly at the disappearing truck and turned on her heels to walk towards the back door of the building. Her face still bright with a smile until she clocked Ritchie’s downcast and slightly stressed expression.

“You OK, Ritchie?” She asked.

On the brink of panicking, he quickly grabbed his bag and sprang up from the bench, back straight and eyes everywhere but her face.

“Oh, Yeah. I’m good. Just a little tired. Not used to getting out of bed so early these days.” He huffed.

“You’ll get used to it. Go get a coffee, you have a lot of appointments!” She beamed, placing a hand on his shoulder as he struggled past her and shrugged his backpack on. Before opening the back door, he allowed himself a glimpse over his shoulder to find her still looking at him. He offered a shy half smile and continued inside.

As soon as he was out of sight, the grin dropped from Selene’s features and she glared at Shorty.

“He OK, Shorty? I feel like he’s a bomb waiting to go off” She demanded.

He gave her an awkward and pained look, sucking in a breath through his teeth and emitting a hissing noise. He didn’t want to have to disclose the truth, but he understood that unless Selene was aware of what was going on with her own staff, the likelihood of another violent outburst would only increase and it would drive them all apart.
“He’s having a hard time seeing you and Daryl together.” He admitted.

She crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight to one leg. She tried to ignore her own reflection in his mirrored glasses, wondering if her legs really looked as short as they appeared in the distorted image.

“I’m not going to stop that on his behalf.” She stated.

“You shouldn’t have to.” He agreed with a nod.

“Be honest, is he going to be a problem in this workplace, Shorty?” She asked.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I’ve given him some advice. Just hope he’s strong enough to take it on board.” He shrugged, getting to his feet and draping an arm across her shoulders. He gave her a brief but welcome squeeze before releasing her.

“OK…alright.” She sighed. “Probably best that we keep this between us. He’s not like the rest of you, he’s very sensitive. I don’t want him feeling even more outcast if the others know.”

“Selene, they all know. They just don’t say anything.” He informed her.

Her brow furrowed and she took a step back.

“Even Ray?” She asked.

“Even Ray.”

She flapped her hands by her sides in exasperation at the idea that Ray would fail to mention something so important and help her figure out what to do about it. Storming inside, she decided to spend the morning up in the piercing studio with Ritchie and a seemingly endless list of appointments. The idea had been to keep an eye on him and monitor how he worked. But she was aware he knew what she was doing despite his reluctance to say anything. Instead he chose to enjoy being able to look at her so much after a long time away from her.

When Axel appeared at the top of the stairs, Selene dropped her pen on the desk and looked up in surprise.

“Axel, you’re supposed to be off today.”

Wearing a tight, black T-shirt, his dark hair perfectly slicked back and black, beaded bracelets on both wrists, he looked to Selene like he was on his way somewhere that required a certain amount of effort.

“Oh, I am. I just wondered if I could talk to Ritchie for a sec.” He said.

The cogs turned in Selene’s head until finally, a light bulb went on. Skye. Ritchie didn’t know and it hadn’t been discussed by anyone since his departure from Rehab.

“Sure, I’ll go put all this shit away in the store room.” She announced, picking up a cardboard box and wandering to the door in the corner of the room.

“Hey man. Good to see you back.” Axel chirped sincerely as he shook Ritchie’s hand.

“Good to be back. Was getting kinda bored playing video games all day.” Ritchie huffed.

Selene pressed her ear to the door and for some reason, found herself stood on the tiptoes of her
black sneakers as if it would somehow help her to hear more clearly. She fanned her fingers out on the wood and allowed it to take her weight as she strained to hear what was being said.

“Look, there’s something I need to tell you.” Axel started “when you were gone, I got talking to Skye. The girl Selene gave your number to. She um, she said you didn’t reply to her text and we got along real well.”

“-So, you’re seeing her now?” Ritchie intercepted bluntly.

Axel nearly stepped back in surprise but managed to hold his ground, merely blinking a couple of times before regaining his composure.

“Yeah, I am. I didn’t want to step on your toes or move in on anybody’s girl, but you ignored her, dude. So, she was fair game.” Axel explained.

Ritchie tossed the box of latex gloves in his hand onto the countertop behind him and wandered over to the wireless speakers, lowering the volume of the sludgy, stoner rock music filling the room. It helped him to clear his head and process the information easier as he sat on the piercing chair and slowly rubbed his hands together as he sat forwards, elbows propped on his knees. Selene was grateful for the lowered volume, now able to hear the conversation clearly.

He hadn’t thought for one second that Sky would wait around for him. Axel was right, he had ignored her and could only conclude that it wasn’t much of a surprise she had moved onto someone else. The fact that it was Axel was a little uncomfortable to fathom, but he figured it would soon pass and that even if he had succeeded in getting himself a date with her it would all be for nothing anyway, because she wasn’t Selene.

“No, I get it. It’s fine. Really. You’re right. She seemed like a nice girl.” He eventually expressed.

“She is. I like her.” Axel confirmed.

Ritchie looked up at him with a half-smile.

“Appreciate you telling me.” He said sincerely.

“You’re my buddy. I didn’t wanna be ‘Mr. steal ‘yo girl’. I’m not like that.” Axel smiled.

“I know, Axel. It’s cool.”

“Alright, well we’re going to the movies so I gotta run. See you tomorrow.”

Selene heard footsteps across the studio and could only assume Axel had crossed the space between them and gone in for a manly handshake or hug. She had heard the whole exchange from the store room and started to feel desperately sorry for Ritchie. He couldn’t seem to catch a break from anywhere, so she was at least glad she fully booked him for the day, meaning he’d have made plenty of money and little time to mope about feeling sorry for himself.

Half an hour passed and Selene had pottered around Ritchie all the while keeping conversation minimal and witnessing him perform a Septum piercing on a guy that seemed to be over before it had even started. Ritchie was working quickly and effectively and try as she might, she couldn’t find another reason to keep hovering around him, waiting for him to do something wrong. When Ritchie took a break, Ray climbed the stairs to see Selene and found her sat in the piercing chair with her headphones on, a calculator balanced on one knee and a notepad on the other. She scribbled down numbers with a frown. Ray tapped her shoulder and she looked up, dragging her headphones down to her neck.
“How’s he doin?’ Ray asked.

“Good. Axel told him he’s screwing the girl he liked and his boss has watched him like a hawk all day. I’m sure he’s living his best life.” She sighed; her reply laced with sarcasm.

“You’re worried about him.” Ray pointed out.

“Yeah. Everybody knows how he feels too. You knew and didn’t say anything. Feel partly responsible for how screwed up he’s been.” She complained. The calculator and notepad were swiftly slapped onto the countertop beside the chair and she sat back, crossing her arms in an almost childish gesture that was made worse by her sulking expression.

“Listen to me.” Ray crouched down in front her with his hand on her knee. “You can’t help how he feels about you or the fact that he had a little meth problem. You didn’t choose that. You’re a good friend and a good boss to him. There’s only so much ya can do to help him.”

“I know.” She reluctantly admitted.

“Wanna grab a burger at Marty’s after work?” He suggested.

For a split second, her face lit up. The prospect of a beer and burger usually never failing to cheer her up.

“Thought you were watching your figure.” She reminded him with a small smile. Ray stood up and performed a dramatic twirl before heading to the stairs.

“S’alright. I can get so drunk I’ll throw it all up anyways.” He declared with a wink over his shoulder.

“That’s real sexy, Ray.” She laughed.

*****

Marty looked over at Selene for what felt like the millionth time and each time she caught him, he flashed her a yellowed, cracked toothed grin and managed to turn her stomach without fail. She hadn’t thought twice about wearing the cowl necked, low-cut black top she purchased online on a whim, believing it to look good enough to wear out but not formal enough to make her look overdressed. Instead, it was attracting attention from unwanted sources. She growled under her breath as she stirred her drink with a cocktail stirrer and caught Ray’s eye from beside her.

“I shouldn’t have worn this. Why do men stare at boobs, Ray?”

He placed his hand over hers and raised an eyebrow.

“Because men are pigs, baby girl and pigs love truffles. If they’re in the undergrowth or out in the open.” He told her.

She broke into an unavoidable fit of giggles, drawing yet more attention from Marty. Ray shot a hand out in front of Selene’s chest and narrowed his eyes at the bartender, using his other hand to shoo him away. Marty soon got the message and wandered off to the other end of the bar.

“So, I um…got to know Merle Dixon a little better last night.” She disclosed with a certain degree of apprehension. She was wary of telling anyone for fear of them thinking she was being naïve for concluding that Merle wasn’t as bad as everyone seemed to think. Ray recoiled and took a quick sip of his drink through a bright pink straw. “He asked Daryl to invite me over. Taught me how to
play chess.”

“Merle” Ray shuddered dramatically “hope you washed your hands.”

Selene rolled her eyes. There it was. That same judgement she had held against Merle from the beginning.

“He’s actually not as bad as we thought.” She said.

Ray plucked a toothpick from a box to his left and reached over the bars countertop, managing to spear himself a sugared cherry from a bowl. The low dipped arm hole of his multicoloured vest sagged forwards, revealing his toned and tattooed side, his skin had turned an appealing shade from the sun, as it always did and he never missed an opportunity to point out that Selene never seemed to tan and if she did, she looked like a lobster for days.

“Hmm, gotta admit, the fact he wanted Daryl to ask ya over is a surprise in itself.” He mused as he clamped the cherry between his teeth, withdrew the toothpick and chomped down on the sweet fruit. “We better call hell, see if it’s frozen over.”

“Believe me, I was god-smacked when Daryl asked me. He back-tracked as soon as the words left his mouth. I’ll never tell him this; but It was so fucking cute. At the time, him and Brad were playing pool having put the whole black eye thing behind them, just like that. So, the least I could do was agree to try and get along with Merle.” She explained.

Her cellphone buzzed in the back pocket of her tight jeans and she shuffled forwards, sliding it from it’s sheath and onto the table. She opened up the message.

*Workin’ late again. Call me later.*

Daryl. She smiled at the words on the screen, despite their disappointing message, she still loved it when he sent her text messages.

“You’re a better person than me.” Ray commented. “Aint no amount of booty gonna make me agree to spend time with a asshat like Merle.”

Selene quickly text back as she spoke. “Yeah, I know.”

*Maybe I’ll visit you instead.* She pressed send and shrugged a shoulder up. “Anyway, Daryl cooked and we drank rum and laughed. It was…well, it was enjoyable.”

“Careful now, he’s still a small-minded, racist, homophobe.” He pointed out with a wag of his index finger.

“Believe me, that thought never left my mind. He calls you all ‘fancy boys’ y’know.” She smirked.

“Hmm. I am pretty fancy.” Ray considered while brushing a strand of hair from his face. “I’d go as far as to say I’m the fanciest motherfucker in this bar.”

“Oh, you are. So fucking fancy. Now, I gotta go, Daryl’s working late and I’m going to take him a little surprise.” She announced, getting up from her barstool, downing the rest of her drink without even bothering with the straw and collecting her cell.

“What kinda surprise?” Ray wanted to know. She could tell her already knew what she was alluding to, his mind being in the gutter most of the time.
“Bought myself a new jacket.” She whispered in his ear “Knee-length, black. Since the weather has changed. I don’t need to wear anything underneath it either.” She winked.

*****

Daryl’s eyes swept over Selene’s fishnet covered legs and while he wasn’t an expert on fashion, he couldn’t help but notice that her attire was somewhat out of place for a random, late night visit to his workplace. It was only the second time she had turned up at Rocket City Auto Repairs and he felt a stab of smugness when he noticed the other two mechanics down tools and stare when she arrived and waved casually at them. Her announcement of her name and that she was ‘Daryl’s girlfriend’ had made him grin to himself from the office where he sat, surrounded by paperwork.

She was opposite him, finishing up noodles from a take-out down the street and tossing the chopsticks into the box when she was done. She reached out and also collected Daryl’s empty box throwing them both in the trash.

“Thanks for dinner.” He said, picking up a pen and resuming filling out weeks of overdue paperwork. “Didn’t think I was gonna see ya tonight.” As he spoke, he barely looked up, one hand scrawling numbers and signatures onto form and the other rifling through a stack of receipts for parts. Selene took no notice of his distracted state, clearly able to see that he was up to his neck in work. “I ain’t so good at the paperwork side of things, boss is up my ass ‘bout it.”

Selene got to her feet and slowly clicked around the room in her stiletto ankle boots, taking in the naked women on the calendar pinned to the wall, the health and safety chart that was so old it was brown and curling at the edges and the contacts list that included her father’s office at the top. She swung her vision back around to him, observing his broad shoulders through his work shirt and his ruffled hair from all the times he’d scratched at his scalp or thoughtlessly ran his fingers over his head while thinking.

“Kinda like you in that shirt.” She mentioned.

He glanced up at her comment, his pen poised over a line on the paper.

“Um, Thanks.” He grunted.

She wound her hand around the fabric belt of her coat, swinging it in front of her as she gradually paced back and forth.

“I like the leather vest more though.” She admitted.

Daryl dropped his gaze back to his work again, scribbling another signature on the page.

“Can’t wear it while I’m workin’. Against the rules.” He mumbled.

Selene knew she had her work cut out here. She had never usually struggled to attract his attention but with such a pressing workload on his mind, she realised that whatever she was going to get from this was going to have to be both quick and intense.

“You think I’d look good in your vest?” She asked.

“You look good in anythin’.” He mumbled while turning over more pages and squinting at the black and white text. He clamped his pen between his teeth as he thoughtfully scanned the numbers on the bottom of the pages and began punching them into a calculator.

“Maybe I could try it on one day.” She suggested.
Then, he paused and looked up again, speaking through his teeth still with his pen held off to the side.

“Ain’t nobody touches that vest ‘cept me.” He told her.

“Right, right” She nodded, a smile spreading across her dark red, velvety lips. “There nothing I can do to talk you into letting me?”

As she stood there swinging her coat belt, Daryl started to put the pieces together in his mind. The coat, the line of questioning, her turning up in the first place. Far from wanting to be presumptuous, he decided to proceed with caution.

“Maybe” he shrugged.

She carried on wandering about, noting the lock on the door and the blinds that could be lowered.

“Anyone likely to come in here in the next few minutes?” She asked, her eyes scanning the two other working men beyond the window, both listening to country music and bellowing along to the lyrics.

“Nah, those two are in as much trouble as me. Those cars need to be fixed by the mornin’.” He replied.

“Hmm, Interesting.” She hummed.

She checked the corners of the room, up by the ceiling and noticed a camera. In one, swift movement she hauled a chair over to the corner and climbed up, standing on the top in her heels with expert precision. She pushed the lens to one side and carefully stepped down before heading over to the blinds and lowering them as quietly as possible, blocking the view of his colleagues outside. By that point, Daryl was suspicious and confused.

“The hell ya doin?” He questioned.

She didn’t reply as she walked back to the desk, looked him right in the eyes, unbuttoned her jacket and let it drop to the floor. He swallowed hard at what was before him. She was wearing nothing else but her boots and a pair of black panties under her fishnets. He could only stare at her for a few moments, his mouth gradually falling open while he blinked in shock and tried to make sure it was real and was actually happening and isn’t just a dirty dream. The pen in his mouth fell from his lips and clattered onto the desk below.

Shiiiiiiiit

Eventually finding some sense, he got up wordlessly and rounded the desk. Selene stood completely still except for her eyes, which followed him until he stopped behind her, forcing her to drag her vision away. He slid his hands around her from behind, feeling over her breasts and gently squeezing her nipples between his fingers and thumbs. She moaned and tilted her head back to him, resting it on his shoulder. He started kissing her neck and she reached back with a hand and tugged at his belt, releasing the buckle.

Refusing to overthink the situation and choosing to ignore his heart beating out of his chest, he quickly opened up his pants while nibbling on her neck and yanked her black underwear and fishnets down her legs. Her skin was silky soft under his rough and oil stained hands as he dragged them up her outer thighs. Then, he suddenly stopped and Selene instantly knew why.

“Visited the clinic, I got us covered.” She purred back at him over her shoulder with a mischievous
smile.

He was already sensitive, rock hard and ready for her, the half-naked woman wanting random sex with him in his manager’s office was enough to get him hard in seconds. He licked the inside of his fingers and wiped it along her entrance, instantly realising that there really was no need and that she seemed to be just as wound up as he was. Not wasting any more time, he lined himself up with her and harshly pushed inside her. She fell forwards and braced herself on the desk and he grunted loudly. She reached a hand back and rubbed his balls as he drove into her. One of his arms reached around her body, holding onto one breast and rubbing his thumb over her nipple. With his other hand, he gripped tightly onto her hip.

He couldn’t believe his luck, aside from the physicality’s of the whole thing, his mind was bustling with excited and surprised thoughts.

*I can’t believe I’m doing this. Here, in the damn office at work. What the hell?! I love this. I love that she’s done this. I love that she’s mine.*

He grunted shamelessly with every hard thrust, quietly cursing under his breath occasionally and she was pleasantly surprised when he braved a light slap on her ass which sent her into over drive. He pulled her hand away from his balls, replacing it with his own on her clit, circling it furiously over and over. She pushed back to meet him each time, the warmth radiating from his efforts with his fingers causing her legs to buckle slightly.

Sweat was starting to bead on his forehead as his whole-body thundered with lust and pleasure. The table creaked and the room was filled with gasps, swear words and loud panting. Selene was grateful for the loud and grating country music filling the main building next door.

Daryl wanted to say things to her but didn’t know how she would take it, his confidence with conversation in such situations still not yet reaching its peak, regardless of his relentless teasing of her previously. He pondered that she seemed to like the mild slap which in its self was a huge risk and figured that she most likely wouldn’t mind him branching out a bit more.

“Uuhh…you feel so good.” He panted against the side of her face, the words husky and quiet.

She managed to look back at him briefly, her bottom lip pinned between her teeth and a mischievous smile on her face.

*Ooh, you’re getting so bold, Dixon.*

His hard thrusts, thumb brushing her nipple and fingertips on her trigger were fast becoming too much and she could feel the coil of pressure tightening inside her.

Both of his hands gripped her hips and he amped up the intensity, moving faster, harder, pushing so far into her that her body spiked with pleasure and pain. His was almost there too, the whole experience being almost too much right from the start. His balls were becoming taut and the top of his cock began to ache for release.

Selene’s body exploded with electric, sparkling bliss. Her legs shook and she released a moan that could probably be heard outside the office. Daryl was able to think quickly enough to reach a hand across her mouth until she quietened. Her fingers gripped onto the paperwork on the desk, crumpling it in her desperate grip.

Seconds later, Daryl followed when he leaned over her, his arm holding her tight to his chest and his breath coming in deep, strong heaves. She felt him hold her so close her back was flush to his
chest.

“You dirty girl.” He huffed in her ear in amusement.

“You like it?” She panted

“Show up at my work…” he started while tickling his fingertips down her spine “…wearin’ nothin’ but a jacket and panties and let me bend ya over the desk, stupid question.”

It was something he never dared to dream of; having a girlfriend, having someone that was different and proud of it, fun to be around, smart and attractive. To top it off, she was sexually confident and made his head spin and his toes curl and he wondered what the hell he must have done in a past life to have earned this as his reward. They’d waited a long time to progress to this point. But it seemed that now they had, they couldn’t stay away from one another.

She turned and pressed her body to his, allowing him to stroke over the bare parts of her skin as she kissed him. Hearing a noise from outside jolted them both back to the reality that they were in Daryl’s managers office and Selene was without a stitch of clothing. She dressed quickly as he straightened the paperwork back up on the desk and moved the camera back to it’s original angle. Selene unlocked the door and walked back to him one last time.

“Should visit you here more often.” She said casually, as if absolutely nothing had happened behind the closed blinds.

“If this is gonna happen every time then it’s fine by me.” He uttered.

She took hold of the front of his shirt in her fist and kissed him slowly, caressing his tongue and noticing him trying to smile at the same time. A breathy giggle sounded out between them when she finally pulled away.

“See ya later. Thank you.” He whispered

“What for?”

“Makin’ work fun.” He smirked.

She winked at him and swiftly left, Daryl following her to the door and watching her walk away. His colleagues look over at him suspiciously and he subtly laughed to himself before going back to work.

*****

After being contacted and asked to do a full backpiece on a client that was willing to travel across the country for her unique style, Selene set to work that night in her apartment, drawing up each individual part of the image the client had asked for and decided to figure out a way to connect them all in the latter stages of the design process. She sat on her bed, a large wooden board across her lap to rest on. Her mind and eyes wandered after a while, back to the spot when Daryl had placed her atop of the table and taken her. Where he pushed the boundaries and found his confidence, just like earlier in the day, when he had braved another step forward in the form of a light slap and a confession rasped in her ear that he just couldn’t hold back. She shook her head andiggled to herself, the simple memory of it filling her soul with an excited rush.

When her phone’s message alert made her jump, she quickly snatched it from the nightstand and hoped it would be Daryl. Disappointment weighed down her mood when she realised it was Ritchie.
'Hey. You wanna join me for a beer at Marty’s? I’m bored.’

She cocked her head to the side, aware that she needed to finish the design she was working on but the lure of beer was far too strong. She concluded that she would treat herself to two drinks before heading back and trying to be productive. She shuffled off the bed as she typed back.

‘Sure. I’ll be there soon.’

Ambling across her apartment, She was now wearing a lot more clothes than when she had seen Daryl earlier. She slipped off her black sweatpants and swapped them out for some corseted leggings and plucked her jacket from the coat stand. As she was wiggling into her boots, her phone went off again.

‘Cool. meet me outside in five minutes’.

*****

The alley at the side of Marty’s was mainly used for depositing trash into huge dumpsters and the storage of outdoor chairs and tables for the height of summertime. Marty had missed the boat and failed to move everything out in time for the highest temperatures of the year so far, telling himself he would do it the next day and then the next, until it got forgotten about.

Daryl Leaned against the wall, wondering what Amy could possibly want so urgently at this time in the evening and seemingly so randomly. But he had agreed to meet her anyway after she came across as panicked and worried during the phone call he had received after he’d finally finished work. He needed to walk past Marty’s to get to his truck anyway, so decided to just wait and find out what she wanted. High heels could be heard clipping along the street, signalling Amy’s imminent arrival.

**Hurry up. He thought I might be able to see Selene again tonight if she makes this quick.**

Amy rounded the corner and strutted up to him. Her white, short skirt and barely there, lace top leaving hardly anything to the imagination. She dipped into her clutch bag and pulled out her cell as she approached, tapping a message into it and throwing it back into her bag.

“Hey, hottie. Thanks for meeting me.” She purred, her long, red hair shaping her face and falling into bouncy curls over each shoulder.

“What ya need, Amy?” He asked.

Selene wandered along the road, scuffing her boots along the sidewalk occasionally in a casual and unrushed state. She could see the back of Ritchie’s Ink Cabinet Hoodie as he stood in the doorway of her destination, hunched over and looking at his cell. Hearing voices to her right, she glanced at the alley at the side of the bar and noticed two figures. Squinting into the dim light between the two brick buildings, she realised that one of them was Daryl when she noticed the wings on his vest as he turned his back to the wall.

**He must be dealing. She thought.**

But in front of him, was Amy. Her heart dropped when she witnessed the redhead place her hands on his chest and walk him back to the wall with a wide smile.

Daryl’s body wouldn’t respond no matter how much his mind screamed at him to just do
*Something, Anything.* Everything was moving in slow motion, the hands on his chest, his feet being forced to step back, his vest slapping against the brickwork. Shock flashed through him when her lips met his. He raised his hands, finding her waistline.

Selene’s eyes filled with tears and through her blurred vision, she whirled around and ran back to her apartment, sobbing loudly as her boots hammered into the asphalt.
Deconstruction

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay! I’ve been back in the hospital but I am updating finally, YAY!

It was a sound he had heard a thousand times before. The *clink, clink, clink* of the buckle on a biker jacket, ringing out through the street like a signal of her presence. Her very own soundtrack. He first noticed it in high school among the throngs of teenagers bustling along the glistening hallways, backpacks slung over shoulders, laughter and jeering rising up like a chorus that made his chest heave with resentment and hatred for every single one of them. He kept his head low and his wits about him, enough to hear that *clink* above all else. Then, she was there.

Lips blackened and glossy, hair jet black like the cloak of the night that surrounded him when he spent cold nights in the woods. Bright eyes stopping on his briefly, enough to stir his soul and halt him in his tracks.

*clink*. She’s laughing. Perfect, straight white teeth. One, silver-ringed hand raising and playfully slapping her companion on his shoulder. There was no stereotype here. She wasn’t moody and withdrawn. She wasn’t obsessed with death and pain. Nor did she scowl from the back of classrooms while writing poetry and dreaming of an existence away from the societal norms that she so hated. She was light, she was sunshine dressed in a layer of lace and leather. She was unlike anything he’d ever seen. Milky, pale skin like satin that he would do anything to touch. He knew of her; she wasn’t new to him. He had stood in many a background, admiring the goth girl with the surprising smile like a breezy Sunday afternoon spent under a canopy of trees on a cliffside. Little did he know that one day, he would get to take her there.

*clink, clink, clink*. Now, boots were slapping along the sidewalk, long, black hair fanned up into the air as Daryl realised the weight of the situation. His hands, still on Amy’s waist, shoved her back further until she stumbled over a trash can and hissed a string of cuss words under her breath. But Daryl was already running, her name spilling from his lips in desperation as he followed her across the road and down the street.

“Selene!”

He wasn’t sure, not one hundred percent that she’d seen what had just transpired. But she wasn’t stopping and with every new pound of her boots on the ground, his heart began to shatter into tiny little pieces.

Stopping, she whirled around, her face etched with pain and rage. Her eyes were brimming with tears, thin, black veins of eyeliner and mascara already overflowing and leaving a pained pattern on her cheeks. His chest constricted at the sight.

“I fucking trusted you.” She croaked before turning and carrying on back to her apartment.

“Wait… that aint what it looked like. *She* kissed *me*.” Daryl attempted to protest.

“You don’t need to explain. I saw enough.” She snapped, refusing to turn around.
“I wouldn’t do that shit to you. Why would I risk losin’ you?! C’mon, Selene!” He tried as he reached out to take a hold of her shoulder. She flung an arm up, throwing him off violently and glaring at him with an intense rage that both scared and surprised him.

“Don’t fucking touch me, asshole. Go put your hands back on the whore’s waist in the alley! We’re fucking done. Don’t come near me again.” She fumed.

His legs stopped working, rooting him to the ground. Her words rendering him immobile and weak. His face dropped instantly. He didn’t want to just let her walk away, he wanted to follow her and make her believe him, make her see that he would never do anything to jeopardise what they had. That he had wanted this since High School and he would never commit such a betrayal. Instead, he let her go.

The image of her leaving him stood there was one that he knew he would never forget. Anger began to creep into his mind, his chest, his heart. Deep into his bones until it was the only thing keeping him upright. He turned, stalking back to the alley to find Amy, ready to do whatever he needed to do to cause her the same amount of agony that she had just inflicted upon him. But the alley was empty. She was nowhere to be seen. The trashcan she’d fallen over was the nearest object to endure his wrath when his steel toe capped boot hammered into it, denting it so much it was almost folded in half.

“FUCK!” He yelled; his throat hoarse. “Amy?!” A bird broke into flight from the roof above, the only noise that filled his surroundings aside from the blood thundering through his head. “AMY?!”

Ritchie slid his cell phone into his pocket when he saw Selene scream at Daryl across the street. His eyes widened and he blinked, half expecting the scene before him to disappear. But there she was, storming away from him, not able to extend their distance enough without running. He left the doorstep to Marty’s bar and hopped down the kerb, crossing the street and keeping close to the store fronts as he tried to hear what was being said. Reaching the corner, he startled and backed into the closed doorway of a shoe store when Daryl passed him, hands balled into fists and his face reddened and enraged.

Ritchie’s heart drummed away in his chest after seeing how focused Daryl’s anger was, witnessing him stood in the alley, bellowing Amy’s name and destroying a metal trash can as if he were some kind of beast unleashed. He toyed with the idea of approaching him and asking if he was OK. But the question sounded just as ridiculous in his head as it would have seemed had he actually done it. Opting to follow Selene instead, he rounded the corner and jogged after her.

Her vision was so blurred, she dropped her key twice before finally managing to grip it between her fingers. She sniffed wildly and tried to blink away tears but the torrent of salty waves just kept on coming. She attempted to slide the key into the lock, only to circle the hole three times. Losing her temper, she kicked the door, rattling it in its frame and threatening the large pane of glass in the middle.

“Hey, thought we were meeting?” Ritchie’s voice came from behind her. She slowly turned and looked up at him with her chest gasping for air and blackened rivers of tears running down her face. The sight of her almost knocked the breath out of his lungs, it was nearly unbearable.

“What the hell?” He breathed, lunging for her and taking hold of her shoulders. Her self-control was waning and she began to sob uncontrollably. Ritchie brushed her hair from her face, stopping it
from sticking to her tears. His eyes searched for hers as he dipped his head and tried to get her to look at him. “What’s happened? I saw you yell at Daryl.”

“He-he ch-cheated on me.” She stammered. “He was k-kissing Amy from the rabbit in-in the alley.”

Ritchie blinked at her, his eyebrows pinched together in an expression of pure bewilderment.

“What?!” He exclaimed. “W-what?! I mean… are you sure that’s what you saw?” he tried.

“Y-Yes.” She nodded frantically, not unlike a child when they’re certain of something.

“What the fuck?” Ritchie whispered under his breath as his vision dropped and he glanced around the street for any sign of Daryl. Selene’s despair was growing stronger and she let herself fall back into the glass door of the tattoo parlour, not even bothering to wipe any more tears from her face. Ritchie quickly took hold of her hand and drew her close to him, enveloping her in his arms and letting her bury her face into his T-shirt.

“It’s OK. It’s alright” He whispered. She clung to his clothing and let sobs wrack her body.

When Ritchie had finally managed to get Selene into her apartment, he awkwardly paced back and forth while she sat on the bed in silence, tears still streaming down her face. She had stopped howling as soon as he had pushed the door open and picked her up, carrying her inside and up the stairs to her haven. In the moments since he’d placed her down, she hadn’t said a word. Hands wrung in her lap while she stared at nothing particular, her shoulders juddering with every breath.

Ritchie wished he could take it all away, snatch it from her and endure it for himself. Her eyes had lost their sparkle and her whole demeanour was defeated and shattered.

“Are you sure, Selene? I mean, it was kinda dark.” He asked.

“I’m sure.” She mumbled quietly.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, careful to avoid his piercings as he pulled his cell phone out of his jeans with his other hand.

“OK. Um. I’m really not sure what to do. So, I’m going to call Bear…and Ray and Axel. Maybe shorty too and anyone else that might be better at this than me. Maybe we need a female. Do you know any girls? I’ll call Delilah” Panic began to set in when she offered no answer, just a loud sniff. “Right. Shit. OK.”

He sat on the bed beside her and started scrolling through his phone, looking for numbers. When he felt her move closer, he stilled and wondered what she was doing when she took the cell phone from his hand and tossed it over her shoulder, hearing it drop onto the beds covers. She shuffled to the edge of the mattress, throwing her legs over his lap and snuggled into his chest. His arms lifted involuntarily for a moment while he panicked about where to put them and after some initial doubt and reservation, he eventually wrapped them around her and let her cry again, resting his chin on her head.

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Merle smoothed his tongue around his teeth behind his lips as he stood under a light outside the main door of the Velvet Rabbit. It had been a quiet night, boring in fact. If it hadn’t been for the
burger he had snuck out of the kitchen and eaten in the camera’s blind spot he’d have faded away from starvation too. He didn’t usually mind being put on the door, it meant he got to scout for potential buyers of the plethora of drugs he had stashed back at the house and he also got an adrenaline fix by having to break up fights and toss people out on the streets for breaking the rules. He didn’t much like having to wear a suit, it was hot and uncomfortable and he much preferred brawling while wearing his typical jeans and vest.

On this particular night, the sun hung low in the sky, peeping just above the horizon, framed by a slither of pinks and oranges. The Velvet Rabbit being set on a hill meant the nights on the door came with the added luxury of being able to watch the sun set. A treat that even the likes of Merle Dixon didn’t take for granted.

Plucking a rolled-up cigarette from behind his ear, he leaned back against the pillar beside the door, sparked up and inhaled deeply, watching as the smoke expelled from his mouth and nose, closing his view of the silhouetted horizon. His peaceful vigil was disrupted by the roar of his own bike thundering through the parking lot and skidding messily into a space in the corner. Daryl killed the engine and jumped off the bike, charging towards him with a face set by fury and clenched fists. Merle pushed himself away from the pillar, threw his smoke away and instinctively slammed his hands against Daryl’s chest before he could get any further.

Merle liked to think he’d brought Daryl up. Watched over him when things were tough and taught him to shove his emotions down and buck up with the best of them. He had taught him how to fight, mainly through their volatile relationship and a life fuelled by drugs and alcohol. At times, they’d wanted to murder one another, but Merle knew Daryl better than anyone and at that particular moment, he could tell it wasn’t him he wanted to kill for a change.

“Woah! What crawled up your ass?!” Merle cried as he applied enough strength to Daryl’s chest to hold him back.

“Get outta my way.” Daryl hissed through his teeth; his eyes fixed on the door over Merle’s shoulder.

“Uh… no can do. Ain’t lettin’ ya in with ya temper all flared up like that.” Merle confirmed.

“Get outta my fuckin’ way, Merle!” Hands were soon harshly grabbing at where he now had his younger brothers’ shirt and part of his leather vest held tightly in his grasp. Having to think quickly and knowing Daryl would barge at him to get past, he shoved as hard as he could. Daryl stumbled backwards but held his own, remaining upright and feeling his anger escalate, flashing before his eyes.

“WHERE’S AMY?!” He shouted. Merle’s lip curled for a second in confusion.

“Amy? She’s inside. Why?” He replied

“I need to talk to her.” Daryl seethed, once again making tracks to push past Merle.

“Na-Uh.” Merle announced loudly, holding his arms out at his sides. “You go in there like that and Bill’s gonna shoot ya where ya stand, dumbass.” He dropped one arm, motioning to a small wall beside them. “Sit down a spell.”

“No.”

“Don’t be a dick, boy! Sit the fuck down!” Merle suddenly yelled. Daryl took a step back and after initially hesitating, finally agreed to sit down. “What In the hells goin’ on?”
“She kissed me” Daryl grumbled.

“What? Who?”

“Amy. She kissed me. Selene saw it.”

Merle couldn’t help it, a crackled, dry laugh escaped him and he decided to roll with it despite his brothers’ furious glare. He chuckled loudly, shaking his head in disbelief and placing a hand on his stomach.

“Hoo! Damn. I’m sorry. It’s just…since when do you get so much pussy?” He chortled. Daryl sprang up from the wall.

“That’s it, I’m goin in.”

“No, no, NO. Sit down, asshole!” Merle ordered, pointing firmly at the wall with an extended index finger. Reluctantly, Daryl complied. Leaning forwards with his elbows on his knees and taking a moment to hold his head in his hands. When he looked up, Merle had finally silenced and his expression was no longer one of humour. Daryl felt like he could be mistaken, but he was sure he saw the slightest glimmer of concern in his eyes.

“I didn’t want it. It was all her. I pushed her off of me. But Selene… she saw the worst part.” Daryl explained.

“And you think ya gonna charge up in here all gung-ho in the lion’s den? Check yaself, Daryl. Have you lost ya god damn mind?! I ain’t lettin ya do that.” Merle told him.

“I need to know what the fuck she thought she was doin!” His cheeks were reddened with flustered rage.

“Girls a whore, her vagina pays her bills. She’s probably a little hard up, tryin’ to get a client.” Merle shrugged, hearing Daryl huff with irritation.

“I don’t pay for girl-”

“-Yeah, Yeah. You don’t pay for girls. Get on down from that soapbox and open ya damn eyes. Amy don’t do shit for free.”

Daryl looked up at his brother and locked eyes with him. Now, Merle was about to find out just how different their experiences at the Velvet Rabbit were.

“She does” Daryl croaked.

Merle stepped back slightly, doing a double take at his brother and raising an eyebrow in disbelief before moving closer and leaning down to him.

“You hit that?!” He whispered from the corner of his mouth.

Daryl just stared at him after giving him a slight nod. He found himself praying to anyone that would listen in his mind that his brother would keep his great, big mouth shut. Merle had the answer he sought without Daryl having to say a word.

“For free?!”

“Bill doesn’t know. Wanna keep it that way.” Daryl sighed.
Merle straightened and took a moment to pace back and forth. He had been frequenting the rabbit since he was a teenager and it was safe to say he was there more than he was at home. He knew all of the girls well and also knew that it was against the rules to sleep with any clients without charging them. It was an agreement that meant Bill got his percentage and the girls were well looked after and protected. To break such a rule, especially as an employee was quite the risk.

“You been dippin’ that wick all over the damn place huh? Pussy in every part of town. Well I never.” Merle eventually scoffed.

“We were friends. I ain’t like that.” Daryl corrected quickly.

“You have it out with her in that club and all this shit will get back to Bill. He’ll put a bullet in ya skull if he finds out Selene thinks ya did the dirty on her n’ ya been fuckin his whores for free. Get the hell outta here.” Merle instructed, throwing an arm up in the air and gesturing to his now dust covered bike that Daryl had arrived on.

Daryl got to his feet and scuffed about for a while, huffing, sighing and nibbling furiously his thumb. Merle watched his typical display of anxiety and frustration in his sibling, it was something he’d done since he was a child. He remembered their mother commenting that the boy would have no thumbs left if he carried on chewing at them like an Opossum eating a sweet potato.

“Ahh hell. Fine!” Merle spat “But don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

He stepped aside and Daryl glowered at him. It wasn’t often that Merle tried to do the right thing. In fact, it was almost unheard of, but his effort with Selene and now his attempt to stop Daryl from doing something he’d regret meant that it took a minute or two for it to sink in that he had even tried in the first place. Daryl had been so busy protesting that it had only just occurred to him; his brother cared after all. As he passed him on his way to the door, he shot him a knowing look.

You are my brother. I would never do anything to get you killed.

With his Merle’s and his own mortality at the forefront of his mind. Daryl casually walked into the bar and ordered a double whiskey. Knowing that if he sat down as usual, Amy would seek him out at some point. She always did, time after time, regular as clockwork and unless she had a client to lure, she would place herself right next to him.

When half an hour passed, he’d calmed down considerably and managed to formulate some kind of restraint in his anger. But it hadn’t completely dissipated, now he was going to use it wisely, the way he knew he could when given time to hone it and mould it into something he could use to gain something other than a black eye and a court case.

Amy emerged from the back room wearing a tight-fitting red, strapless dress and black heels. She froze when her eyes fell upon Daryl, sitting at his usual spot with a whiskey tumbler in front of him and a Martini placed on the counter as his side. The drink he always bought her. She took a deep breath and figured this show of normality could only be a good thing. Adopting a faked air of indifference, she glided into the seat beside him and picked up the Martini.

“Daryl.” She stated casually, sipping the drink and placing it back down. He didn’t even look at her, his eyes fixed pointedly on his fingers and thumb as he twirled the tumbler around in front of him on the glossy, black surface

“Gonna tell me what the hell that was earlier?” He growled.
Amy swallowed hard, sitting up straight and pushing her shoulders back in an attempt to come across blasé about the whole thing.

“Thought you wanted it.” She shrugged with one shoulder.

“Ya asked me meet ya there n’ threw yaself at me.” He said, slowly turning his head and looking her right in the face. “I didn’t do shit to make you think I wanted it.”

Amy shifted in her seat and quickly took a large gulp of her drink, practically throwing the entire thing down her throat and flicking her hair over her shoulder with one hand. His gaze was still bearing into her soul and for the first time since she’d met him, she felt slightly afraid of him.

“We’ve been talking a lot more recently. Just thought you might have been interested in another night, you and I and my silk sheets. Can’t blame a girl for trying.” She offered.

“I got a girl, Amy.” He reminded her.

“So have 99 percent of the guys that come in here. Doesn’t mean anything.” She reasoned.

Daryl wanted to strangle her there and then, but his level of self-restraint surprised him and meant he was able to hold back his impulses and get more information.

“Selene saw it, ya know that, right?” He asked.

“Yeah.” She mumbled. Her vision dropping to her lap where she played with her long red fingernails for a second. “You um…you think she’ll tell Bill?”

Daryl finished his drink and got to his feet. Moving to stand behind her he gently laced his fingers into the side of her hair, tenderly moving it back from her ear. His fingertips brushed her neck and set a jolt of unexpected delight thundering across her skin. He leaned down to her, levelling his lips with her ear.

“You and I, we’d both be in the crosshairs if she did, but at least I’d get to fuck your shit up even more by telling him you screwed me and didn’t charge me a cent and tried it a second time.” He warned.

Amy went to move away but his other hand held firmly onto her shoulder, pinning her in place and digging into her skin until it began to ache under the pressure. “You know the rules. You work for him. How do ya think he’s gonna take it that you’ve been givin’ it out for free and pissin’ off his precious daughter? I fuckin’ hope Selene does tell him. You ain’t nothin’ but a jealous bitch”

Delving into his pocket, he threw a crumpled-up note onto the bar to pay for the drinks and went to walk past her. Amy took what she knew was a huge risk and shot a hand out, gripping his forearm and halting him.

“I’m sorry.” She blurted out. “I’m sorry she saw and I’m sorry I did it, OK?”

Her face displayed a momentary flicker of fear and genuine regret until it went incognito again and she was back to her regular, attitude laden self. He ripped his arm from her grip, making her flinch away in distress. Leaning down and only stopping inches from her terrified face, his jaw pulled tight and his anger flared in his chest. Daryl knew he would never lay a finger on a woman with violent intent, although the temptation was undeniably there. He was not his father and he had no real intentions to be. But he also knew that the likes of Amy would only listen when threatened with something extreme.
“Ya think you know me? Think I’m the quiet, safe one? Huh? You mighta just cost me the one thing that ever meant anything to me. So, if you ever try to talk to me again, or ya go near Selene, I’ll fuck that pretty face of yours up so bad the guys in here would rather screw Merle. You understandin’ me?” he hissed.

Amy blinked rapidly and felt her chest burning from the breath she was holding in.

“Y-yes.” She agreed. Exhaling when he finally walked away and throwing the final dregs of her drink down her throat.

So focused was he on leaving the bar and heading for the door, he almost didn’t notice Delilah place a hand on his shoulder as he passed. Her face was suspicious and she gently pulled him into a darkened corner of the club.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

Daryl could still see Amy at the bar over Delilah’s shoulder. She was looking straight back at him but the vulnerable and scared expression on her features had not departed, much to Daryl’s satisfaction.

“Ask her.” He said, nudging his head up in her direction and waiting for Delilah to look around and notice her. When she did, she rolled her eyes.

“What has she done?”

Daryl didn’t want to go over it all. In fact, he wanted to get to the tattoo parlour and try and make Selene listen to him.

“I ain’t never raised my hand to a woman. But I’mma make an exception unless I leave right now.” He confessed.

Delilah squeezed his arm and gave him a sympathetic look, needing no further information. It was obvious to her that Amy had been planning something for a while, her interest in the younger Dixon brother seeming to peak in more recent weeks. Amy’s morals had always been questionable, but Delilah liked to allow people the benefit of the doubt before charging in and holding them to account for something that may not be all that it seems. On this occasion, she wished she’d adopted a tougher stance.

“OK, honey. Go. I’ll catch up with you another time.”

Selene ignored the constant ringing of the buzzer, telling Ritchie to do the same while she curled up next to him with a pillow pushed into the side of her face, muffling the sound of the obnoxious doorbell. He had tried to suggest that she hear Daryl out, just give him five minutes and told her that it might not have been as black and white as she’d assumed. Her response had been one of anger, a raised voice telling him in no uncertain terms that she wasn’t stupid and was quite sure of what she’d seen. Daryl’s hands on another woman’s hips as she kissed him was damning enough evidence.

Ritchie stayed with her all night after she’d asked him not to contact anyone else. Not knowing quite how to handle things, he simply sat still and offered to make drinks and food every now and then until she had eventually fallen asleep with her head on his chest in a moistened patch on his
shirt from her tears. He tickled lightly over her cheek and down to her neck, hearing her sigh dreamily. It was not lost on him that the situation appeared a little more than platonic, but he pushed it away, getting his hopes up for something that probably wouldn’t happen was a thought that he didn’t want to entertain.

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Daryl was no quitter, but he also wasn’t the kind of man to beg anyone for anything. But the longing to constantly plead with Selene for five precious minutes was near enough overwhelming. Managing to keep away from the tattoo parlour for almost a week had been one of the most difficult things he had ever had to do. He considered that if it were him on the other side of the situation, he would want time and space and so opted to keep away for as long as he could stand it and not contact her at all. But then there was the internal conflict. No contact could be mistaken for a lack of interest while too much contact would most likely result in her ignoring him altogether. Being unaware of the correct protocol for such a dilemma, he’d played it by ear and after five days, decided that he needed to remind her that he still cared.

Selene shot up from her seat as soon as she saw Daryl close the door to the tattoo studio in front of her. Brad and Ray, who were making arrangements to attend a tattoo convention across the country from the couch, both looked up and were on their feet in seconds, arms held out to block him from passing but he didn’t move. He remained by the door, watching her between the two bodies of her protective best friend and brother.

“Five minutes, that’s all I’m askin’ for.” He said to her, treating Brad and Ray as if they didn’t exist.

His heart sank when she simply walked away and climbed the stairs. He wanted to yell and scream, pick things up and smash them. But he was rooted to the spot, bitter disappointment gnawing away at him.

“Think you should leave, Daryl” Ray expressed.

“Wait” Brad intercepted “Step outside with me a second.”

Daryl wasn’t an idiot and was more than aware that Brad could probably knock him out with one punch if he wanted to which meant that being alone with Selene’s extremely overprotective brother was not high up on his list of priorities. But Brad seemed calm, calmer than Ray infact, and it was that realisation which prompted him to agree, albeit with a little suspicion.

Outside, Brad rubbed at his now bearded chin as he looked down at Daryl, who clenched his jaw as his mind flashed back to the moment his eye socket exploded with pain from Brad’s fist connecting with it. But he was not in a fighting stance, nor were his eyes wild or his veins popping. He was contemplative and patient, much to Daryl’s astonishment.

“I believe you.” Brad admitted.

Daryl was speechless as his vision dropped to the floor and he shifted his weight before gradually dragging his eyes back up to Brad’s waiting expression.

“Ya do?” He croaked.

“Yeah. Doesn’t add up. Risked our dad having you killed and took a beatin’ from me and you still stayed with her. You went to Shorty’s wedding with her and took her to meet your redneck, scumbag brother because he’s family. Not the actions of a guy that’s checking out other women.”
Daryl nodded as he shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels.

“I’d never hurt her like that” He mumbled.

“I know, dude. I’ve tried talking to her. She just says she doesn’t want to keep going over it.” Brad told him with a downcast look.

“Thanks for trying.” Daryl said sincerely as he backed away and released a disappointed breath.

Heading back inside, Brad avoided Ray’s persistent gaze and settled back down on the couch, picking up the tablet they were both scrolling through before Daryl had arrived. He could sense Ray’s need to know what had been said, but refused to surrender the information for now, believing it better kept to himself. Ray perched on the arm of the couch opposite him, drumming his fingers on his knee. The light, padding sound pinching at Brad’s nerves.

“Would you stop that?” He mumbled.

“That depends.” Ray tittered. “What did you just say to Daryl?”

Brad expelled a slow breath and gradually looked up at Ray.

“I believe him.” He uttered.

“Oh really. So, what? You punch the guy and now you’re his number one fan?” Ray exclaimed.

“No, Ray. It just doesn’t make any sense to me. I can’t see why he’d risk losing her for the likes of Amy.” Brad reasoned.

“Hmm, well you have a point. I admit, I can’t see it either, But we got no way of knowing the truth and neither does she. I’ma stick right by her, because that’s what she needs.” Ray expressed.

“Never said you shouldn’t.”

Ray shot him a suspicious glance and waved a finger at the tablet in his hand.

“Book us a frickin’ hotel, two separate rooms. You take up too much damn space and ya smell like a swamp creature in the mornin’s.” He ordered as he flounced out of view.

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Over the next two weeks Daryl was completely torn between charging into the tattoo parlour and demanding that she hear him out, going on a huge bender and raiding Merle’s stash to make it all go away temporarily or waiting it out patiently and painfully. On one occasion, he had got so drunk on cheap whiskey that Merle had to lock him inside the house to stop him from getting into his truck and wrapping it around a tree. He had cussed and yelled and the two of them had fought until Daryl took a hit to the jaw, leaving him with a swollen face and a bad attitude the next morning.

Meanwhile, Selene had shoved it all away and locked it in a box at the back of her mind. She went about her days as if Daryl never even existed which both confused and worried her friends and colleagues. Particularly Ray, who got shot down in no uncertain terms every time he dared to utter the name of the younger Dixon brother.

Her routine didn’t waiver in the slightest and she still visited the coffee shop every morning for her oversized cup of caffeine filled goodness. It was here that Daryl finally managed to track her down. As she turned away from the counter, she was met with a leather clad torso and heavy, biker boots.
Daryl looked down at her and waited for her to raise her gaze and meet his eye. When she didn’t, he grew irritated and told himself that she was going to talk to him, no matter what. She side stepped, clutching her coffee in front of her but he blocked her path.

“Just talk to me.” He whispered

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Bullshit. You got a bunch of stuff ya wanna say. You’re just too fuckin’ stubborn to say it.” He expressed, his voice raising slightly.

“Get out of my way.” Was all she rewarded his efforts with.

Managing to swerve around him, she almost ran into a man on his way to the queue but stopped short of colliding with his big frame. She muttered an insincere apology and headed for the door, praying that Daryl wasn’t following her.

But he was, he was right behind her, boots thumping on the wooden flooring, stalking after her with a steely determination. When she stepped outside onto the street, she would have partially felt like she could breathe again if it wasn’t for the shadow following behind in her peripheral vision.

“You fought for me.” He pointed out. “So this is me, fighting for you.”

She stopped and lowered her head, bringing a hand up to her face although Daryl couldn’t see quite what she was doing due to her hair blowing back over her shoulders.

“But I’ll be damned if I stand here n’ beg you, Selene.” He mentioned.

“Just leave me alone. Please.” She croaked, still refusing to turn and allow him to see her face.

“I didn’t do what ya think I did.” He tried.

“Go stick your tongue down some other whores throat.” She snapped

“It wasn’t-”

“And don’t forget to put your hands on her hips, that’s important!” She snapped before charging off across the street.

“How can you just throw this away?!?” He called after her. Finally, she looked over her shoulder, her eyes black with dampened mascara from her tears and Daryl’s heart all but shattered in his chest.

“You’re the one that threw it away.”

*****

The Velvet Rabbit was loud and boisterous on a Saturday night, especially when the bars in town closed and people headed out to the one place that was still open and serving alcohol, despite the strippers and prostitutes scouting for business.

Selene descended the stairs from her father’s office and squinted in the strobe lighting, lifting a hand to shield her eyes and give her a clearer view of the steps in front of her. She regretted wearing the boots she had selected for this trip, the thin stiletto heels did not combine well with the shiny floor.
When she was one step from the bottom, a hand appeared in front of her, red talons reaching out for her hand. She looked up to see Delilah stood before her dressed in nothing but a tight, black blazer and tailored short shorts that left hardly anything to the imagination. Selene took her hand and stepped away from the staircase, allowing herself to be guided into a nearby booth. Once they were in the privacy of the high-walled, red velvet seats, Delilah let go of her hand and motioned for her to sit. The music seemed quieter inside the confines of the private and exclusive area and Selene found herself able to think clearer once she had sat down.

“What did you tell your daddy?” She asked, cutting straight to the chase.

“Hi Delilah, how are you? Good? Oh, great, I’m good too, thanks for asking.” Selene quipped sarcastically with a smirk. But the older woman was in no mood for jokes which was evident to Selene when she leaned forwards and narrowed her eyes at her.

“What did you tell him?” She repeated.

“I’m not my father.” She stated plainly.

Delilah tilted her head back, looking down her nose at Bill’s stubborn daughter.

“You didn’t tell him the truth?”

“I told him we grew apart and that it was no one’s fault. He hurt me. But I don’t want him killed. Satisfied?” Selene said.

Delilah, who had been fretting behind the scenes about Bill discovering what had happened had scratched around for every piece of information she could gather but was met with nothing when she realised that the only people that knew the truth aside from her were Amy, Daryl, Selene and Merle and by some miracle, everyone had managed to keep their mouths shut.

She shifted closer to Selene on the plush seat and took her hand under the table.

“Listen to me and listen good. I’m not gonna sit here n’ try and convince ya that you’re wrong or blind or stupid. It’s your life and your decision. But I’ve worked with Amy long enough to know that she is a manipulator. She would sell her own mother to get what she wants. Just keep that in mind, sweetheart.”

Selene felt more pressure in her hand as Delilah squeezed it even harder, as if she was willing her to choose the right option without actually having to say it.

“Maybe she is. But I saw them. He had his hands on her. In an alley. It’s a risk I can’t take. I can’t be with somebody who can betray me like that. I won’t be treated like an idiot.” She said simply, tugging her hand free and shuffling along the seat before standing up.


Holding her gaze for a few seconds, Selene licked her lips and nodded.

“Alright. Where is she?”

Delilah had made sure that Selene stayed put in the booth while she went away to seek Amy out. As she waited, the image of Daryl kissing her flashed through her mind and her skin prickled with anger. She had done a good job so far of pushing it away, refusing to acknowledge it and proving
her desire to move on with her life instead of dwelling on the what if’s. But Delilah had peaked her curiosity and as a result, stirred her innermost demons. The longer she sat there, the more she fantasized about tearing Amy to shreds. Violent and disturbing thoughts passed through her mind which would normally be ignored, but this was Amy.

She scanned the table, plucking the bottle of Grey Goose vodka from the ice bucket in the middle and quickly ridding it of it’s cap. She brought the bottle to her lips and took a large gulp, instantly remembering why she didn’t drink neat vodka. It was disgusting. She slammed the bottle onto the table and asked herself what the hell she was doing, agreeing to speak to the woman who had kissed the love of her life. She wanted to rip her limbs off and batter her with them, coat the club in blood and booze and scream at the top of her lungs like some kind of savage.

She got up, stepped out of the booth and made her way to the door. Her version of what seemed logical at the time hitting her like a freight train. She didn’t want to see Amy at all. Because if she did, she would be at the mercy of her own rage which could only mean one possible outcome; She would be her father after all.

*****

Three months can seem a long time when something weighs heavy on a soul. Constantly, it tries to eat away at every remotely happy moment and prods away in the back of one’s mind, poisoning any chances of truly moving on. Marring progress and achievements. Two steps forwards, ten steps back.

For Selene, 3 months had not only meant the front of her hair being dyed blonde and the removal of her snakebites in place of a single, centre labret piercing. It also meant another award for Ray’s tattooing skills from a convention, its prestigious status meaning a rise in profits and talks of expansion in the business. Her life had settled somewhat, but her soul hadn’t and she still clawed around for anything that filled the gaping void of loneliness that Daryl had left behind. But she never spoke of it. Never uttered a single word about her unhappiness and chose to keep it stored away until the middle of the night, when it would suck another part of her away with every thought of him.

For almost an hour, she had sat on the bathroom floor staring in horror at the black sweater she had found in the laundry. Upon the realisation that it belonged to Daryl, she threw it across the bathroom like it was a ball of fire and sank down onto the cold floor, trying to decide what to do with it. Eventually moving mainly because her backside had gone numb, she scooped up the sweater, left the bathroom, plucked her truck keys from the hook by the door and left her apartment.

Pulling up outside the Dixon house in the woods, she surveyed the surroundings for a moment, noting that Daryl’s truck was missing. She climbed out of the cab and slammed the door, balling the offending garment up in her hands as she walked to the front porch. Her heart hammered in her chest, it hadn’t been her intention to see Daryl during this task and she wanted to avoid it all costs. She glanced around, looking for an idea of what to do with this over a sweater when the door swung open and startled her.

Merle stood before her in his underwear and stained white vest, chewing wildly. He said nothing as they stood and glared at one another. Eventually, her brain kicked into gear and she held out the sweater to Merle.

“Please give this to your brother.” She requested “I found it in my apartment.”

Merle slowly reached out and took the sweater from her, his expression stony.
“Thank you.” Selene squeaked politely as she turned on her heels and went to depart.

“Hey, Morticia” Merle sneered. She froze to the spot and blinked at the gravelled ground in the flickering porch light. She waited out of curiosity more than anything, wondering what Merle Dixon could possibly have to say to her. But once again, he surprised her.

“He loves ya, my little brother.”

She pressed her eyes closed and took a deep breath.

*Don’t you dare cry in front of Merle Dixon.*

Forcing her emotions away, she turned to him and raised her hands, palms up, either side of her body in a noncommittal shrug.

“It’s a pity his actions said otherwise.” She replied, backing away and eventually turning to go back to her truck.

****

Ritchie had managed to convince Selene to let him take her to the lake on her day off, an activity that had been thought a great idea by the others if it meant she got out and away from them for a while. They had found her lack of willingness to talk about Daryl and her overacting as though everything was fine to be unsettling and awkward. Even Ray had tried and failed to get through to her, telling her that if she didn’t let her emotions out, they would eventually destroy her. She had simply shaken her head at him while grinning manically and declaring she was absolutely fine.

The lake was beautiful in the summer, the water warmed by the strong Georgian sunrays. Small, choppy waves glistened like pearl drops on the surface as she lay on an inflatable ring with her sunglasses on and Ritchie bobbing along next to her, trying his very best not to leer at the utter perfection that to him, was Selene in a black swimsuit. His dreads were tied up into a heavy, round mass on his head, held together by a band of black fabric.

Selene pulled her sunglasses down to her nose and levelled her eyes with him when she saw him flip over and peer down into the water.

“What is it?” she enquired.

“Fish” He replied “Think they’re trout. If you sit still out here long enough and you’ll see them. Dangle your legs in the water and some of the smaller fish even suck on your toes.”

“You and feet. Jesus.” She quipped.

Ritchie rolled his eyes. “I don’t really have a thing for feet, you know that, right? The guys just make shit up about me and I play along.”

“Good, because feet are ugly” Selene complained, wrinkling her nose and lifting her legs from the water and pointing her toes into the air. Ritchie laughed quietly and paddled closer to her, grabbing one of her big toes and tugging on it.

“Let’s dunk this in the water and see what fish are hungry” He declared, much to Selene’s disapproval. She shrieked and pulled her foot away, soon breaking into a fit of giggles as the ring rotated and she also flipped herself over and copied his positioning. She reached out with her hands, catching his fingertips and pulling herself closer to him.
His heart leapt when she found his other hand and laced their fingers together. Not knowing quite what was happening, he simply remained immobile, allowing the soft bounce of the waves and the grip of her hands to do all the work. His elbows bent as he floated closer still, braving eye contact with her and finding her more than willing to keep it. Closer still, until their faces were inches apart and everything around Ritchie seemed to vanish and there was just him and her, suspended in a moment that was not unlike one of the frequent day dreams he had about her.

She let go with one hand, moving it to his bicep to steady him and sliding her body forwards, kissing his cheek tenderly before moving back and smiling at him.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” She whispered.

They lay there next to one another for what seemed like five minutes to Ritchie, but it was really upwards of two hours. Every moment spent with her seemed to pass by in a flash before he had even had time to take it in. Being able to spend a whole day alone with her like this was almost unheard of since she’d met Daryl. He missed the days when they would sit around in her apartment or his bedroom and play video games for hours. Or, when they’d go for ice cream in the middle of a rainstorm and complain about how cold it was. He understood why she’d distanced herself from him, but he didn’t like it.

When evening arrived, Ritchie built a fire by the shore and helped Selene cook a fish that he’d helped her to catch with some fishing equipment borrowed from his late father’s belongings in the garage. They had laughed all day and when it came to sitting down and eating, silence fell around them as they sat on opposite sides of the fire. Selene was wrapped in a heavy blanket and Ritchie let his dreads down and put on a hooded sweater. She glanced up at him intermittently, either finding him looking right back at her or biting his nails and nervously surveying the lake.

“Anybody ever tell you that you have amazing eyes?” She blurted out.

They were amazing. Large, icy blue irises that always drew her focus. She liked seeing them the way they should be instead of ruined by drugs. The blue hue of them was unlike anything she’d seen in anyone else, even Daryl, who’s eyes were just as striking but somewhat darker in colour.

“No.” He smiled shyly. “Thank you.”

He fidgeted and discarded the foil on which her ate from before picking up a stick he’d noticed on the ground. Needed to occupy his hands with something, he began stripping the bark from it.

“I think…” He started before changing his mind and shaking his head. “s’nothing.”

“No, c’mon. You think what?” She urged.

“I think you’re…you’re beautiful.” He stammered. Selene’s eyebrows raised slowly and her mouth dropped open as she processed the words. She was more than aware of how much it would have taken for him to say it and also of how he genuinely meant it. A long silence ensued while she studied his anxiety from across the fire, gradually witnessing him grow frustrated with himself.

“Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that.” He backtracked.

Selene thought for a moment about how to handle the situation and decided to just go with what felt right.

“You really meant that, didn’t you?” She asked.
He catches her eye uneasily and stills. She could see him swallow hard and felt a pang of sympathy.

“Of course I do.” He uttered, dropping his vision into his lap.

“You’re sweet, Rich.” She whispered, offering him a smile, but he refused to look up and see it.
I'm back! Apologies for the slow update. Life is tough at the moment but writing is keeping me sane. I hope my regular readers of this story are still with me, even though the next couple of chapters may not be all that agreeable (I'm sorry!) Hang in there ;)

In the four months since the incident at the side of Marty’s, Daryl’s life had changed and a silver lining had become evident out of all the heartache. He had a new job in the next town over, courtesy of Bill and his ignorance of the entire situation. Daryl was certain that Bill's lack of knowledge in the truth was Selene's doing. She couldn't have told him what she thought she saw or he would most certainly already be dead and buried under some concrete next to Merle, who was very much still alive. The pay increase with his new job had been beneficial enough for him to afford his own apartment and move out of the rickety, dirty shack he shared with his brother in the woods.

But ultimately, it all meant nothing. Something was missing from his new life and that something was a strong feature from his past. A vibrant and beautiful element of his life that had vanished as quickly as it had appeared on a hot, summers day at school. Selene’s absence had left him with a sadness in his soul that couldn’t be soothed with alcohol or drugs. A sadness that grew heavier with each reminder of what once was.

On the balcony of his new apartment, Daryl smoked a cigarette and reclined in his seat while he enjoyed the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. He had just finished work and had plucked a bottle of beer from the fridge as soon as he’d arrived home. Settling on the metal chair, he twisted the cap from the bottle and took a long gulp, considering for a moment how he’d been looking forward to this much needed taste of beer for the entire day. When his cell phone buzzed in his pocket, he removed the brand-new smart phone and tapped his passcode onto the screen. A text from a colleague inviting him to a Barbeque on the weekend was displayed and he politely declined, social situations now proving to be even more strenuous than they ever were before.

The thing about the internet is that one can often stumble across things that were never searched for in the first place. Coincidences are everywhere and while there is always an element of paranoia, a hint that someone, somewhere might be listening in, mind reading internet browsers are another prospect altogether.

Daryl’s eyes fixed on the headline of the news article halfway down the search engines results. A simple search for locals selling motorcycle parts had turned up more than he’d bargained for. His shoulders tensed and he fought with every ounce of self-restraint not to click on the link. But his curiosity got the better of him and triumphed over his need to keep his emotions in check. His thumb hovered over the words.

Award winning tattoo artist secures yet another prestigious accolade.

He clicked the link, immediately faced with an image of Ray and Selene stood side by side and both holding a sizeable, diamond shaped, glass trophy with Ray’s name engraved across the middle. Selene’s smile was wide, brilliant white and she looked prouder than he had ever seen her. His stomach knotted and he pinched the screen, zooming in on the face that he had missed so much
for over four months. He sighed and took a drag on his cigarette following another gulp of his drink. His eyes skimmed the article.

‘A tattoo artist from popular studio The Ink Cabinet has secured a sought after and notoriously difficult win at what has come to be known as the biggest tattoo convention in the world…Two day event saw some of the best artists from across the globe compete for the title…Raymond Davies, who is the Assistant Manager of The Ink Cabinet, already has an impressive collection of awards for his talents…Owner and Manager, Selene Taylor expressed her pride at the achievement…bookings at the studio have spiked…”

Against his better judgement, he screenshot the image. The thought of being able to see her face from time to time somewhat comforting, although he knew in his heart it was not the best choice he’d made in recent months. He opened up the image, cropping it and leaving it open on the screen while he finished his beer and smoke, his heart growing heavy with the weight of how much he missed her.

*****

Merle scraped his heels along the gravel as he ambled back and forth in front of the entrance to the rabbit. In his hand he held a roll-up cigarette, given to him by Delilah, who was perched on the wall nearby, watching the sunset and clicking her bright red heel against the brickwork over and over, creating a nervous tick in Merle that soon had him gritting his teeth and glaring at her.

“Will ya quit that, woman?! Gonna lose my damn marbles over here.” He complained

“Ya lost ‘em a long time ago, honey. And I aint talkin’ about those teeny, tiny orbs in ya pants either.” Delilah said casually, flicking ash from her cigarette and catching his eye. He shook his head at her, seeing her smirk with satisfaction. It wasn’t hard to outwit Merle Dixon, but she still never tired of it.

“How’s Daryl?” She asked out of genuine interest. The last time Daryl attended the rabbit was more than three months ago and Delilah had been informed by Bill that he had been moved out of town at Selene’s request. She kept quiet, not wanting to add fuel to the fire but remained relieved that Daryl was not to come to any harm.

“Beats me,” Merle shrugged. “Only seen him a couple times since he left. Got himself a new life now.”

“It’s a tragedy.” She sighed.

“You damn right. Should see the living room now cinders aint around.”

“I mean Selene and Daryl, knucklehead. They were good together. She was good for him, kept him outta trouble. He gave her a reason to stand up to Bill. I’m sad they broke up.” She explained.

Merle pursed his lips and rocked back and forth on his heels after flicking his smoke out into the parking lot. He pondered Delilah’s take on his brother’s relationship, remembering back to the night he had played poker with Selene and decided that she wasn’t the she-devil he had her pegged as and contrary to his earlier beliefs, her presence in Daryl’s life was both more than his little brother had bargained for and a good thing all at once. But he still hated to have to admit his agreement with Delilah’s sentiment.

“Somethin’ not right about all this. Stinks to high heaven if ya ask me.” He expressed instead.

“Thought that from the start.” She agreed. “You think Daryl did the dirty on her?”
“I know one thing, there’s a lotta shit I didn’t know about my little brother. Maybe he did. Maybe he’s plain stoopid. I dunno.” He mused, noticing Delilah shooting him a disbelieving and incredulous look from the wall. “Oh c’mon, you think I don’t know that the kids smarter than me?!” He exclaimed “He is! But ya gotta be a dumb as fuck to kick the boss’s daughter aside for a whore.”

Delilah extinguished her smoke by grinding the orange glow into the dirt under a platformed heel. She lifted her clutch bag and checked her reflection in the mirrored clasp, ensuring her glossy lipstick was still firmly in place before lowering the bag and looking back over at the older Dixon.

“I don’t think he cheated, Merle.” She said seriously.

“Fifty bucks.” He challenged.

“What?”

“Fifty bucks he did.”

Her face twisted into a shocked expression and her eyebrows knitted together. She didn’t know why she was still shocked by Merle’s often heartless stance on things, it was something that hadn’t changed much over the years, cracks in it’s exterior only being produced by his fierce loyalty to his younger brother but who was also not exempt from his selfish ways.

“Ya a fuckin asshole y’know that? How in the hell are you gonna find out the truth anyways?” She wondered.

A car door slammed across the lot and Amy stepped into view, her long legs striding towards them and her heels crunching in the gravel. She flicked her wavy, auburn hair over her shoulder and deposited her keys into her bag, clicking it shut. She smiled at Merle, who held a hand up in a playful and mocking wave.

“Fairy dust n’ a little patience, sugar tits.” He grinned.

****

Daryl couldn’t say that Lady Luck’s bar was better than Marty’s. It wasn’t. The wooden floor was damaged and sticky, the bar was dirty, the air was thick with the smell of body odour and stale beer and even the neon sign outside was partially damaged. But it was two blocks from his work and four blocks from his home which made for manageable staggering distance after a rough day.

He spoke to no one except the bartender, who simply served him drinks and muttered the odd thanks here and there with a nod of acknowledgement when Daryl emerged in the doorway seeking solitude and people watching in the same night. He sat at the same spot at the bar which enabled him to observe the rest of the patrons from a safe distance without having to converse with any of them. He often found people to be fascinating when in the throes of a drunken stupor. Fascinating and irritating more often than not. He drank beer most of the time, switching up to whiskey when the need to dull his senses a little more struck him. Mostly, whiskey reminded him of Selene, so he tried to keep its consumption to a minimum.

It had been five months and during the past four weeks the photo of Selene on his phone was opened up every night before he endured another night of fighting his thoughts and trying to sleep. It didn’t seem right to him not to see her before he eventually drifted off, she was his solace, his sanctuary.

He traced a pattern into the side of his glass as he glowered at two drunk women across the bar,
both staggering about and holding onto the jukebox for dear life as they argued about what song to
put on and who’s coins had been deposited into the machine. His vigil was disturbed by a figure
standing beside him. His eyes shifted to find a tall, classy woman with fiery red hair looking right
back at him. The first thought that entered his mind was that she looked like a vastly more
beautiful version of Amy.

“Hi” She smiled.

Daryl’s body stilled and he stared at her for a few seconds too long before reality set in and he
blinked.

*Is…is she talkin’ to me?!*

“How ya doin?” She enquired with a twinkle in her bright green eyes.

He stole a glance around the room, the bartender was watching him, but no one else was. Despite
his small audience, he felt his heart begin to quicken and his palms grow hot.

*Why is she talkin’ to me?*

“Good, you?” He replied quickly, stifling a burp that had been threatening to force its way out
since she’d appeared out of nowhere like some kind of ghost.

“Great now I’ve found somebody to talk to. I’ve seen you in here a few times, thought I’d
introduce myself. I’m Cassidy.” She beamed, offering him her hand. He took it, albeit reluctantly
and all the while praying that his increasingly sweaty skin wasn’t going to feel like a wet fish in her
grasp.

*Seen me a few times? I’ve never seen her.*

“Daryl” He stated plainly as he shook her dainty and soft hand.

“So, you’re one of those quiet, brooding after work drinkers, huh?” She stated; her rosy red lips
curled into a smile.

He didn’t consider himself to fit the description at first, but upon contemplation of his usual after
work routine, he concluded that she’d hit the nail on the head.

“Guess so.” He shrugged.

Cassidy was intermittently flickering her eyes down to the empty seat next to him, silently urging
him to invite her to sit down like most men placed in such a situation would. But Daryl wasn’t most
men. In fact, he was totally oblivious.

“What do you do?” She questioned.

“Motorcycle mechanic at AJ’s.” He said, nudging his head up in the direction of the new Auto
repairs business he worked at.

“Nice. Thought I’d seen those arms somewhere else. I run the bistro across the street.” She grinned, leaning on the chair’s backrest with a subtlety that still wasn’t catching Daryl’s attention. What had stirred his interest, was the mention of food.

“The place that makes those huge sandwiches?” He asked.

“That’s us.”

“Those are some good sandwiches.” He remarked, seeing her giggle with a confidence that seemed to brighten the dull room.

“Thank you, be sure to leave us a good review on Trip Advisor” She laughed. Knowing her efforts at being invited to sit down were passing him by, she looked down into her empty glass, making it obvious that she was hinting to him to buy her a drink. Finally, it hit him like a bolt from the blue.

_Holy shit. I think she’s flirting with me._

Now, he had a decision to make. Far from wanting to banish her from his personal space and go back to brooding over his fourth beer in the corner, he thought about how events could transpire from this point. He could sit with her and have a drink and a conversation, he could walk her home, he could end up spending the night with her. All of which were tempting prospects that he wasn’t sure if he was ready for. Eventually deciding that some decent company would simply be a good start, he resigned himself to going with the flow and swung his vision around to the bartender.

“Hey, Bobby? I’ll have another and whatever she’s havin’.” He called out. Bobby sprang into action in the way that only Bobby could, with the speed of a snail and the dexterity of a 90-year-old. Daryl motioned to the seat next to him. “Wanna sit?”

It wasn’t the most chivalrous or polite of invitations but Cassidy accepted nonetheless.

“Thank you.” She whispered as she sat down on the barstool next to him, crossing her long legs and catching his eye. A hint of a smile swept across his features and for the first time in months, he found himself sat with a stunning woman that for some reason unknown to him, found him attractive.

****

Selene never was the most talented at DIY out of the workforce at The Ink Cabinet. As she reached up and hammered the nail into the wall with a force akin to a wrecking ball demolishing a building, the noise thundered through the walls, disturbing staff and clients alike on the ground floor. She jumped when the hammer landed so close to her thumb, she could feel the cold metal ghost past her skin. Despite her heavy-handed effort, the nail was most definitely stuck fast into the wall and ready for her to hang the piece of original artwork given to her by Brad on the wall of the piercing studio.

Ritchie passed her the heavy frame and she hooked the wire on the back of the gift over the nail and let her hand drop. Tilting her head, she smiled at the skull and raven sketch that her brother had given to her. There was no particular reason, just that she’d expressed her interest in it after seeing a photograph of it tattooed on one of Brads clients in his portfolio. Only taking him two nights to draw it up, he’d framed it and handed it over the desk that morning without a word. Selene thanked him with a tight hug and proceeded to bounce upstairs to find a hammer and a nail so she could give it pride of place on the blank wall in the piercing studio.
Ritchie reached around her, adjusting the frame slightly to centre it at the same time that Selene turned around to find him standing inches away from her face. It wasn’t intentional on his part, but the desire to move backwards, away from her was non-existent. His eyes searched her face for any signs of awkward discomfort, but he found nothing, only her perfectly applied winged eyeliner and intense stare. Her eyes soon moved down to his lips and back up to his icy blue Iris’s. He held his breath. Trying to remove his hand from the wall beside her, his fingers trailed over her hip and the sensation meant his restricted breath was released in a jagged huff. He didn’t understand why she was still there, why she hadn’t flinched or casually moved off. He almost jumped when she gently tickled the back of his hand at his side.

“Are you going to kiss me, Ritchie?” She whispered.

His chest was heaving with short shallow breaths that he’d managed to finally allow to pass through his lungs. She was doing something to him and both of them knew it.

“I-I don’t know.” He uttered.

The silence between them soon became heavy and telling, with neither of them willing to step back away from the situation. It was only shattered by the clearing of a throat across the room. Selene eyes shifted to find Ray stood at the top of the stairs, regarding them both with a most unimpressed look coupled with a hand placed on his hip. Ritchie lowered his head, sighed to himself and quickly moved back while Selene snatched the hammer from the side and headed off in the direction of the stairs to her apartment.

Ray didn’t hold back, glaring angrily at Ritchie with a fierce intensity as he passed, following Selene up the stairs and pushing through the door behind her.

“When’s my turn? Huh?” He demanded, slamming the door behind him.

“What are you talking about?” Selene replied nonchalantly. She was aware that any attempt to play down what Ray had witnessed would prove to be fruitless, but she figured trying couldn’t hurt.

“You workin’ your way through us now?” He shot at her.

She wandered to the table, gently setting the hammer down and pushing away the urge to hit herself over the head with it as a punishment for being so careless and failing to check her surroundings before toying with the idea of getting close to Ritchie. Ray was relentless, following her close behind as she began pottering about the kitchen and making coffee.

“No. Jesus. Shut up.” She complained.

Ray grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around and forcing her to look at him. She avoided his eyes, focusing over his shoulder on the bookshelf across the room instead. There sat the Blue Morpho, gifted to her by the very man she had almost crossed a line with minutes before.

“Then what the hell was that?! You know that is Ritchie, right? Your friend.” He reminded her.

“I know. I’m not blind.” She muttered, crossing her arms defensively over her chest. Ray sidestepped and left her no choice but to make eye contact with him which sent anxiety flooding through her body. With her arms still crossed, she fiddled nervously with the seams of her tank top in either side.

“You sleepin’ with him, Selene? Don’t lie to me.” He wanted to know.

She shook her head without a second thought, her face now confused and shocked.
“No! No, I’m not. We’re close but no, there’s nothing going on.”

“That ain’t what I just saw.” He countered, narrowing his gaze at her.

“Look, I don’t know what you just saw, OK?! I don’t know what just happened.”

A shift backwards meant she was able to skirt around him, opening the refrigerator and retrieving the milk. Hoping she’d heard the last of the conversation, she willed Ray to just leave but to her dismay, he continued ins

“You gotta be careful. If you start swinging off them dreadlocks it’s gonna make things awkward for everybody. Especially you. You’re his boss too, remember.”

It wasn’t lost on Selene. She was more than aware that she was not only his boss, but his best friend and the object of his affections. The facts were there, staring her in the face but somehow becoming completely irrelevant when she was stood before him, feeling the warmth of his breath on her skin and lost in the bright blue depths of his eyes.

“I don’t need a lecture, Ray.” She spat, slamming the refrigerator door and throwing the carton of milk into the countertop.

Ray, who could read Selene like a book, changed tact and lowered his voice, now trying to sound less preachy and angry and more concerned.

“You know how he feels about you.” He reminded her

“Yeah, I do. No thanks to you.” She huffed, bordering on a sarcastic laugh.

“I didn’t need to tell you. It’s plain as day. Don’t act like any of this is my fault. You’re the one that’s about to mess his head up again.” He argued.

“I’m not.” She protested with a frustrated sigh. But she didn’t believe a word of it. It was true, Ray was right and she couldn’t deny it.

“Do you like him? Like that?” Ray continued to probe. She turned her back to him, momentarily nibbling on the nail of one of them thumbs. She closed her eyes and sighed, her hands then placed flat on the countertop for stability, as if Ray’s line of questioning was draining her of all her energy.

“I find him very attractive.” She mumbled.

“Lawd. Yeah, ’cause that’s enough” Ray muttered sarcastically, rolling his eyes and flinging his hands up in the air briefly. He turned and began wandering around the kitchen, from left to right in front of the dining table.

“Ray just… just leave it alone. Please.” She begged with her back still turned to him

“Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn ya.” He announced before flouncing out of the apartment and slamming the door with the same force as before, leaving Selene alone with a head full of too many thoughts and a conscience that was already stinging.

*****

Her heels clicked along the sidewalk at a deliberately leisurely pace. She didn’t want to hurry, having enjoyed her short encounter with the surly and mysterious man from the bar who had bought her a drink and given her short answers to all of her questions. He had more than piqued her
curiosity. Far be it for Cassidy to pass up an opportunity, she had agreed straight away to his offer to escort her home, assuming him to be the type of man that may not be outwardly very interested, but cared enough about other people to make sure that she got home safely. She chatted to him enthusiastically and dutifully listened to his stunted replies, having realised early on that he wasn’t the world’s greatest conversationalist.

Reaching the main door to her apartment building, she tugged her keys from her shiny, black purse and turned to him under the glow of the street lamp. The street was empty due to the late hour and the ground was littered with puddles from an earlier downpour that had also left the air crisp and fresh. Goosebumps formed on her skin but she couldn’t tell if it was from the icy breeze or the effect that his shy but smouldering stare had on her.

“This is me. So, do you want to come in for coffee?” She asked confidently.

Instantly, he dipped his head and scuffed awkwardly along the ground with his boot while he scratched at the back of his neck with one hand. A nervous ritual performed while he wracked his brain, trying to figure out how he should respond.

“Oh.” He grunted.

Cassidy grinned at him, finding his uneasy demeanour more endearing than she’d expected and concluding that she would need to lay her cards on the table in order to make any progress at all.

“You know I’m not really offering you coffee, right? I’m offering you a little more than that.” She admitted.

He raised his vision but kept his head low. A crooked smile crept across his face and he huffed in amusement, quickly rubbing at his chin. He was stunned that such a woman would offer to sleep with him and in such a blase manner. He had enjoyed her company and enjoyed the view even more but throughout the duration of his encounter with her, all he could think about was how she wasn’t Selene. His Selene, who had set the bar, set a standard that he knew no one else would ever reach.

“Yeah, I got that.” He nodded.

“Look, I’m not usually ‘that woman’ that picks up guys in bars and has sex with them. But I saw you a couple days ago and admittedly I’ve seen you across the street while I’ve been at work. You’re very attractive and now I’ve spoken to you, I like you. You seem like a good guy and I’m not getting any younger. So, I guess I can be ‘that woman’ tonight, with you.” She explained without a single hint of doubt.

Daryl was still smiling shyly at her when she stepped towards him, lifting his chin with her finger and bringing her face close to his. She looked into his eyes, filling him with fascinated temptation. For a fleeting few seconds, he indulged in the idea of what it would be like to just say yes and spend the night with her. Physically, it would scratch an itch but it was an itch he was able to live with. Emotionally, he had resigned himself to being completely unavailable, his heart and soul still very much with the one woman who was able to really see him. He knew that no one else would ever compare.

He hadn’t intended to move back so quickly; it was more of an involuntary and exaggerated move that had resulted in him cursing himself internally for potentially offending her.

“I’m not your type, huh?” she beamed, still smiling and not appearing offended in the slightest.
He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and cleared his throat, lifting his head and glancing around them. His cheeks and ears began to grow hot from the awkward discomfort of the situation.

“Aint that. You’re um…ya stunnin’. I just can’t.”

“Oh” She nodded knowingly “Of course. There’s a girl. I should have checked. Guess I’m not so good at this. Girlfriend? Or wife and you just don’t wear a ring?”

*Please, don’t make me explain.* Daryl thought. Since Selene had made it crystal clear that she didn’t want to see him anymore, he hadn’t breathed a word of what he’d lost to single soul in his new town. He avoided any conversation at work about wives or girlfriends and had no intentions of disclosing any of the details of his pain to anyone. This was his story, no one else’s.

“Girlfriend.” He mumbled. “S’complicated.”

“Right” She chirped with an air of acceptance “Well, I hope it gets uncomplicated for you.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

“If you change your mind, you know where I am.” She suggested, gesturing to the large front door, framed by two marble pillars behind her.

“OK, Yeah. Night” he muttered.

“Goodnight, Daryl.”

He held up a hand and offered a small wave as he began to step backwards, watching her open the door.

“Cassidy?” he suddenly called out, surprising himself.

She stopped and peered at him over her shoulder with the same pretty smile that hadn’t left her lips.

“I’m um, I’m flattered. Really.” He confessed.

Her response was a classy and polite nod before she vanished into the apartment block.

*****

Selene threw a piece of popcorn into her mouth and crunched loudly, the crackling under her teeth meant she couldn’t hear the dialogue in the movie playing on the TV but it didn’t mean she was missing much. She’d spend the last half an hour lying next to Ritchie on his bed and intermittently swinging an arm out to her side and offering him popcorn rather than taking any notice of what was materialising on the screen. Her discarded boots lay forgotten about by the door, her biker jacket carelessly tossed onto a chair in the corner and her Ink Cabinet T-shirt had ridden up her torso, exposing just enough skin to leaving Ritchie feeling like he should focus on something else.

He scrolled through his cell phone while occasionally accepting popcorn from Selene. It had been a spontaneous after work activity that wasn’t altogether unusual for the two of them. While it was common knowledge that Selene spent a large chunk of her free time with Ray, Ritchie was close second with frequent video game and movie nights that translated into sitting in the same room, eating trashy food and simply enjoying being in the same vicinity as one another. There was generally no need to talk much unless Selene felt the need to accuse Ritchie of cheating on a game as was frequently the case due to him knowing cheat codes and refusing to share them with her.
She shifted beside him, moving closer and resting her head on his stomach. It wasn’t unheard of and until now, Ritchie had simply allowed himself to enjoy the closeness to her without having to make it a big deal. In the workplace, she was as professional as she could be while still maintaining a close friendship with everyone, but outside she was playful, tactile and affectionate in her own way.

He looked down at her munching away on a mouthful of popcorn, her head comfortably positioned on top of his T-shirt. He hoped she wouldn’t move any further down or give his body a reason to react in a way that meant his dark grey sweatpants would leave nothing to the imagination.

His attention steered back to his cell briefly until she suddenly grabbed the remote and switched the TV off, rising from her spot and locking eyes with him.

“What’s up?” He asked, placing his phone on the bed beside him.

“I’m going to ask you a personal and difficult question. I’m sorry in advance but it just needs to happen. It needs to be addressed.” She said firmly as she fidgeted into a more comfortable position that enabled her to see him properly.

“Um, OK.” He shrugged. Deep down, he knew what she was about to ask and his heart began to thud in his chest so loud he thought she might be able to hear it. His exterior displayed a calm and easy demeanour, but inside he was turning himself inside out with worry.

“Do you have feelings for me, Ritchie?”

There it was. It was finally being acknowledged after four years of torturous secrecy. Enduring having to see her attention focused on guys that weren’t him. Four years of being friendzoned and wanting nothing more than to be able to tell her how he felt but knowing it would ruin everything.

Selene waited in silence for Ritchie to draw in a slow, deep breath and collect his thoughts. When he did finally speak, his voice was little more than a croaked whisper.

“I don’t have feelings for you.”

She wrinkled her brow at him, knowing the truth herself but wondering why he flat refused to admit it, even just between the two of them in the privacy of his own home.

“So, what happened yesterday, Rich? What was that? Something happened-”

“I’m in love with you.” He interrupted. “I’m sorry, Selene. I’m so sorry. I have been for four years. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

As soon as the words tumbled from his lips, he scrambled back on the bed, leaning his back on the headrest and covering his face with both of his hands. Although Selene already knew, it didn’t make it any less profound hearing it said aloud. She gawped at him, unable to tear her eyes away as he rubbed at his face and seemed to fight to drag in a breath deep enough.

“I know that you don’t feel the same. It’s OK.” He eventually sighed.

“Why did you never tell me?” She wanted to know, slightly surprised when a sarcastic laugh emerged from him and he raised an eyebrow at her seemingly ridiculous question.

“What would have been the point?” He said “You are like, so out of my league. I would have been stupid to even think you’d be interested in me like that. So, If I couldn’t have you the way I wanted you, then I’d rather still be your friend than not have you in my life at all.”
Selene also crawled further up the bed, sitting next to him and holding out a hand to her side, palm to the ceiling. She willed him to take hold of it as a show of her support. A gesture that would mean it was OK and nothing would change. After a pause, he laced his fingers between hers and squeezed her hand.


“You didn’t need to do anything.” He told her. A flush of uncontrollable bashfulness swept through him as he thought about what he wanted her to know. Now was the best time to tell her and if he screwed this up, he would die having never told her everything he wanted to say. “I remember when I first saw you. That day changed my life. You’re everything I ever wanted in a girl. You’re smart, brave, you make me laugh. You have this vitality in you and there’s nothing better than watching you laugh when you’re genuinely happy.”

Selene blushed and turned her head away to hide her flushed cheeks.

“Ritchie-”

“-And…” he continued “… you kick my ass when I need it.”

She laughed softly, turning back to him and gently kissing the back of his hand. “I care about you.”

“I know.” He smiled. “I know its weird to hear, but I love you. I just want you to be happy, wherever that is or whoever it’s with. It’s why I pushed you to be with Daryl. I wouldn’t have done that if I’d known what was going to happen.”

Still clutching his hand, she smiled back at him, rubbing her thumb over his skin.

“You’re a great guy, Ritchie. You’re sensitive and kind and I really think any girl would be lucky to have you… you’re very pretty too.” She confessed.

“Pretty?” He laughed.

“Yeah, you’re a hottie. Your eyes are absolutely amazing and Axel has done well training you, you got some good abs. You’re gorgeous.”

He blushed furiously, feeling his whole face explode with a rush of warmth. He hated the idea of being so coy in front of her, but so many compliments in one sentence had been totally unexpected. “Thank you. Coming from someone as hot as you, that’s means a lot.” He laughed quietly. She let go of his hand and twisted her body to face him.

“You’ve put me on one hell of a pedestal, Rich. I’m not perfect. I’m stubborn and impulsive. I can have tunnel vision about stuff and there’s a lot of other things that you just don’t see.” She reasoned. But Ritchie was having none of it, he knew what he felt and nothing she said was going to change it.

“You’re perfect to me.” He said firmly.

His eyes fixated on hers and within seconds they both found that they couldn’t fight the invisible chains that bound them. Something in Selene shifted and out of nowhere, she grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt and dragged his lips to hers. Ritchie took the opportunity without a second thought, thinking that he could at least die happy after this one kiss. Taken off guard by his effective and sensual technique, slow, deliberate movements and light nibbles, Selene found herself quite taken with the moment and loved how it felt when his hand swept around her waist, pulling her body
closer. So much so, that her hands seemed to take on a life of their own, finding their way to the waistband of his sweatpants as he slid down on the bed with her. He pulled back at the sensation of her gently pushing her fingers between the elastic and his abdomen.

“Woah, wait, wait.” He urged “kissing me is one thing but that… uh… it isn’t… I’m not sure we should be doing this.” Aware he sounded like he was rambling, he tried to get to the point “This isn’t just physical for me. It’s going to change everything, Selene. You have to be sure. If you’re not, you should take your hands away and we don’t have to mention this again.”

Stunned by his bold display of logic and reason in the midst of such a lust charged moment, Selene continued to search his eyes, refusing to give up and keeping her hands exactly where they were.

“Selene?”

She was silent, motionless. Almost like she had become set in stone except for a flicker of her blackened lashes and a hushed sentence that Ritchie thought he would never hear in his life.

“Let me touch you, Rich”

She licked her lips and remained still as she observed his face, his worried expression mixed with longing and confusion all at once. She knew everything would change, but would that really be a bad thing?

His eyes flickered down to where she had stopped short of pushing her hands all the way inside his sweatpants and she could hear from his irregular breaths that he was nervous and unsure. She then looked down, seeing that he was also turned on from the close proximity of her reach.

“Uh…Sorry…” He stammered.

She responded by crossing the line and ceasing to wait for permission. She didn't need it as she began sliding her hands further down and kissing him again. The sensation of her curling her fingers around his hardness caused him to gasp slightly against her lips. He throbbed in her hand and tilted his hips, unable to stop himself and pushing against her palm. She worked him slowly, able to tell he could be eased from the edge quite easily. He eased off her work shirt to reveal her black, lace bra and made quick work of pushing the straps from her shoulders and releasing the clasp. Her inked skin was a delicious contrast and he traced his fingers over the tattoo under her breasts before moving up to knead at them, flickering his thumb over her nipples.

Selene frantically popped the button and zipper on her skinny jeans and shoved them and her panties over her hips. More tattoos were revealed, this time on her lower abdomen. More pictures to explore, Mandalas, the Blue Morpho, symbols and words, the secrets of her soul. Ritchie’s body was crying out for release already, the pressure becoming almost too much every time she rounded his tip with her thumb or fingertips. He shuddered and tore away from her grasp.

“Close.” He panted, deciding that it was time he switched the focus onto her. He journeyed his fingers between her legs, gently rubbing at her clit and sliding one finger inside her. She gasped and writhed and he was so glad that the lamp was on so he can see the glorious sight of her decorated, toned body as he made her moan and beg him for more.

Doubt crept into his mind, knowing nothing will be the same ever again. He was under no illusions that she’d never be truly his, no matter how enthusiastic she was at that very moment. But each delectable touch, each gasp and shudder of pleasure was making it harder and harder to refuse. He forced himself to speak, hoping she would listen.
“We don’t have to do this. You want to carry on?” He said. When the words were said, it was like someone else had said them. He was never short of female interest and had sex many times over, but until then, he’d never said a word during sexual activity.

“Yes.” She whispered, pulling his shirt up. He briefly left her and tugged it over his head, revealing his now solid and defined chest and abdominal muscles. She couldn’t help it, her eyes lit up as she took in every inch of him. He flushed with pride when he noticed her approving raised eyebrow and bottom lip clamped between her teeth.

“Damn” She said clearly.

He smiled shyly at her as she kicked her scrunched up jeans down the bed and slowly climbed on top of him, completely naked and vulnerable. Before she settled over him, she discarded his sweatpants and leaned over him, kissing in a zig zag pattern across his torso while he used his hands to feel every part of her soft skin that he could reach. When she reached his lower abdomen, she paused and looked up, taking him in her hand again and licking slowly from the base to the tip. He had to stop her somehow or it would be over before it had even started.

“Selene” he gasped. He laced his fingers into her hair and gently tilted her head back so she was looking right at him.

“You want this?” He asked.

It wasn’t yet another attempt to check if she was sure, it was something more carnal and wanting that had come out without Ritchie having any control over it. He had wanted this for so long, dreamed of this, imagined what it would be like while alone at night with only his hand for company. When he was with other women. He wished they were her. He wanted her so badly that he knew he wasn’t going to be gentle and delicate. He was going to destroy her, make her scream and beg and shake and give her a night she would never forget. It wasn’t like him, he was shy and reserved, but when he was with her, he was someone else. Someone he actually liked. He was braver and determined to enjoy every second of this unexpected and momentous occasion.

“Yes.” She confirmed with shiny lips.

*****

Hip hop. It was one of Ray’s pleasures in life. A life long love of metal had also led him to seek out other extremes of music, heavy beats, silver teeth and questionable lyrics had lured him into another obsession that he shared with Selene. The speakers in his living room vibrated and hummed through the walls, a noise that meant he had lost count of the amount of noise complaints he’d brushed off as if they were nothing. His extensive tattooing career, award wins and sheer number of clients that filled his appointment slots resulted in Ray being able to own his own place, a small two-bedroom house on the outskirts of town, decorated as flamboyantly as his personality.

The joint poised between his fingers emitted a thick, winding trail of smoke that rose into the air and fanned out into the air above where he lay, reclined on his couch with his cell in his other hand and the bass of a hip-hop track thrumming through the room. He composed a text message, his thumb dancing across the touchscreen before hitting send. He smiled to himself, wondering what Shorty would say if he knew his brother was sending flirtatious text messages to men instead of women.

Jolted from his peaceful solitude by a hammering on the door, he sat up, extinguished his smoke in the ash tray on the table and growled to himself. As he got up, he switched off the music and glanced out into the front yard, rain was sheeting down onto the sodden ground in the illuminated
patch of light from the porch bulb. It hadn’t rained in a while and as seemed to be the typical pattern of weather in the town, when it rained, it poured. It was well into the early hours; quite what time exactly had escaped him. He shuffled through to the hall, unlocking the door and opening it just wide enough to see Selene stood, hugging herself on his porch and shivering. Her hair stuck to her face, eyeliner ran in branched patterns down her cheeks and her jacket was so wet she was leaving a puddle on the floor from the run off. He pushed the door open wider and blinked at her.

“Remember all those times you told me I do dumb shit when I’m sad?” She squeaked.

“Yes. I recall them very well.” He replied; his tone mildly cross.

“I did a-a thing. I- I did something… dumb.” She shivered. As he watched her, he noted her bottom lip turning blue and quivering.

“Get in here.” He ordered, standing aside and allowing her to scuttle sheepishly into his hallway, sopping wet and freezing. “Wait here” He told her before climbing the stairs and vanishing from sight.

When he returned, he handed her a T-shirt and some sweatpants and led her into the living room, where he drew the drapes and sat down while she changed. Her clothes made splattering sounds on the shiny wooden floor as she threw them down and rapidly took advantage of her new, warm attire. Ray had seen Selene change on so many occasions it quickly became something neither of them spared a second thought for. He usually carried on conversation with her, but this time he simply observed her, noticing light, oval shaped bruises on her neck and even her ribs. Covering her torso with his T-shirt, she sank down onto the soft rug in front of the fire and nibbled on her fingernails. Ray stood, retrieved a blanket from a chair across the room and draped it over her shoulders, stroking her dampened hair as he passed and sat on the floor in front of her.

“Don’t think I need to ask what happened.” He sighed.

“I just had sex with Ritchie.” She said flatly without a hint of emotion.

“I know.” He leaned over and picked up his joint from the table, lit it and inhaled deeply, offering it to Selene, who snatched it from his grasp quicker than he expected. She greedily puffed away a few times and handed it back when she saw his irritated expression.

“It was gonna happen after I walked into a wall of sexual tension between you two at work today.” He pointed out. “He looks at you like he wants to bang you like a snare drum and you’re startin’ to do it back. Don’t take Einstein to figure it out, honey.”

Selene tugged the blanket further around her shoulders and wiggled her toes under her crossed legs.

“I-I think I was lonely.” She mumbled.

Ray’s shoulders relaxed and he nodded sadly at an admission that was long overdue. He waited for weeks for it, but it never materialised. Everyone but Selene could see she was lonely without Daryl and her recent pattern of behaviour was both predictable and dangerous.

“I’m lonely.” She whispered, as if the sound of the words was an epiphany in itself. “At first, it felt right, y’know? Because we’ve been spending so much time together and Ritchie is safe, lovely, kind Ritchie and I just thought it was what was supposed to happen. But all I could think was…”

“That you’re still in love with Daryl.” Ray stated, unsurprised.
Tears began to well in her eyes as she looked up at him helplessly. The strong and unbothered façade she’d adopted for so long now a thing of the past as a barrage of emotions shoved their way through to the surface. Ray’s heart stung with sympathy and he finished his joint and reached out a hand, gently stroking her knee.

“I still love him so much, Ray.” She sobbed. “And...and I bailed on Ritchie. Just like Daryl did to me. I’m an asshole. I’m a fucking asshole. The guys in love with me and I feel like I used him. I’m a horrible person.”

“No, ya ain’t. I don’t associate with horrible people. You’re mixed up and hurt and I don’t think ya ever got closure for what happened with Daryl. I ain’t gonna lie, you’re gonna break Ritchies heart, but I know you and this is typical of you. You gotta put this right. Be honest with Ritchie.”

“You can say it. Go ahead.” She said, flickering her black, painted fingernails at him.

“I fuckin told ya so!” He cried with a small smile emerging on his face. “You got feelings for him? Like, real feelings?”

It was a question she’d asked herself a number of times, feeling drawn to him more and more with every minute spent in his company. She didn’t know if it was simply a physical attraction due to his vastly improved appearance, or something more being born out of his support of her. Then there was the notion that he was someone, anyone that served to lessen the void that had been left by Daryl.

“I don’t know. I thought I did. Like I told you today, I think he’s hot but I just-I don’t know.” She admitted.

“I ain’t asking this to be crude but was the sex good?” He questioned.

Selene cast her mind back and closed her eyes for a second, vivid memories of his tongue journeying down from the valley between her breasts, over her tattoo and stomach, the electricity that sparked in her core when he gently took hold of her hair and wound it into his fist, tugging her head back to allow for access to her neck and the painful pleasure of being decorated with bites. How he was relentless, determined, sensual and thorough all at the same time.

“It was fucking incredible” She eventually admitted, risking a glance up at Ray’s face, who was looking right back, wide eyed.

“Noodlehead got moves.” He quipped “Alright, so, If the sex was bad, you’d already have your ‘let’s stay friends speech’ ready. Men connect during sex, women connect afterwards, that’s why you ladies make such good snugglers. Ya had fun and it’s complicated things because you’re emotionally connected now.”

The prospect of being emotionally connected to anyone that wasn’t Daryl wasn’t one that sat comfortably with her. She buried her face in her hands.

“Oh Jesus. What have I done?” She muffled through her fingers.

“Ya screwed ya best friend and ya employee.” Ray shrugged.

Removing her hands from her face, she focused on the space between them on the black, furry rug.

“Shit. I’m so confused. He’s so fucking pretty, Ray.” She uttered.

“Oh, I know, sweetheart. He’s transformed recently. But I can’t check out Ritchie like I can check...”
out Axel though. Axel takes it all in his stride. Rich just blushes and runs off. You gonna give me some more details?” He requested with a smirk.

“Ray. He’s your friend!” She exclaimed while trying not to laugh at her friends typical prod at humour in every situation.

“He’s your friend and you’ve been sharpenin’ his pencil!” He laughed, pushing at her leg with his hand.

“Touché.” She rolled her eyes. “Perfect balance. Rough but still made sure I was OK. Could tell he’d been longing to touch me like that for years. By the end of it I was covered in sweat and bites and everything was beautifully numb.” She confessed. Her lower lip was pinched under her teeth and she wondered if she’d just given away a little too much.

“Holy cow.” He remarked “Tell me you’re on birth control.”

“Yeah, I’m covered.”

“Well…Wow”

“Yeah. It was hot.”

“Hotter than Daryl?”

“No. Nobody’s hotter than Daryl. Daryl is like… solar flare hot.”

“Agreed.” Ray nodded. “What are ya gonna do?”

“I’m going to have to tell him the truth. That I’m still in love with Daryl and while I had a great time, I can’t be anything more than Ritchie's friend.”

She didn’t know how it was to be done, how she would be able to put things right without someone getting hurt. She wished she could turn back the clock and change the events that brought her to this point in time, but she couldn’t and now she had to face the consequences.

*****

Daryl smoked outside his workplace as he usually did. Leaning against the wall with one leg bent and his vision low. He often took time away from the others in his workplace to revel in solitude, needing to recharge once in a while. Being an introvert was part of who he was and he didn’t think it would ever change.

He looked up to see Cassidy outside the bistro across the road cleaning tables and chatting to one of her employees. She noticed him straight away and shoved a bright blue cloth into her black apron before raising a hand in greeting. Gingerly waving at him, the girl next to her began to snigger and grin at her.

“Oh my god is that him? Is that the guy?”

He couldn’t hear it, but he could read the words from her lips as clear as day from across the street. He toyed with the notion of pretending he hadn’t seen anything and heading back to work, instead deciding to nudge his head up, blow smoke from his nose and return the gesture. Cassidy simply smiled and wandered inside, guiding her young, excitable employee back through the door by her shoulders. Daryl guessed that a polite exchange of greeting would be all he had to process at that point. She was now an acquaintance to him that he would have to acknowledge every time he saw
her going forward, which wasn’t an altogether horrible thought.

It wasn’t until she re-appeared a few minutes later that he realised she was likely to be around a lot more than he’d expected. Glass in hand she crossed the street and he pushed away the temptation to just bail and pretend he hadn’t seen her. As she neared him, he noticed her apron tied tightly around her small waist and her long red hair glistening in the sun. Her lips were a deep red in contrast to her pale and freckled skin. Her eyes, large and bright green.

*She’s even prettier than I remembered.*


He hesitantly took the glass and tilted it to her in a gesture of thanks.

“Aint gotta do that” He took a sip and the citrusy flavour hit his tongue and throat, tangy and sweet. It was a welcome relief in the hot weather that had followed the rainstorm the previous night. “This is real good.” He admitted.

“Glad you like it. How are you?” She queried, flicking a tuft of vibrant red hair over her shoulder.

“Kinda beat.” He shrugged “workin overtime.”

She didn’t respond straight away, initially turning her head to scan the street and nod casually. She gathered that he had his moments where conversation was concerned, but overall, he was hard work.

“Well, don’t work too hard, you’ll end up in that bar every night, drowning your sorrows.” She beamed. Little did she know; he already was in Lady Luck’s most nights regardless.

“Yeah” he grunted, having no idea what else to say.

Cassidy decided to cut to the chase, she only crossed the street and approached him for one reason and the painful small talk that had ensued was draining her energy already.

“You OK with us maybe being friends? Or does that interfere with your complicated girl issue?” She probed with the same smile that never seemed to leave her face.

Daryl held her gaze for a moment, attempting to try to see behind her warm smile and confident eyes. He was suspicious, that was for sure. It wasn’t often that anyone actually asked to be friends with him, let alone someone like her. The chance of an ulterior motive putting him off slightly. Nevertheless, he figured he didn’t have much to lose.

“Naw, we can be friends.” He agreed.


Cassidy cocked her head to the side and grinned at him, flashing her perfectly kept, white teeth.

“Are you guys an actual thing? Like an official couple?” She wanted to know, delving right in and getting to the point once again.

“We were. Some shit happened.” He offered, reluctant to disclose any more details.

“But you’re just holding out for her anyway?” She continued, all the while aware that she was treading the line between chit chat and prying.
“Guess so.” He grunted.

When he lowered his head, she observed his strong shoulders and messy, dusty coloured hair. If he wasn’t her type before, he certainly was now. Rough around the edges, quiet, and guarded. The more she spoke to him, the more she wished his situation wasn’t as complex as it seemed.

“You must really love her.” She mentioned.

A short, curt nod was all she got in return, indicating that anymore lines of questioning wouldn’t be welcomed and she was likely to anger him.

“Well, I can only hope that I find someone that loves me like that. Choice isn’t exactly wide around here.” She paused and gauged his reaction. Risking one, last question. “What’s her name?”

As if a series of memories were flashing through his mind, he fell completely silent for a minute before realising that time had passed and he needed to answer.

“Selene.” He uttered.

“Pretty name.” She affirmed, still with a wide smile.

“Yeah.” He agreed quietly. He handed the empty tumbler back to her, a ring on her middle finger clinking against the glass as she took hold of it.

“OK, I gotta get back to work. Guess I’ll see you around.” She chirped, walking backwards slowly.

“Be in later for one of those sandwiches.” He half smiled, nudging his head up in the direction of her business.

“Great. See you then.” She grinned, turning and sashaying across the street.
The day after Selene’s questionable decision to sleep with Ritchie, she took it upon herself to act as though nothing had happened. Much like she had done in the time since she’d seen Daryl kissing Amy. She shoved it aside and carried on with her day as usual under Ray’s watchful eye. Ritchie greeted her with a shy smile and a mumble before he headed up to the piercing studio, where he remained for the next two hours. Three clients later, he appeared at the bottom of the stairs while Selene was busy answering emails. Ray looked up from his task; tattooing a middle-aged woman’s ankle and strained to her what was said above the buzzing of Shorty’s tattoo gun across the studio.

She could sense his presence before he even spoke and her back prickled with discomfort. She licked her lips and made a marked effort to continue typing.

“Selene? Can I talk to you?” Ritchie said quietly with a brief glance over his shoulder. He caught Ray peering over at him and prayed that she hadn’t told him anything. “Upstairs?”

She swivelled round casually on her chair and flicked her hair over her shoulder. Her black shirt, unbuttoned to her cleavage revealed a little too much for Ritchie to handle and he found himself dropping his vision to the desk and spinning a pen around on the surface.

“Yeah, of course. Lead the way” She smiled.

He nodded and turned quickly, hearing her get up and walk along behind him. Her indifferent attitude was both a hindrance and a help. One part of him was pleased that she wasn’t making things awkward while the other worried that she simply didn’t care what had happened between them.

Stopping in the middle of the piercing studio, Ritchie paused briefly to take a deep breath before facing her. His eyes firmly fixed on hers to stop them travelling down to her chest.

“Uh, I guess I just wanted to make sure you were alright. I Um…I woke up and you were gone.” He murmured, his confidence failing him as he stood before the woman he had been in love with for the past four years. Now that moves had been made and he’d known the feeling of being intimate with her, approval was all he needed. He just wasn’t sure he was going to get it.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I just needed my own bed.” Selene replied, shrugging a shoulder up.

“Oh, OK.” He grunted. Was she telling the truth? There was no way for him to know, he had no choice but to take her word for it. In the brief pause that followed, he saw her bite her bottom lip and a flash of anxiety passed behind her eyes. “Look, I don’t want this to be awkward-“

“-no. Me neither.” She interrupted, shaking her head.

“You mind if I ask you something?” He hazarded, his heart beating faster with every hesitant
glimmer in her eyes.

Oh god, he’s going to ask me if we’re in a relationship and I’m about to tell him last night was a mistake. I am going to hell.

“Sure. Ask away” Attempting to sound unbothered by the conversation, she realised that she only sounded nervous and the words that came out of her mouth sounded altogether more painful than when she had said them in her head. She cringed.

“Was it-was it OK… for you? I mean the….um…the-”

“-The sex?” She concluded bravely.

“Yes. That.” Ritchie confirmed with an embarrassed scratch of the back of his neck. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, yes. No… I mean yes but in a good way”

“Are you sure? I know I was kind of rough.”

“Ritchie, it was amazing. You were amazing.”

“So were you. Believe me, I know how lucky I got last night.” He reached out to her and took her hand. She let him, knowing she needed to tell him the truth. But his big blue pleading eyes and his clear skin and the hand that he had previously used to do dirty things to her was distracting her mind and she wanted to indulge, just a little more.

What are you doing? You have to tell him! Her mind screamed at her but her body ignored it.

He pulled her close to him, his lips meeting hers and she fought against her urges but they triumphed and she kissed him back, allowing him to drag his lips from hers and down her neck. Her black hair fell back between her shoulder blades when she tilted her head back to allow him better access. His fingers found her shirt buttons. He plucked open a couple of them and shoved his hand inside her bra, gently squeezing her breast. She moaned quietly, aware that if it wasn’t for the heavy metal playing downstairs, the others would hear her.

“Oh my god. I want you all the time.” He said against the skin of her collarbone.

Stop this. You know you have to stop this. You have to tell him you still love Daryl and this can’t happen. But it’s already happened once, what difference does one more time make?

“The store room.” She uttered.

He stopped kissing her and raised an eyebrow at her in surprise as he let her lead him to the room in the corner. They quickly disappeared inside and as soon as the door was closed she turned to him and threw his T-shirt over his head. He pulled her short leather skirt up and yanked her fishnets down with her panties. She unbuckled his belt and released him from his jeans. He was already rock hard and ready for her. Seizing her waist, he picked her up and sat her on a box which was the perfect height for him to release the rest of her shirt buttons, pull down her bra and stoop down to take one nipple between his teeth while he lightly pinched and rubbed at the other. She wrapped her arms around his head, pushing her fingers into his dreadlocks and holding him where he was as shoots of pleasure travelled like sparks from her nipples to the nerves between her legs. Unable to hold back, she slipped her hand down and circled her clit. As soon as Ritchie realised what she was doing he shot back and looked down, in awe of the sight of her pleasuring herself. With her other hand, she grazed a thumb back and forth over the glistening tip of his cock.
He needed her so badly he pushed her hands away from what she was doing and began to push inside her. She gripped his now broader shoulders as he filled her, stifling a load groan by burying her face in his neck.

“Uh...Oh god.” She breathed while he held himself inside her and waited for her to adjust.

“You’re so fucking beautiful” He hissed in her ear.

“Stop talking and screw me.” She replied in a heady, dreamy haze.

His thrusts were focused, cleverly positioned by his hips angled upwards so as to provide her with the most pleasure he could in this position. She clung to him, her nails gripping into his skin, red marks left when she moved them and her back hitting the shelving behind her. Her body was singing with desire and her mouth hung open as she panted and encouraged him to move harder, faster inside her. He whispered to her, not quite dirty talk but more a hushed narrative of how addicted to her he was. He wanted to look her in the eyes, but she averted her gaze or closed them each time he tried.

“G- gonna come.” She suddenly told him after a matter of minutes. It had come out of nowhere but he was grateful of its swift arrival, his own release being kept at bay by him focusing on a piece of sticky tape stuck to the shelf behind her. He plunged into her, letting go completely and hearing himself growl loudly against the side of her head as he shuddered and held onto her while expelling himself inside.

Selene’s body was also wracked with juddering, involuntary movements from a thundering orgasm at the same time as Ritchie, that she should never have had. But it was delicious and consuming and wonderful and wrong all at the same time. She ran her hands down his muscular back, down to the base of his spine and encouraged him to push into her one last time. He leaned back to see her face and gave her a bashful smile and rubbed his nose on hers.

A flash of utter terror tore through her when the door flew open and Axel walked in, casually looking over a purchase order and mumbling to himself when his vision lifted and he stopped dead in his tracks and froze. His eyes were wide and he first blinked at Ritchie, then Selene.

“Shit. Shit.” Selene cussed with Ritchie still inside her and her shirt ripped open. The only thing she had near her to hide behind was her own hands. She shielded her face and dipped her head.

“Oh no.”

“Uh, fuck. Um…” Ritchie Stammered.

“Get out, Axel” Selene finally said.

Snapping out of his shocked state, Axel looked around the room for something that would help with the embarrassment of it all before finally stepping back out of the room and closing the door.

“Guess we’ve been found out.” Ritchie muttered, pulling away and lifting his pants up. He held out a hand to help Selene down from the box to find that she just waved it away and buttoned up her shirt.

They re-dressed in an awkward silence, Selene pacing back and forth briefly to try and organise her thoughts and what she was going to say to Axel before she left the room. When Ritchie placed a hand on her shoulder, she closed her eyes and hung her head low.

“Are you alright?” He asked.
“I need to go find Axel.” She said, shrugging him off and reaching for the door.

“Selene” he called to her. She stopped but didn’t look back at him.

“I love you.”

He could see her shoulders rising and falling subtly because of her breathing increasing and it was this that he watched while an unknown amount of time passed. It seemed like an eternity, both of the fighting to say and do the right thing but being clueless as to what that was. Eventually, she glanced over her shoulder but not far enough to see him.

“I know”

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When 1pm rolled around, Daryl found himself having to collect everyone’s lunch after one of the guys had seen him talking to Cassidy. Word had quickly spread that she was the owner of the bistro and before long, he had a list of lunch orders so long he’d been forced to call ahead and order them all.

When he walked through the door, she was the first person he saw. Not because there weren’t others around, but because she seemed to shine above everyone else. She waved him over and totalled the order on the cash register. Cheerily informing him of what he owed and waiting while he shifted through the many notes he’d been given by almost all of the employees at work. As he handed over the cash, he refused to look at her for too long, afraid that he might blush or do something stupid when it occurred to him that the only reason he would act that way was because he liked her and cared what she thought. He took hold of the bag she handed him along with his change and hesitated, his feet unwilling to move and his finger tapping rapidly on the outside of the paper bag that was now clutched to his chest.

“Something else I can do for you?” She asked,

He nibbled on his lower lip furiously and forced himself to raise his vision to her bright, green eyes, full of curiosity and wonder.

“Um…yeah, meet me at Lady Lucks tonight.” He instructed.

Surprise quickly flashed across her face and she widened her eyes. Glancing around her to make sure everyone else was out of earshot, she leaned over the counter towards him.

“You asking me out on a date, or as a friend?” She whispered

In truth, Daryl didn’t really know the answer but he supposed that a date with Cassidy couldn’t be a bad thing and maybe, if he just tried, it would help him to move on from what was his one, great love. He thought for a moment while he studied her features and decided that she was extremely attractive. He would never ask a woman out without being promised success anyway, but Cassidy was in a different league. Selene’s league. She was the type of woman he would never dare to ask out under normal circumstances.

“Both I guess.” He admitted.

I was not expecting this. She thought.

“Thought you were holding out for your complicated girl?” She challenged with a slight wink.
“You gonna have a drink with me or not?” He said bluntly.

She raised her eyebrows, his direct manner not entirely unappealing.

“One condition.” She purred “You walk me home again afterwards.”

“Sure.” He agreed.

“Alright then. I’ll have a drink with you.”

Daryl couldn’t ignore the sense of pride he felt when he left the Bistro. Maybe Selene had left him with something more than a broken heart. She had taught him his worth and instilled enough confidence in him to enable him to ask out a woman that he deemed to be way out of his league. If he managed a relationship with Selene, he knew he’d be able to at least attempt something with someone else. The question was; did he want to?

*****

Selene lightly clicked the back door shut and hesitantly paced out to the bench in the parking lot where Axel sat, his cell in his hand, refusing to look up at her. She settled next to him and lit a cigarette, puffing away quietly for a couple of minutes as she organised her thoughts and tried to guess how Axel would react. When he didn’t get up and leave, she considered it a small triumph and decided to at least try and explain.

“Have you told anybody what you saw?” She asked, blowing a plume of smoke from her nose and mouth into the air above them.

“No.” He mumbled. “I wasn’t going to either. Thank your lucky stars I’m not Bear.”

From his response, she could sense his indignation and began to feel uneasy. She hadn’t been on the receiving end of Axel’s temper before. In fact, she had never even seen him that angry. But this time his snappy and biting tone struck worry into her.

“Thank you. I know. I should apologise to you. What you witnessed up there was highly unprofessional of me.” She mentioned sincerely.

Axel couldn’t help it, he tried and failed to hold back what started as a small, sarcastic laugh that ended up almost mocking and extremely unimpressed.

“Fuck your professionalism” He scoffed.

Selene gawped at him in disbelief. Her mouth dropped open and her cigarette fell from between her fingers, extinguishing in a pool of spilled soda under the bench. “I know you’re my boss and I shouldn’t be talking to you like this but after you just screwed Ritchie in a store room I don’t think you have a leg to stand on here. Do you like him? What the hell are you even doing, Selene?”

“I-I like him, but I don’t know what I feel” She sighed.

Axel’s head snapped to the side and his jaw tightened. She didn’t like this side of him and wished she could go back and change the decision she’d made to drag Ritchie into the store room. But it had been satisfying and enjoyable and she’d wanted it so much at the time, clutching at straws to justify it.

“You don’t know? How can you not know?!” Axel exclaimed “What, are you just trying him out or something? He’s not a new tattoo gun for god sakes. This isn’t fair, you know the dudes liked
you for years. I’ll bet he finally thinks he’s got what he wants.”

“I’m not trying to hurt-”

“- Let’s talk about the real issue here, you never got over Daryl. You didn’t talk about it, you just moved on like nothing happened and it was real weird. I get that you lost someone you loved, but you still love him now and your trying to replace him with Ritchie and I’m sorry… I love you, we all do. But it’s fucking wrong.” He raged, getting to his feet and looming over her as she tried to stop her eyes from brimming with tears.

“I think I’m losing my mind.” She croaked.

“If you don’t feel anything for him, you gotta stop.” He told her.

“Axel, I do like him” She admitted as she batted a tear away “I’m comfortable with him and he’s so sweet and kind to me. But he’s not… he’s not Daryl.” She sniffed loudly “no matter how hard I try, I can’t get Daryl out of my mind. I’m not sure if I want to.”

Axel stepped back and ran a hand across his chin, his tattooed and rippled arms glistening in the sun as his loose-fitting vest billowed from the breeze.

“Maybe you should try to find him.” He suggested.

She’d thought about it almost every day. Toyed with talking to him, going to her father and finding out where he lived. Turning up at his place and trying to talk things over. But it all boiled down to one thing.

“No. He cheated on me. I can’t be with him.” She sniffed.

A few frustrated paces in front of her led to Axel storming to the back door.

“Then whatever you do, just stop screwing your best friend.” He snapped over his shoulder.

*****

Cassidy selected a black pencil dress for her evening with Daryl, wanting to give off the impression that she may well be a bistro owner, but an apron and the smell of strong coffee was not all she was about. She arrived dead on 8pm to find him hunched over the spot at the bar where she had initially spoken to him. He was wearing the same thing he always wore when she had spotted him various times before. Jeans, a black button-down sleeveless shirt and a leather vest with angel wings sewn onto the back.

Conversation was strained at first, with Cassidy doing most of the talking. But she was OK with that once she realised that he was actually listening to every word she said. She knew that to be rare for men on first dates and even more rare in men that looked like Daryl. The bad boy type with the unusually shy side. An hour into their meeting he seemed to loosen up a little and began asking her questions. How long had she owned the Bistro, did she grow up in the same town and other conversational basics.

She was no stranger to dates and generally found herself sat across from selfish and boring men who would rather waffle on about their careers than ask her anything about herself. But not Daryl. Daryl was different. Quiet but extremely observant and with a hidden sensitivity that she knew was there and made him all the more enticing to her.

When the time came for them to leave, she offered him an expectant look as they stood outside the
bar, facing one another. Daryl recalled their agreement and nudged his head up in the direction of her apartment.

“C’mon, I’ll walk ya home.” He mumbled.

He couldn’t be sure of her motive behind their little deal, but he suspected it had something to do with her inviting him in when they were last in the same situation. Far be it for him to be presumptuous, he decided to wait and see.

The walk was uncomfortably quiet with Cassidy becoming slightly confused as to why he’d asked her out. She hadn’t forgotten that his situation was complicated, but where did that leave her? She had been given hot and cold signals from him, the slow down and the go ahead all at once and she was now left not knowing if she was supposed to make a move on him, or simply wish him a good night.

Upon reaching her apartment door, she looked at him, pursed her lips and released a sigh.

“You haven’t asked many women out before, have you?” She asked.

Not realising how apparent it was that he didn’t make a habit of chasing women, his face twisted into an uncomfortable expression.

“That obvious, huh?” He mumbled.

“A little.” She giggled. “You didn’t do so bad though. I had a good night.”

A good night. It was the least he could have hoped for. He half expected her to just walk out an hour into the evening, or make her excuses, friend zone him and go off to talk to someone else. But she’d had a good night. It would do.

“Good. Me too.” He replied.

Stepping in front of him, she narrowed her gaze, her long eyelashes lowering and her green eyes sparkling in the light of the street lamp. Cassidy was not the kind of woman to play games or ignore the elephant in the room. She was direct and to the point and as a result, needed to know where she stood.

“But I am confused.” She admitted “last time we were stood here, you turned me down. Because of your complicated girl. Now, here we are.”

Daryl’s eyes swept over her pretty facial features, risking a slight peek at her lightly freckled chest, decorated with a thin, gold chain and a simple teardrop shaped diamond pendant.

“Guess things change.” He shrugged.

Things may have changed, but Cassidy wasn’t about to put herself in a situation where she could end up getting hurt. Far be it for her to step on anyone’s toes or, repeat the past and make the wrong choice.

“Maybe. But I don’t want to cause any drama or come between you and her. So, if she’s still on the scene, I don’t want to be.” She stated plainly.

“She ain’t.” he said “ain’t spoken to her in a long time”.

Saying it aloud was a different ball game to thinking it inside his head on a daily basis. The actual
words made it seem real and while he didn’t know if he was ready for a chance with someone else, Selene had made it crystal clear that she wanted nothing to do with him.

Cassidy wondered what made a person special enough to be waited on for so long. She never had been and could only hope that one day, she would find someone that would do the same for her if it ever came to it.

“Time to move on?” She whispered hopefully.

Daryl nodded. “Think so.”

“I just wanted check that you really are single. Been burned with that one before.” She had, twice. She still didn’t know what it was about her that stirred the desires of men already in relationships. Men so willing to cheat and risk everything. Having morals and standards meant that she never took the opportunities to be ‘the other woman’ and she was glad of it, only ever having fallen into their trap by accident and by being lied to. It was not in her nature to be selfish enough to take a part in the demise of someone else’s relationship.

“I’m single” he confirmed.

She smiled at him and ran a hand through her red hair.

“So, you asked me out because…?” She trailed off, coaxing him to finish the rest of her sentence.

“C’mon, really?” He huffed, showing her the subtlest of smiles.

“You find me attractive.” She grinned.

Daryl felt like he couldn’t make it any clearer, but his version of clear seemed to differentiate with others and when he thought he was being open and transparent, to others he was still guarded and closed off.

“Find me a guy in that bar that doesn’t.” He told her. Her response was am impressed raised eyebrow and a slightly surprised look.

“You like me enough not to turn me down if I invite you in again?” She enquired hopefully.

“Huh… um” he stammered, amused by her directness “I’mma have to say no. But it ain’t ‘cause I don’t want to. I’m just not the kinda guy to rush into shit.”

In all her dating years, Cassidy had not yet met a man that would have turned down such a promising invitation. She didn’t make a habit of luring them into her apartment on first dates with Daryl being the one and only exception, but she was conscious of the fact that if she did, she could have had a lot more soulless, meaningless action than she had already.

“Wow, that’s refreshing to hear.” She commented,

“Besides, ya might go out with me again and think I’m an asshole after all.” Daryl pointed out.

She grinned and a small giggle meant Daryl did the same but shyly, with his head dipped and his vision fixed on his boot.

“So, I’m going out with you again, am I?”

“Uh, If ya want.” He suggested.
Before she answered, she waited. Willing him to look up at her so she say the words to his face. When his eyes eventually worked up to hers, she spoke.

“I want.” she purred.

Not expecting it to have been that easy, his reply was laced with confusion and he hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question instead of a statement.

“K”

She stepped even closer to him and traced her fingertips along the outside of his forearm at his side, eventually ending up holding his hand, which he allowed after a brief moment of doubt. He braved eye contact with her once again, reluctant to let her see his mild apprehension. He had only ever been this close in this way to Selene.

“Is kissing me goodnight classed as rushing?” She whispered.

He swallowed hard and tried to steady his breathing, which was now being skewed by uncertainty and nerves. Was this woman serious? He’d known her for what seems like five minutes and she was interested enough to want to kiss him already. Aside from being shocked and nervous, Daryl couldn’t deny that he was tempted. Tempted to allow himself a moment of enjoyment.

“No.” He replied quietly.

She said nothing, merely lifting one eyebrow up, waiting for him to make a move. His eyes fell to her rounded lips, luscious and appealing as he raised his other hand and gently placed it on the side of her face, guiding her to him. During the first couple of seconds their foreheads met and he nuzzled her nose, taking her breath away already. When he finally pressed their lips together, she felt her knees weaken and his hand tighten its grip around hers and she knew there and then that she had to continue her quest to get this man into her apartment and bed.

Daryl’s nerves quickly dissipated when he sensed her deepen their kiss and run her tongue along his lower lip. He couldn’t deny that he liked her, she was quite something to look at and her strong and self-assured personality added to the attraction, much like someone else he knew. When he gently pulled back from her, he saw her eyes open slowly in a daze and her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Ohmygodwow” she breathed.

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the back of her fingers and moving backwards, signalling his departure.

“G’night.” He said calmly as he let go of her hand and turned to walk away. She raised a hand to her face, half covering her blushing cheeks and waving at him before taking the two steps up to the porch and fumbling in her bag for her key. Visibly flustered and overwhelmed.

Maybe I have got some game, after all. Daryl thought.

*****

Ritchie descended the stairs of The Ink Cabinet at lunchtime to find Axel and Ray in the studio. Selene and Shorty were noticeably absent and upon asking after her whereabouts, Ritchie was told she has ventured across the street to buy coffee for everyone. Selene has gone to the coffee shop and shorty has had to run across town. Getting up and going to the front desk to check his appointments, Axel hummed along to the music in the studio, unaware that Ritchie had followed
him and was standing behind him. He checked on Ray over his shoulder, seeing him rambling away to his client. It was safe to proceed.

“Sorry about earlier, man. Didn’t mean for you to see that.” He said quietly. Axel did a quick double take over his shoulder and went back to scanning the screen.

“Secrets safe with me.” He sighed. "Although you should probably stop fucking people in the store room at work."

“You're right. I know. Thanks.”

Ritchie closed his eyes, shook his head and went to walk away. The thought of his friend catching him having sex with anyone was mortifying, but throwing Selene in the mix meant it was near enough unbearable.


Ritchie stopped and turned back to him.

“What do you mean?” He probed.

Straightening up, Axel picked up a pen and tapped the desk with the blunt end. Taptaptaptap. Ritchie could see it was an act of vexation. He hated that he’d been put in this position and it was obvious that he didn’t agree with what was going on. Ritchie sensed a lecture on its way.

“I sound like a dick, you know I love Selene and she doesn't meant to, but she's using you, man. She's all screwed up over Daryl. Just...keep it in mind” Axel advised, getting up and placing a hand on Ritchie's shoulder as he passed.

His words circled around in Ritchie’s mind. His head was telling him that Axel was right, all logic pointed to him being used as a replacement or some kind of risky rebound. But his heart hoped otherwise and swelled every time he thought of their private moments together.

*****

A lot can happen in 6 months. 180 days of choices. For Daryl, his choices had been purely selfish and he was enjoying every minute of it. Still adopting the slowly but surely approach, he had braved a trip to the movies and a lunch date with Cassidy. Despite neither of them making any further attempts at kissing one another, both dates were a success and he noticed her interest in him increase, as did his in her. But Selene was never far from his thoughts, creeping in when he’d lay awake at night and blindsiding him with just how much he still loved her. He couldn’t bring himself to delete the picture he still looked at every night on his cell phone and felt like he was torturing himself with every peek he took. Telling himself it would lessen over time, he actively made the choice to try and get on with his life.

After a spontaneous date after work at a local diner, Daryl stuck to his typical chivalrous routine and walked Cassidy to her apartment door. For the entire night she talked and he happily listened, they’d shared a sundae and debating the difficult topic of the best pizza topping on the walk home. Upon reaching Cassidy’s destination, she turned on her heels with a knowing look on her face. It was obvious to both of them what she was about to say.

“No pressure, no assumptions…You want to come in with me?”

His eyes quickly took in the ornate and expensive looking building behind her before falling back to her stunning, bright eyes and expectant expression. What was the worst that could happen? He’d
freak out and have to leave? Probably. What was the best-case scenario? He’d get to spend the
night with her and it would potentially give him the shove he wanted to forget about Selene.

“Alright.” He agreed.

The apartment was spotless and huge and Daryl was scared to touch anything in case he left a
finger mark somewhere. Even the air smelled expensive, like the time he’d dropped a Motorcycle
off to a well-off client in an affluent part of town and was invited in for iced tea. Feeling like he’d
wandered into a parallel universe, he’d knocked back one glass of tea and left.

Standing in the vast living room in front of the mantelpiece, he wondered how she could afford to
live there comfortably while being a mere small business owner. As if she could read his mind, he
heard her speak from the kitchen.

“It was my grandmothers place. She left it to me in her will.”

Appearing with two drinks in her hands, she watched him wander around the living room, much
like he did when he first visited Selene’s place, or anywhere for that matter. Being a curious soul
wasn’t always complimentary to his introverted nature. She breezed past him, handing him a
tumbler of whiskey on the rocks. He nodded a thanks and gingerly sipped the drink, in time ending
up back at the mantelpiece where he met her eye.

Her gaze was piercing, intense and laced with anticipation, leaving him finding it more difficult to
look away by the second. Neither of them needed to say it but an unspoken agreement seemed to
pass between them and she walked up to him, took his drink from his hand and slid it onto the
mantelpiece. She closed the gap between them and kissed him straight away, her hands sliding up
his torso to his chest, unbuttoning the top of his shirt until it’s half open. He didn’t resist and drew
her closer still with his hands on her hips.

She started to push his leather vest from his shoulders and for a split second, he forgot where he
was. Never entertaining the prospect of being with anyone else but Selene, his senses had gone into
overdrive as it occurred to him exactly what was happening. An internal battle waged a war inside
him. Carry on and take a risk, or bail now before things got complicated. He chose to help her
remove his vest, shrugging it down his arms and tossing it aside on the couch behind him before he
took a hold of either side of her face and kissed her hungrily. Grunting as his lips crashed with hers.
Her fingers worked on his belt buckle, then his jeans as his kisses shifted focus to her neck and
chest, he pulled the straps of her top down and breathed heavily against her skin.

An image passed through his head as his eyes closed; Pale, tattooed skin. Delectable curves and
plump, pierced lips. Selene. She wasn’t Selene.

He jolted away from her so fast he nearly stumbled. His belt buckle clinked loudly as he moved
and her hands were torn away from the front of his open jeans. Confused and panicked, he turned
away from her, panting wildly and needing to hide his embarrassment.


“Nothin. It ain’t you.” He replied quickly.

“No then what is it?”

His eyes were everywhere, switching between her, the floor, the walls, the ceiling. He raised his
hands, covering his face for a second when he dropped them and began fastening his jeans and
belt.
“Can’t do this.” He said to himself.

“Why?” She demanded.

He looked up and noticed her face, disappointment and humiliation so evident they may as well have been trailing along above her head on a neon sign. The more he looked at her, the more he was awash with guilt. He moved to her, positioning one hand on her hip and the other around her shoulder so he could tenderly grasp the back of her head. She relaxed against him as he kissed her on the cheek and whispered into her ear.

“‘Cause I still love her. M’sorry.”

Neither of them needed to say anything more. Daryl withdrew from her, turned and quickly left her apartment.

*****

In the coffee shop, Selene squinted at the board as if she was going to order something different from the same thing she always chose everyday. The young Barista rolled her eyes and threw an apologetic look at the other four people waiting in line behind Selene. She usually ducked out of sight of went to wait tables when Selene walked in, the desire to endure her indecisiveness little to none. Selene was now well known in the coffee shop, and after taking at least five minutes to decide on her beverage, always ended up at her usual choice.

“Can I get a…” She mused, squinting at the drinks list on the wall at the back of the register.

“-White chocolate mocha with all the sugary bullshit on top. Extra large.” A familiar voice interrupted from behind her. Her veins spiked.

Daryl.

She stood there, frozen to the spot with wide eyes, unable to speak and feeling like her boots were filled with cement. Her heart began to hammer and her palms grew sweaty. It had been a long time and he was still as surly and attractive as she remembered.

“Hey, pretty girl.” He rasped.

She almost died there and then, convinced her heart would jump out of her chest in front of a coffee shop full of people. The sound of his habitual greeting to her had filled her soul with affection that she wasn’t even sure if she wanted.

“H-Hi.” She stammered.

Daryl took the time to look at the others in the line behind them, seeing nothing but angry stares at his apparent pushing in and Selene’s inability to pick a drink. Now, it looked like they were just having a conversation to top it off.

“You got a minute?” He asked her.

“Um, yeah. Yes. I do.” She replied, much to his surprise. He didn’t know what to expect when he pulled his bike into the lot at the front of the building. But he had hoped she would at least give him five minutes. After so much time had lapsed, he was counting on her attitude being a lot less venomous towards him. He paid for and collected their drinks while Selene found a table. She couldn’t take her eyes off of him. He looked well. Possibly the best she’d ever seen him. He seemed better off for not having her in his life. He sat opposite her at the table, noting how she
would rather gaze out of the window beside her than keep eye contact with him.

“How have you been?” She whispered as she slowly rotated the huge takeaway coffee cup between her fingers on the table.

“Good.” He started. “Ya ol’ man moved me outta town to a different auto repairs place. Money’s better. I got my own apartment. Ain’t much but it’s better than living with Merle.” He took a large gulp from his drink and set it back down again. Selene was now observing him closely, her attention no longer on what was going on beyond the window. “I know I got you to thank for that, for not tellin’ Bill what happened.”

“No need.” She dismissed.

“Ya didn’t have to lie for me.”

“We both know you’d be dead if I didn’t.” She said, her tone serious and bordering on angry. Opting to ignore it, he decided to keep the conversation steered towards a more amicable atmosphere until he got to his point.

“‘Bout you? Still got the tattoo parlour?” He enquired.

“Nothing’s changed here.” Came her simple and blunt reply.

“I miss-”

“-Stop. Don’t, Daryl.” She interrupted.

“I miss you.” He said defiantly.
Selene hesitantly studied the man sat across from her. He looked smarter, together and as though he had walked in from another life, a life where she was never in the picture. She noted his dusty brown hair, styled messily but effective to his own personal identity, with a slight flick at the front. The arms of his leather jacket looked new under the worn status of his trademark, winged vest. His face was determined and focused and she felt as though she would unravel right in front of him and expose herself as the emotional wreck she was.

“I came here ‘cause I gotta meet someone who wants to sell me a bike. Thought I’d stop by, try n’ see ya. I got somethin I wanna say, so I’mma say it n’ then I’ll go.” He explained.

She dropped her gaze and nodded into her coffee cup.

“Look at me.” He requested. She slowly looked up, dragging her heavy, bloodshot eyes to his face. “I didn’t cheat on you. Amy kissed me and I pushed her away, you saw the worst part. I don’t speak to her no more. I knew how lucky I was to have you; I would never have done anything to risk losin’ you.”

For a split second, it was like she was back there. Standing on the sidewalk watching Amy kissing the man that she had given her heart and soul to. The man she was secretly convinced was the one that she would build a life with. With someone else.

“I know what I saw.” She mumbled.

A thud from under the table startled her and she realized it was Daryl slamming his foot against the leg of the table in irritation as he spoke.

“No. No, you don’t know what ya saw. Ya never even gave me a chance to explain. There’re two sides to everythin’, Selene. But you didn’t wanna hear mine. So here I am, all these months later, makin’ ya listen.” He sat back and drummed his fingers on his coffee cup while he took in the sight of her. Her vibrancy and charisma now nothing but a distant memory. He reached into his inside pocket, retrieving a small, white card and slid it across the table to her. “My new cell number.”

She picked up the card, holding it delicately between her fingers like it could break and shatter. A silhouette of a motorcycle dominated the main area of the card with the words ‘Dixon’s motorcycle modifications” along the top with an address she knew well in the next town along the bottom.

“You have your own business?” She asked.

“Somethin’ I do on the side for the extra cash.” He replied after taking a sip of his coffee.

“You don’t deal anymore?”
“Naw. Ya ol’ man cut me loose with that.” He said with a quick glance around the room. The line was still long and the place was filling up.

She noticed his new cellphone on the table. A shiny smart phone with a spotless case that she would previously thought he would have turned his nose up at. Then, She shifted in her seat and swung her vision around to the view outside the window. A black, matte, cruiser motorcycle was parked right outside the window. It was the kind of bike Selene dreamed of, the kind she’d been saving up for since the Studio started making a decent profit.

“That’s yours?” She asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s a beautiful bike.” She admitted, impressed by his taste.

“Thanks.”

“New jacket, new bike, new phone, new apartment, own business. Apparently a new found confidence, you’re doing well for yourself. You got a girl?” She wanted to know. Outwardly, she had delivered the sentence with confidence, blasé and like it was nothing more than a conversation between two strangers. Inwardly, she was screaming at herself for asking the one question that would destroy her depending on the answer given.

Daryl leaned forwards, bracing his elbow on the table.

“You’re my girl.” He replied blankly.

She stared at him, speechless and still. It was the answer she wanted. But why? Why should he never move on just because she couldn’t stand the thought of him with someone else? She refused to see him, listen to him or even be in the same vicinity as him, yet to know she was still his girl had filled her with confusion, relief, anger and sadness. Conflict raged in her chest, her eyes threatening to overflow into her coffee.

“Never told ya before, but I liked you since high school.” He informed her, locking her into eye contact. His unwavering, icy blue stare made the room fall away. He had her attention; he knew it and he was going to make the most of it. “Think I maybe even loved ya back then too. I was just the loner nobody knew existed, but I watched you. I saw your smile and your laugh. You were stunnin’. Fascinating to me. Always have been.”

“I knew you existed.” He whispered.

“Senior prom.” He continued, ignoring her comment. “I didn’t go but maybe I would have if I could have gone with you. I sat on the roof with a bottle of liquor and a pack of smokes. Watched ya walk in. Took my damn breath away, you looked so beautiful. But all you were interested in was that dumb prick with the neck tattoo. I saw what he did to you, humiliated ya like that in front of all those people. When ya ran out, I climbed down from there like the devil was chasin’ me so I could follow ya n’ make sure ya got home OK.”

Her eyes were now filled with obvious and telling tears but try as she might, she couldn’t not look away from him. He had never commanded her emotional attention quite like this before.

“Did you like the black Tulip?” he uttered.

Selene’s face changed as the penny dropped. She had sprinted home, her cheeks soaked with despair and humiliation until she reached her house and tore inside, straight to her room. Locking
the door, she sobbed violently into her pillow amongst her midnight black, satin, corseted gown like a medieval maiden marred by heartbreak until she didn’t think she could cry anymore. As was usual for their friendship, Ray would climb the outside of the house to the balcony of her room and let himself in. Sometimes, if she was sleeping or not in, he would leave her things on the door handle or floor in front of the French doors. Sometimes it was candy, sometimes it was a movie, or a T-shirt, a poster, tickets to gigs and on the odd occasion; flowers. That night, Selene eventually forced herself up from her tear stained pillow and padded to the door. Pulling back the drape with the intention to step outside into the night air and clear her head, she spotted a single, black Tulip tied to the handle of the door with the long, green leaves of another plant. She had opened the door, plucked the flower from its place and held it to her chest, considering how lucky she was to have such a thoughtful and caring friend in Ray. Little did she know at the time; the scarred boy had given the crying girl a flower and it was the first gesture of pure, unequivocal love that Daryl had ever delivered.

“That—that was… you?” She croaked with wide, glassy eyes.

He nodded once, taking a gulp of his coffee and refusing to get caught up in the memory. A memory that was as painful as it was heroic. At the time he’d felt a sense of accomplishment, like he’d pushed himself to commit an act that would make the girl he thought of as more unbelievably beautiful than anyone, smile after running home crying. As he grew up, he pushed the memory aside, telling himself it was a wasted effort and that while it meant something to him, she would never know the truth behind it unless he told her. Now, his cards were on the table.

“In some cultures, they mean courage and strength. Wanted to remind you that ya had plenty of those things.” He said.

Her face was incredulous, her cherry red lips parted and her hand frozen around her coffee cup which she’d not touched since she sat down.

“I can’t believe that was you.” She uttered to herself.

“Stole it from somebody’s front yard. But I stole it for you.” He shrugged. “So, ya see? I wouldn’t have risked it. Not for a whore, not for anyone.” Leaning forward, his fingertips grazed the back of her hand and her eyes dropped to where the contact was made. Both burning and tingling with want at the same time. “I had everything I ever wanted in you. Think about what I’ve said n’ call me if ya decide ya believe me after all. I never gave up on us. I think about you everyday.”

She moved her hand away from his, picking up the card and closing her palm around it. Daryl’s chair scraped across the floor, emitting a loud and jarring noise which didn’t bother either of them, both of their souls heavy with confession and complexities. He picked up his cell phone and felt in his jeans pocket for his motorcycle keys before taking one, last lingering glance at her. Her shiny, black hair wavy from being braided, her heavy silver rings, leather wristbands and glossy, black nails.

“I loved you, Selene.” He said bravely and possibly in the loudest and most self-assured way he ever had. It had the desired effect; she couldn’t help but look up. His heart stung with guilt and sadness when a single tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

Walk away. You’ve done what you came here to do.

“I still do.” He added before turning and walking to the door, leaving a mixed-up Selene sat alone at the table with a White Mocha and a business card in front of her.

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Over the next day, Selene constantly fiddled with the business card Daryl had given her and toyed with the idea that she should call him. It lived in a variety of places; on the board on the wall of her kitchen, on the fridge, secured by a magnet, on her bedside table, in front of her on the dining table as she ate pancakes with Ray in the morning. She still didn’t know if he was telling the truth, the situation looking extremely damning from her point of view. Deep down, she wanted to believe him after hearing him speak with such sincerity and lack of discomfort about delivering his side of the story. He was sure. Surer than she’d ever seen him.

Ritchie was wary of pushing her too far and risking undoing everything that had happened between them. For the first time since he’d met her, he felt like they’d connected. Turning up at her door a day after her encounter with Daryl over coffee, she buzzed him in and he stepped into her apartment with some unease, gauging her mood and attitude towards him before seeing her bright smile as permission to drop his bag and jacket and stride up to her, sliding a hand around the side of her face and kissing her with such passion she stumbled back and ended up pressed against the refrigerator door. To her, Ritchie’s kisses were not easy to ignore. He was skilled, thoughtful and she could literally feel the desire he had for her transfer from his lips right to her impulses. What’s more, he seemed to know she found it almost impossible to say no to him when he kissed her like that and it made his pride swell, among other things. Before she even realised what she was doing, her fingers were under his T-shirt, nails clawing at his rippled abdomen.

*I could just give in. I want him. I want him but he’s not Daryl.*

At the mere thought of his name, Daryl, she pushed Ritchie back and could only look at him wordlessly for a few minutes while he tenderly rubbed her cheek with his thumb, outwardly not bothered in the slightest that she had changed her mind while internally his veins raged with lust.

“Good morning.” He uttered under his breath.

For an impulsive and indulgent moment, she let herself feel it. That need for someone, anyone, but Ritchie was there, in front of her. Not Daryl. Ritchie.

“Morning.” She said upon the exhalation of a sigh. As she studied his eyes, clear complexion, hint of a beard that was neatly groomed and appealingly symmetrical lips. He smiled bashfully.

She moved out of his reach, avoiding having to use more self-control if he touched her again.

“I’m taking a couple of weeks off. Ray is looking after the place. I was thinking of heading out of town for the night to clear my head.” She told him.

He nodded, a couple of his dreads falling forwards from his shoulder, small, silver beads decorated them. He had just had them tidied up and she wondered if she’d ever seen such a niche choice of hairstyle suit anyone more than it suited him. She knew he’d had his dreads for almost ten years and was fanatical about taking care of them, his love for the reggae lifestyle and being his main influence. Now reaching past his elbows, they were shorter when she’d met him, but she still considered his ‘white boy dreads’ as Shorty sometimes called them, to be interesting and appealing. That, and she just thought he was downright cute.

“OK. I’ll see you around when you get back then. Can text me, y’know… if you want.” Ritchie suggested. Kicking himself for sounding a tad desperate.

An attempt to hide a smile was futile for Selene, she could tell what he was thinking just by the shy expression on his face. She stepped closer and pressed her lips to his. Without the urgency and sexual tension of the first kiss, it still didn’t mean that Ritchie was going to say no. Selene had to admit to herself that she was enjoying the feeling of having someone, anyone to quell her
loneliness. But as Ritchie left her apartment, she couldn’t stop herself from picking up Daryl’s business card from the dining table.

*****

His new job had been tedious at first. Adjusting to new people and a different way of life without his brother had been unsettling and anxiety inducing. But Daryl lived by adapt and overcome, it was just the way he was wired after such a volatile childhood. Allowed to be displeased but never really relying on anyone else for anything. After a couple of weeks, he noticed the other mechanics warming to him and including him in the daily coffee round at lunchtime along with inviting him out for drinks after work, which he usually always turned down without taking the invitations for granted.

After a long day in the heat and listening to country music in the workshop that was on the verge of making his ears bleed, he wandered out of the building with two of his colleagues, both outgoing and talkative men that Daryl would usually have avoided, but they’d taken a liking to him, his dry sense of humour becoming amusing to them both. Daryl slung his blue work shirt over his shoulder, the front of his black vest dampened with sweat as he walked towards the gate of the Auto Repairs business at the end of the working day. He glanced over at the two men beside him, both discussing a recent baseball game that Daryl had very little interest in. His eyes moved down, across the asphalt and then up, stopping at a figure leaned against the gate. Knee high, black boots over fishnets. A simple, plain black tank top and tattooed skin. Someone wolf whistled but it did little to snap Daryl out of his shocked trance.

“Selene. She’s here.”

“Shiiiiit, dude, dude, check her out” One of his colleagues jeered, nudging Daryl in the arm. “Like me a little something different from time to time.”

Daryl said nothing, only continuing to walk while staring at her. She pushed herself away from the gate and began to saunter towards him, her PVC clad hips swaying. Hypnotising.

“Hey” He called out to her. She raised a hand in a half wave and stopped, waiting for him to approach her. The other two men slowed considerably to enable them to whisper to each other behind Daryl.

“Dixon knows her.” He heard from behind him. “Daryl, who is that?”

“Shut up.” Daryl snapped.

Selene held up the business card between her index and middle fingers. Daryl stopped in front of her, his eyes not leaving her even for a second. The other two men passed them, making no secret of the fact that they were trying to see as much as possible of his mystery visitor.

“See you tomorrow, Daryl” one of them out with a shameless giggle.

Daryl was completely still. Transfixed.

*She has my card. She’s thought about what I said.*

“Yeah, later” he grunted.

Waiting for them to be out of earshot, Selene finally spoke.

“Can we go to your place, please?” She asked blankly.
“Yeah. Sure. S’this way.” He said, gesturing with his hand to his left. “You ok?”

A short nod was her only response.

“What you here?” He asked as they began to walk in the sunshine.

She merely looked at him for a second before ignoring the question. Unable to fathom why she’d have travelled so far for hardly any conversation, he furrowed his brow and accepted that she may have more to say once they were in the confines of his apartment.

“Ok.” He sighed. Accepting that she wasn’t going to bless him with an explanation yet.

*****

The apartment building Daryl led Selene into was obviously new, the smell of fresh paint still hanging in their air in the main entrance. It was on the quieter part of town, situated in a park decorated with tall oak trees and hints of Spanish Moss. The area around it was clean, tidy and obviously on the more affluent side.

Selene considered that Daryl’s apartment was already better than hers and she’d only walked through the main door and entered the elevator.

An elevator. She thought. I have stairs. Lots of them. Like a peasant.

On the second floor, he stood aside and allowed her to walk into the hall before him, telling her it was apartment number 21. She skimmed the numbers on the doors as she walked, picking up on the fact that she couldn’t hear a single thing through any of the doors. Either the inhabitants of this particular apartment block were extremely quiet, or the place had been completely soundproofed. When she came to a white door with the number 21 displayed in bronze metal, she stepped back and let him unlock the door. He pushed it open and held out a hand, letting her enter his home first.

Selene’s mouth almost dropped open when she saw the vast size of the living space. The walls were painted a light grey and boasted black, framed posters of rock bands. As she entered the living room, it occurred to her just how ‘Daryl’ his home was. Motorcycle parts made into household objects like clocks, candle holders and ashtrays took pride of place on surfaces. A large, black bookcase much like her own stood in the corner. The TV was brand new, sizeable and obviously barely used judging by the spotless remote on the heavy, black, glass topped coffee table. Under the glass were Motorcycle magazines, arranged attractively and tastefully. His crossbow was mounted on hooks at the side of the entrance to the kitchen along with four hunting knives, displayed in size order.

He couldn’t have decorated this place. Could he?!

She slowly turned her body, taking everything in. The luxurious corner couch, the walk-in kitchen, fully equipped with a wine rack and an elaborate drinks cabinet in the corner, complete with Crystal tumblers.

He said this place ‘wasn’t much’! How much does the guy earn?! Damn!

But Selene wasn’t there to compare interior decorating decisions. As she stood in the middle of his apartment, he leaned on the doorway to the living room. His eyes pinned on the small, white card between her fingers. She rotated it, around and around, using her skirt to propel it round. His business card. When she finally met his gaze, she pushed the card into a tight pocket at the top of her skirt before reaching around to her back and unzipping it. Daryl jolted in surprise.
“What are you doin?” He asked.

She said nothing. Carrying on, sliding her skirt down her thighs and dropping it to the floor. Next was her top. She crossed her arms and hoisted it over her head, revealing a black, leather look bra with leopard print edging. Her movements were fluid, almost choreographed and her eyes locked with his.

“Selene?” He tried, his voice coming out as a small croak. He straightened up in the doorway, half convinced he should go to her and cover her up, but only half. There was a part of him that was curious as to what exactly was going to transpire.

Down to her underwear and staring at him with fierce determination, Daryl had no choice but to look away so he could rub both hands over his face, as if what he was seeing wasn’t real and would disappear at any moment. But it was mere seconds before he found his attention drawn right back to her. She made him weak with her stare, let alone her partially clothed body.

“What is this, Selene?” He managed.

She glided over to him until there was only centimetres between them. His breath hitched in his throat and his chest and back flushed with heat when she closed her eyes and subtly tucked her head into the crook of his neck. Her skin barely touching him but creating enough of an impact to make him hold his breath. He wanted to fight it. To tell her that this was not the way to figure out what was going on between them. But his hands slowly elevated from his sides and he settled them on the bare skin of her hips.

He couldn’t say no, knowing he wasn’t strong enough after missing her so much, the need for a connection was more powerful than it had ever been. She started to unbuckle his belt, lifting her head and opening her eyes to see his confused and pained expression.

_I need you. I’ve missed you. Just this once._

The desperate nature of the situation only added to the sexual tension in the room and Selene didn’t even have to try, he was ready when she was. She slipped her fishnets and underwear down, unfastened her boots, discarded them and took his hand, guiding him to the clasp of her bra. It was a test, he knew that much; if he did it, it was confirmed. It was happening. He didn't need to think about it, having already decided at that point. He popped the clasp and felt her hands clamp around his wrists.

For Daryl, the whole thing was shocking, unlike anything he’d experienced before, out of nowhere and he didn’t quite know how to handle it all. In a sudden, simultaneous rush when she dragged him to the couch and straddled him, he felt everything all at once, anger, sadness, despair, lust and hints of happiness when he was inside her and she clutched her thighs around him and drove her fingers into his hair. Until he saw the blank look in her eyes and it occurred to him that she was trying to fill the loneliness that was in her heart. He knew, because he felt it too.

It wasn’t gentle, considerate or leisurely. It was rough, urgent and as if the two of them were clutching at straws, trying to create something that may or may not be there any longer. His attempts to kiss her were thwarted but she allowed him to hold onto her with a grip so strong her skin bruised and it felt so deliciously addictive, so beautifully wrong.

She was in control at first, increasing the pace and he was left with nothing to do but follow and witness her chasing a release that seems too far away, if possible, at all. She panted and growled next to his ear and if she wasn’t so beautiful and didn’t turn him on so much, he would have thought her to be a little intimidating. Eventually, he let himself go and found himself pushing his
face into her breasts, groaning loudly against her chest as she rocked her hips back and forth at a frantic speed, using his shoulders for stability.

“Make me come.” She rasped at him out of the blue like a wild animal, forcing her eyes open and expecting to see a fearful or baffled expression on his face. But Daryl, far from recoiling in horror, was staring raptly at her. Eyes glazed and mouth hung open, panting heavily as he was transfixed by her breasts and most intimate parts as she drove herself down onto him. Far from shaming her or striking regret into her mind, his response only heightened her desire more. He seized her hips, lifting her from his lap and withdrawing himself from her completely. She whimpered in protest and furrowed her brow.

“That what ya came here for?” He demanded, his voice louder than she was used to, more direct, more certain. As was his face. She nodded and found herself being placed on her feet and bent over the arm of the couch and she realised in that moment that with their emotional connection now barely even there, this was more of a physical thing to Daryl than she had anticipated.

“Open ’em” He ordered as rough hands found her inner thighs, pushing her legs further apart and travelling up, exploring her body while he had the chance. Then, he was inside her again, slamming into her as the fingers of one hand brought her further to the edge, making her legs weak and her breath hard to catch. She reached back, curled a hand around his forearm and dug her nails in so hard he thought she could very well have drawn blood.

Oh, so that’s how you want it.

“What ya waitin’ for, huh?” He growled against her shoulder blade with a fistful of her hair, her head was pinned back at his mercy and her nerve endings thrummed with electric anticipation. “This what you fuckin’ want? Hmm?” She couldn’t answer him, her throat pulled taut and veins bulged. Her chest reddened as she gasped with each thrust. A rough growl escaped her lips and it was all she could muster.

At the sound of his cold and detached words and the touch of his harsh fingers, rapidly circling between her legs, she slipped from the precipice and her inner walls clamped around him. She felt him jolt.

“There it is.” He grinned against her skin, the words breathy and barely audible. She couldn’t help it, she cried out and almost screamed as pleasure pummelled through her entire body, making her legs buckle. She held onto the backrest of the couch so tightly she thought her fingernails might pierce the fabric. If it wasn’t for Daryl’s arm now folding around her waist, she was sure she would have collapsed. Her throat was hoarse from the guttural moans that followed and helped to tip Daryl over the edge too. His fingers dug into her skin and he held her close to him, gasping in her ear with each juddered thrust.

Neither of them said a word as they dressed. Selene barely looked up as she zipped up her skirt and pulled her top over her head. On the couch, Daryl had only bothered to put his jeans back on and neglected to fasten them when he lay back and let his eyes take in as much of her as they could.

He saw her blink rapidly, tilt her head back, take a deep breath and head for the door. Before he could protest, she was gone.

*****

Buying motorcycles had become part and parcel of how he earned his extra money which was turning out to be more than he’d anticipated. The demand was there, he just wished he had more
time to focus solely on what he really enjoyed. But it would mean leaving a job that Bill had
allocated for him and he knew better than to toss his goodwill out with the trash. A day off for
Daryl usually consisted of travelling to check out new purchases, which were essentially
investments to him. He would buy parts and full motorcycles to work on in the allocated garage he
had underneath his apartment complex and then sell them on for double the price.

The night of his encounter with Selene had been sleepless, restless, frustrating and revealing. He
poured over and over the details time and time again. But there really wasn’t much to dissect in the
way of verbal communication. She hadn’t said anything much at all, which only added to the
magnetism of the situation. He was sure, if it hadn’t been for the absence of any emotion, that it
was one of the hottest, most random experiences of his life. However, it wasn’t without a glaring
fault, and that was how obvious it had become that Selene would rather silence her craving for him
with sex over communication.

It made the following morning even more awkward than it would have been if she had never
showed up at his workplace that afternoon. Having travelled back to his old stomping ground,
managing to avoid Merle long enough to be spared the agony of talking his way out of getting lit or
going to The Rabbit, Daryl headed through town to an address where he had previously viewed a
motorcycle.

His hands were shoved in his pockets and his head was low as he ambled along the sidewalk,
looking up and huffing with amusement. Instantly wondering if the universe could make things any
more convenient for him. In front of him, three feet away, stood Selene with her arms full of full
grocery bags.

“Need a hand?” He called out. Her head snapped around and her eyes widened.

“You don’t live in this town anymore. Why are you here?” She wanted to know.

Nice.

He thought. Good to see you too.

“Told ya the other day. Buyin’ a bike from somebody. On my way to pick it up.” He reached out to
her, tapping one of the bags. Clearly, she was struggling to hold them all, one of them being
particularly heavy. “Let me get one of those”

“No. I’m fine thank you.” She replied straight away, backing up and repositioning her hands
around the groceries. The heavy bag dropped to the floor with a crack and she closed her eyes,
shoving away a flash of rage at the current situation and hating herself for not borrowing her
brother’s truck.

Daryl swooped down and picked up the bag, re-filling it and standing up with a knowing look.

“C’mon, I’ll walk ya back.” He said.

Far from wanting to engage in too much conversation, Selene was aware that she would not be able
to get all three bags back to the tattoo studio in one go and that whoever was watching over her,
was playing a cruel trick on her at that moment.

“Fine. Thanks.” She reluctantly agreed.

They began to walk, crossing the street and only looking up at each other a couple of times. Daryl
shook his head when a flashback of the previous afternoon crept into his mind. His face by her ear
as she shook against him, his fingers gripping onto her hair.

Yeah, I’m not going to be forgetting that one in a hurry.
“Where’s ya truck?” He questioned as a group of joggers ran past in high visibility vests. Selene moved closer to the store fronts to give them more room.

“It needs fixing. Hardly used it anyway.” She mumbled.

“Oh, Ok.” He shrugged.

The chance of any talking from that point on had died until they reached the corner of the street Selene’s tattoo studio was on. She halted and held out an arm as far as she could.

“I’m fine from here. You should go. I don’t want them to see you.” She said.

“OK.” He nodded, passing the bag to her like it was an oversized baby in a brown bag. “Look, um…’bout yesterday-”

“-Don’t, Daryl.” She intercepted.

“Don’t what? We-”

“-There’s nothing to talk about.”

She was trying her best to shut him down, refusing to acknowledge what had happened and it was not sitting well with Daryl, who had mulled over every detail in the hours since. He wanted to make her stand and demand that she explain herself. But then it wasn't all her. He had caved in, surrendered to the situation and felt just as much to blame as she was. Except he didn't regret it one, little bit.

“So, what was it? Just sex?” He asked directly. “That’s all it was to you?”

“Yes.” She whispered, quickly checking over her shoulder.

He tilted his head to the side and sighed, disappointed with her reaction. He didn’t know what he was expecting, but something more than a meaningless session like strangers would have been a start at least.

“Selene, I know that aint true.” He argued.

“I have to go.” She said, surging past him and leaving him stood on the corner of the sidewalk, watching the love of his life walk away from him.
Chapter Summary

Short little update! Bit more angst. Things have to get worse before they get better ;) Please excuse any typos or spelling errors, I've been a busy bee writing today and I will edit as I read through.

Loud, industrial metal music blared from the studio’s speakers, mounted high in the corners of the open plan room. Selene had spent a fortune on them, seeing them as an investment, or rather justifying them as an investment. Ray, upon the revelation of the price she’d paid for such high-tech and impressive vessels for her favourite music, politely reminded her that if her business didn’t make enough money for her to pay her credit card bill, her new speakers would be the reason she’d end up selling her body on the streets. She’d retorted with a comment about how she wouldn’t have to lift a finger if Ray stood outside Reflex nightclub in his short shorts with a placard about special offers.

It was 4pm and Bear was busy tattooing his last client of the day. Axel occupied the front desk, uploading photos from his days work. Ray was outside, smoking a cigarette and making kissing faces at Ritchie, who chuckled and flipped him the bird from the waiting area’s couch. Since Axel’s discovery of Selene and Ritchie’s tryst in the store room, the atmosphere between him and Ritchie had become increasingly difficult and forced despite Axel’s desire to warn Ritchie against doing anything to further risk getting his heart broken, he was finding it a constant struggle to understand why one person would put themselves in a situation that was obviously going to get them hurt. Having already said his piece and making his views on the subject quite clear, Axel decided to leave it at that. But it didn’t stop him from feeling a stab of frustration and anger with Selene every time he caught them lock eyes across the studio.

When his final image uploaded, his eyes lifted to see Ritchie smiling down at his cell phone. It was Selene’s day off and everyone knew she was home all day after Ray emerged from her apartment just before opening time with a large coffee and a mouth still full of pancakes. The frequent, early morning breakfast gossip session. She hadn’t been seen by anyone all day, which meant she hadn’t moved and not only was Axel aware of this, so was Ritchie.

He flicked a couple of his long dreadlocks over his shoulder and pushed his phone back into his pocket. Standing up, he skirted around the coffee table, tidied the portfolios on the surface and wandered past the desk.

“I’m going to clear up.” He mumbled as he passed.

Axel shot to his feet and followed Ritchie as he climbed the stairs, receiving a puzzled glance over a shoulder as he stomped up the stairs in pursuit. Ritchie, assuming that he was heading to the store room, took little notice and once he was at the top of the stairs, began to shut down his laptop, switching off his own music and dragging his bag from the drawer under his desk. But Axel wasn’t interested in the store room, he leaned against the stair posts, his big, tattooed arms crossed and his closely shaven face pulled taut into a scowl. Anxiety began to rise in Ritchie’s stomach, he had somewhere to be but was under no illusions that his friend was about to put obstacles in the way to try and stop him. Slinging his bag over his shoulder, his dreads swayed with the movement of his
body as he walked confidently over to the stairs that led to Selene’s apartment. Axel shot an arm out, blocking his path and glaring down at him.

“Think about what you’re doing, buddy.” Axel warned.

Ritchie sighed and licked his lips, his gazed focused on the floor for a second while he decided how to handle the situation. The last thing he wanted was to fall out with Axel, or anyone else. But, the pull to be with Selene was too great.

“Let me past, dude. She text me, she wants to talk to me” He mumbled.

“Rich, I know what’s going on. I’m not an idiot.” Axel warned sternly.

His bright blue eyes flew up to Axel’s face, blazing with defiance and determination. He had got this far, she wanted to see him and failed to resist him every time he saw her. It was a dream come true, one he’d dared to indulge in for the last few years and he wasn’t about to let anyone come between them, not even one of his best friends.

“Yeah? Well, this is my choice. My life. She likes me, she’s made that clear. Just back the fuck off, alright?!” He hissed, taking a step forwards and finding himself inches away from his friend’s furious face. Axel refused to back down and solidified his stance on things when he blocked both sides of the stair well by placing his other hand on the railing. Now, there was no way of manoeuvring past.

“Get out of the way, Axel.” Ritchie demanded.

But Axel merely stooped down, his lips thinning as he spat out his next sentence.

“You still screwing her?”

Ritchie broke eye contact, still embarrassed by being caught with his boss in the store room. It didn’t matter that it was Selene to him, being caught in such a compromising position with anyone would have been mortifying enough. He liked to joke about being with the girls at the rabbit or his truthfully, non-existent, odd fetishes. But underneath it all and by his own admission, Ritchie was quite understated in that area provided he could trust his sexual partner. There was no one he trusted more than Selene, even though everything was pointing to him being perilously wrong for it.

“I haven’t seen her in a few days.” He grumbled.

“Yes or no?” Axel ordered.

“This is none of your business, man! Just fucking move!” He snapped.

Selene cleared her throat and immediately got the attention of both men in her stairwell, their surprised faces turning to see her unimpressed expression as she leaned against the door frame.

“Axel, let him past, please.” She said, her voice calm and in stark contrast to her angry body language.

An irate glare that moved from Selene back to Ritchie told them both that Axel wasn’t going to let this go and that it had quite possibly dented their friendship from the moment he realised what was going on when he’d walked into the store room that day. Reluctantly, he moved aside and shook his head as Ritchie passed and headed up to Selene’s apartment.
On the ground floor, Bear rubbed at his face and released a quiet growl to himself as his client waited on the tattoo bed in the studio. He was taking a break, or so he’d said when he downed tools and stormed over to the stairs, suspicious of whatever was going on between Axel and Ritchie. One thing Selene’s expensive speakers had failed to do, was mask the tense conversation that had transpired at the stop of the stairs and Bear had heard every single word.

Ritchie threw his backpack onto the couch and pushed the sleeves of his work sweater up to his elbows while he observed Selene open and close cupboards in her kitchen wearing black sweatpants and a huge band T-shirt that was at least two sizes too big for her. Even in her dressed down state with only her eyebrows drawn on, she was still a vision to him.

“You want a beer?” She murmured carelessly as she opened the fridge.

“Sure.” He replied with a voice that was much more upbeat than her own.

She cracked open a can and approached him, holding out the drink.

“You know I’m not allowed to drink, right? Supposed to be in recovery.” He smiled.

Her face seemed to drop even more and she brought a hand up, covering her eyes.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorr-”

“-No, no. It’s fine. I’m fine. I’ve had alcohol since I’ve been out and I’m good. You know that. It’s not the booze that’s the problem, right?”

She offered him a kind of feeble smile, one that did little to quell the worry in his heart that she really didn’t look happy. He felt as though he knew what he was about to hear, but decided to at least try and get some enjoyment out of being able to see her properly for the first time in a countless amount of days that had seemed like months to him.

“Right. As long as you’re sure.” She nodded, handing him the can. He took a large gulp, thankful for the added confidence he was about to receive in the form of liquid courage. He reached up to her face, smoothing a thumb over her cheek as she closed her eyes at his touch.

Selene couldn’t describe it if someone had asked her to. She didn’t know why she melted every time he touched her. Maybe it was because she felt something other than lust and loneliness, maybe it was because no matter how surprising it was to her, Ritchie knew how to persuade her to give in. But should he really have to? Surely, giving in shouldn’t even be present in the equation. When he touched her, she didn’t really seem to care, all she wanted was to experience his touch on her skin, his lips on her collarbone and his fingers grazing over her breasts and ribs. Maybe it was as simple as; he was good at it.

When he slipped a hand around her waist and under her T-shirt, she was compelled to let him, kissing him back before he even had time to think of a reason why not. Only seconds had passed and already he was exploring her body under her clothes and backing her against the bookshelf when he opened one eye upon hearing a clunk when her back made contact with the shelves. He noticed the Blue Morpho he bought her on the shelf behind her. It wasn’t mounted on the wall like he expected, but she proudly displayed it among a collection of vintage books on witchcraft and the occult. He closed his eye and continued to kiss her, pushing his hands inside her bra and pressing
his body to hers.

She gently shoved at his shoulders after finding the strength to try and stop things. It was a difficult move to make when she considered how he was making her knees weak with each time his tongue caressed hers and his finger bumped over her nipple. Success had been achieved and she slowly moved him and broke their kiss, her skin feeling empty as soon as his hands left her.

“Stop. You have to stop.” She gasped.

Ritchie smiled at her, a bright and attractive, symmetrical smile with straight, white teeth that she always thought was gorgeous even before they started having encounters in store rooms.

“You don’t want me to stop, Selene.” He whispered.

She would have been lying if she’d said she did. But one thing was spurring her on, urging her to at least try and figure out the right thing to do; Daryl. She’d thought about him non-stop as was usual to her, only now her every thought was laden with longing and confusion. Giving herself to him so freely and randomly after a lack of seeing him for months had left her reeling. She couldn’t even say why she’d done it, but what she did know is that Daryl and Ritchie were very different and no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to replace the quiet redneck that thought she was too good for him.

“No, I don’t but you have to. Please.” She said a little more certain this time.

“I missed you.” He blurted out. The smile dropped from his face and was replaced with a shy sincerity that Selene thought was adorable. “Let me just spend some time with you, I won’t even touch you.” He suggested “Unless you want me to”.

The innocent ignorance that Ritchie possessed about her state of mind made her feel so guilty she moved out of his reach, backing into the kitchen and picking up the can she’d offered him. She drank a few mouthfuls and slammed the can back onto the table. Ritchie’s expression was becoming more desperate with the realisation that maybe, just maybe, Axel was right.

“This… thing… between us? It’s complicated and I’m not sure what’s happening here, we’re friends.” She explained.

It was a ridiculous notion to him, their friendship was now like a distant memory after what had happened between them. He no longer saw her as his friend, or his boss for that matter. He saw her as something that was so much more than that.


Her mouth moved to respond but his fingertips running along her jawline was too much of a distraction.

Why can’t I say no to you?

“Friends that can’t be in a room alone together without wanting to rip each other’s clothes off?” He continued to hum at her as he levelled his lips with her ear. “Friends that have really hot sex in secret at work?” Her neck tingled with delight when he pulled at the neckline of her T-shirt and kissed along her collarbone. “Hmm? That the kind of friends we are?” He asked between kisses.

Her body was beginning to beg for him and she wished she was stronger, wished she could resist his perfect kiss and addictive touch. She blinked rapidly as she attempted to remain composed, but he was nudging her against the table, his erection hot against her sweatpants and she wanted to grab him, claw at him and have him take her right there. She inhaled sharply and half climbed onto the
tables surface when he slipped his hand into the front of her sweatpants and drove his two middle fingers between her folds. His mouth curled into a satisfied smile as his eyes swept over her, her cheeks were flushed already, her eyes flickering and her hips bucking up to meet his hand. The sight alone caused him to tighten his jaw.

“I don’t think we’re just friends, Selene.” He said through gritted teeth.

“Ritchie” She breathed, the sound travelling on an expelled burst of air that escaped her without control.

“Friends don’t make each other come like we do.” He rasped against her neck “You keep rocking up onto my fingers like that and that’s what’s going to happen.”

Something crossed her mind while she allowed him to heighten her pleasure with his fingers inside her, something that she couldn’t say she disliked- Ritchie had become more confident. He hadn’t spoken to her in such a self-assured and seductive way before and she couldn’t help but wonder if it was the way he was with any other women, or if this new, bordering on domineering Ritchie was specially reserved for her. It reminded her of a time from before, when Daryl had taken the lead in almost the same place in her apartment and made her mind surge with desire when he’d dished out short, sharp orders at her and made her say ‘please’. Her veins were spiking, her skin awash with sensitivity as her imagination flashed back to Daryl and the way he had surprised her with how demanding he could be and all of a sudden, it wasn’t Ritchie when she opened her eyes, it was Daryl. Then, it happened. She cried out. A tidal wave of pure delight crashed through her body and she slapped her hand around his wrist, steadying him and panting loudly. Ritchie rubbed his nose on the side of her face, grinning from ear to ear at his achievement, his breath was warm against her now hypersensitive skin. Her breathing began to slow and he removed his hand, kissing the side of her face as she reached up and gently eased him away from her.

“I’m going to hurt you, Ritchie.”

Disbelieving her, he just shook his head and maintained his smile with his eyes searching her face for some semblance of proof that she wanted him in the same way that he’d always wanted her.

“You’re not hurting me. I’m fine.” He assured her. He tried to move back to her, to wrap his arms around her and continue his mission to gratify his need to have her, but she stopped him with both hands on his chest.

“You have to stop. I need some space.” She confessed.

Ritchie let a huff of amusement escape him and worried for a second she might be offended, but until that point, she had been receptive to him letting himself go and allowing himself to say and do as he pleased without the usual inhibitions.

“That’s because I imagined you were Daryl.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to leave you…frustrated. But you started this. I’m trying to tell you that I just need some time and space to think. Please. Can you just do that for me?” She pleaded, stepping back further and smoothing her hands down her clothing.

Finally realising the gravity of her request, he yielded and dropped his gaze, his shoulders sagging and a rush of air leaving his lungs. “Um, yeah… yeah I guess so.” He took a couple of steps back, stooped down and collected his backpack from the couch before throwing it over one shoulder and
motioning to the door. “I’ll just…go. I’ll see you when you’re back at work I guess.”

“OK” She whispered sadly.

“I’m sorry.” He said sincerely “If I came on too strong. I just-I think you’re beautiful and sexy and literally like the most perfect woman I ever met. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

As he turned and opened the door, he heard her pad across the room to him and looked over his shoulder as she took hold of his arm and turned him to face her. Leaving a light and feathery kiss on his lips, she smiled softly at him and squeezed his hand.

“Thank you” She uttered.

“For what?” He asked.

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, her eyes rolling full circle as she desperately tried not to grin at him.

“The uh…y’know.” She huffed, wiggling her middle fingers in the air.

“Oh” He chuckled, now displaying the traditional shyness she frequently saw in him, in contrast to the confidence she’d witnessed just minutes before. “Really, I could do that all day.”

They both locked eyes and giggled like two teenagers that had broken the rules. Leaving on a lighter note than he’d anticipated, Ritchie descended the stairs not completely disheartened but aware that although his actions were along the aggressive line, Axel could well be right about Selene after all. Not wanting to dwell on the negative now his life was finally starting to make sense, Ritchie hummed to himself as he walked through the studio and headed out the back door, ensuring the lock was engaged from outside before he scuffed along the ground of the parking lot. Bear watched from his truck in the corner of the lot, shielded by the shade of an overhanging tree and slouched down in the seat, he could clearly see Ritchie’s apparently content and relaxed expression.

For the next two days Selene kept away from everyone, taking time to clean and re-arrange her apartment, re-paint the bathroom, do her taxes and buy new clothes. It had been as productive as it had been distracting and she couldn’t deny that if she spent more than five minutes without a task, her mind would only wander back to Daryl. That was what made the nights difficult, the silence alone with nothing but her own thoughts and flashbacks of being close to him. Skin on skin. Sharing a connection that she knew she would never find in another human being. Switching on the light and reading proved to be futile when she read the same sentence for the sixth time and still couldn’t fathom what it actually said. Switching on the TV was just as useless, the colourful images dancing in front of her eyes and speaking to her and yet she still had no idea what was going on in front of her face. Her mind was truly elsewhere. She took off her night clothes, dressing in a black skater skirt and black, button down, short sleeved, fitted shirt and picked up her coat and truck keys. She couldn’t sit around all night at the mercy of her demons. She was going out to feed them.
Daryl turned over in bed and flipped his pillow the new side of the fabric was cold against his cheek, a new and comfortable position that he hoped would lull him back to sleep. The soft light of the moon filtered through the drapes and illuminated a thin, slither of light through the middle of the room. He frequently woke in the middle of the night with his head crowded and his heart heavy. He sighed when it occurred to him that this night was no different. He checked the time; 2:03am. He had work at 7am, a client that was bringing a custom motorcycle in for more elaborate adaption that would take concentration and focus, two things he wasn’t likely to possess after yet another sleepless night.

He thought he may have imagined it or been dreaming after all when the buzzer to his apartment screamed through the room, seemingly ten times louder than it usually did in such a small hour of the night. Having jumped slightly at the sound and feeling his heartrate quicken momentarily, he sat up, rubbing his face and blinked until his eyes adapted to the darkness. The doorbell rang again. Whoever it was, meant it and wasn’t going away. Climbing out of bed, he approached the doors to his balcony and flung one open, ready to berate whoever his mystery, late night caller was.

Selene stared up at him from the street below, her finger poised on the buzzer button. He could see that her legs were bare and her face wasn’t made up as usual. Only her eyebrows were enhanced as her large eyes peered at him.

“What are you doin’ here? It’s 2am.” He hissed down at her as quietly as he could.

Her brow wrinkled and she said nothing, only pushing the button harder, longer this time, sending the obnoxious buzzer alert shooting out into the street and no doubt through the walls to his neighbours’ bedrooms.


He stormed inside, slapping on the light and jabbing the buzzer button on hallways panel. He then unlocked and opened the door, leaving it ajar and heading back to the bedroom where he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Daryl only ever slept in his boxers and for a moment, he wondered if he should at least put on a shirt before finding out Selene’s reason for waking up the entire neighbourhood with her buzzer bashing, but she had seen it all before and it was his apartment, after all. He heard the door click shut and sat on the edge of his bed when Selene stepped into the doorway.

“This better be good. I gotta be up in four hours.” He snapped, his tiredness getting the better of him.

She still didn’t speak, only crossing the space between them and shrugging her jacket off. She threw it on a nearby chair and stood as close to him as he’d let her. Daryl was rapidly realising that this was starting to look like a repeat of the last time she’d been in his apartment, when she had only spoken with her eyes and her actions and the result had been a passionate yet heart breaking encounter. She moved closer, positioning her legs either side of one of his and brushing through his hair as he looked up at her. In the darkness, he could make out her glistening lips and the shape of her body, silhouetted against the dart of moonlight through the drapes.

There were a million things he wanted to say, but none of them emerged when he was rendered completely still by her lifting his hands to the buttons on her shirt, urging him to unfasten them. Half of him knew he should send her away and save himself the pain, but the other half screamed at him to take her, to be close to her if even just for a little while. Her chest rose and fell under his hands with the first button pinched between his fingers, she nodded subtly and he popped the first button, then the second until he was at the hem of the shirt having not been able to say no. She let the shirt fall down her shoulders and quickly regained her grip on one of his hands, smoothing it
along her thigh, under her skirt. Daryl licked his lips and felt a rush of excitement at the thought of her driving all the way over from the next town with the intent to prove to him that she wasn’t wearing a stitch of underwear. Letting his hands roam freely, she gradually knelt on the bed, either side of him and eased him back on to the sheets. With his mind swimming with possibilities and the woman he loved half naked above him, he let her have what she wanted.

4:36am. Daryl’s eyes flickered open to find the shadowy, feminine form of Selene perched on the edge of the bed and smoking a cigarette with an empty bottle of beer in her other hand. Her black hair covered half of her back in a soft, dark mass. She took slow drags, lightly tapping the smoke at the rim of the bottle to catch the ash. She wore nothing except a calm and contemplative demeanour.

Daryl reached out and tickled his fingertips through her hair and down her spine, causing her to close her eyes and tilt her head back.

“Hey” He rasped.

He wasn’t graced with a response, or even an acknowledgement as she took another drag and dropped the cigarette into the bottle. Her eyes were fixed on the gap in the drapes before her, the light from the room subtly lighting her face and chest, which Daryl noticed as he sat up behind her.

“We gonna talk about this?” He asked.

“No.” She answered firmly.

He sighed and rubbed at his eyes with one hand. This time had been gentler than the last, slower and more deliberate somehow. She declined to let him switch positions from missionary, clinging tightly to his arms the entire time, forehead to forehead and fixing her gaze on his face even though very little could be seen without the light. When he’d finished, she held him to her and only released him when he’d lowered his head to kiss her, which she avoided.

“So, you just gonna keep showin’ up outta the blue, sleepin’ with me and leavin’?” he questioned.

“Yes.” She uttered.

As much as he loved her, as much as he wanted her all the time and would have moved heaven and earth for her, he wasn’t about to let her break his heart all over again.

“What if that’s not what I want? This ain’t just about you.” He pointed out.

She placed the glass beer bottle on the nightstand and turned her head to the side. He could see more of her face, downcast and sad. She was still refusing to look at him.

“That’s your choice.” She remarked.

“Naw, ya can’t keep doin’ this to me.”

She stood up and collected her shirt and skirt from the floor. As she dressed, she glanced up and against her will, caught his confused and pleading eyes.

“Didn’t hear you saying no.” She mentioned.

“That’s ‘cause I fuckin’ love you, Selene” He affirmed.

She dressed and swiped up her coat from the chair. Pausing in the doorway, she looked back at him
one, last time. It wasn’t her intention to hurt him, or make him suffer in any way. What she did want from her actions was akin to an addict needing a fix. She needed him, she wanted him. But something was stopping her.

“I can’t get enough of you.” She told him as she tied the fabric belt around the middle of her coat. Daryl swallowed hard and prepared to try and find an appropriate reply, but she stopped his train of thought when she spoke again.

“But I also can’t trust you.”
Regret, Rebellion and Revolt

Even after having known each other for years, Bear and Ritchie weren’t as close to each other as they were to the others in their friendship group. Bear usually spent most of his time with Axel, bickering like an old married couple while engrossed in intense session of Call of Duty. Ritchie was the quietest member of the group, gravitating towards no one else in particular. While he loved his friends and was grateful for the camaraderie of the workplace and the social circle they created, it was rare for him to spend a great deal of time with any of them past the regular drinks after work. The only one he did find contentment around, was Selene. Routine gaming or movie nights at his place were a common occurrence but it was no different to anything she did with the others.

Ritchie had been wary of Bear ever since he’d embarked on a clandestine and highly controversial relationship with Selene. It didn’t take a genius to see that Bear was fiercely protective over his sister and would go as far as their father would to protect her. It was for this reason that his heart began to hammer and his defences went up when Bear demanded that the two of them go to Marty’s for a beer after work. Accepting no as an answer obviously hadn’t been an option as Bear didn’t exactly ask, he told Ritchie that he would be meeting him at the Bar at 6 o clock and received a nervous nod as a response.

Marty’s was quiet that evening which only seemed to draw more attention to Bear’s brooding silence through his first drink. All attempts at friendly conversation made by Ritchie were shrugged off or graced with a curt, one-word answer. Ritchie wasn’t sure if he’d ever taken part in a more awkward non-conversation and wished the ground would open up and swallow him whole, giving him an escape from what was bound to be a strange situation even to the uninformed, outside observer.

“You want another beer?” Bear eventually asked after finishing his and slamming the glass onto the bars surface, an act which made Ritchie want to jump out of his skin. But he remained calm and shifted on the barstool, zipping up his hoodie.

“Um… if it’s all the same to you, man, I think I’m going to head home.” He replied.

There are certain moments in a person’s life which remain locked in our memories as clear as day and are recalled with such a stark clarity that the exact feelings we felt at the time come rushing back, in a flashback so vivid we relive it all over again. Ritchie was sure that Bear’s out of the blue question was going to stay with him for a long time. It was a question that was going to forever marr their friendship and one that he never thought he would have to answer.

“Are you fucking my sister?”

Words spoken with such a blank tone to match his blank expression as he stared across the bar. Marty was polishing glasses, two women talked animatedly in the corner and another member of staff was cleaning tables. But Bear wasn’t focused on any of them. He was focused on his own rage.

Ritchie could almost feel every vein in his body run cold as he closed his eyes for a second.

He knows.

He very slowly picked up his glass and downed the rest of the beer inside before clearing his throat
and wishing he’d had the balls to turn down an invitation to Marty’s bar after all.

“Y-Yes.” He croaked.

It was like Bear was transforming in front of his very eyes. Veins protruded in his temple and his jaw clamped shut. He held up a finger at Marty, gaining his attention. Without a word he pointed to the Jack Daniels and waited for his drink to arrive in front of him. Ritchie attempted to stand from his bar stool and was stopped by a huge, heavy and aggressive hand clamping over his wrist, rendering him completely still. The thud of Bears hand on the bar seemed to rumble through the wood, causing Marty to look up at them both. Bear’s gaze was still firmly fixed in front of him as he picked up the glass of whiskey and downed it with a quick shake of his head as the liquid travelled down his throat.

“When did it start?” He wanted to know.

“About-about two weeks ago.” Ritchie obediently stammered.

“How many times?”

“Dude-” Ritchie tried

“How many times, asshole?” Bear demanded, slamming a fist onto the bar. Now, everyone was looking their way and Marty was hovering around the phone attached to the wall.

“Twice.” He blurted out “And a-a half”

“A half?” Bear probed with an intensely unimpressed side glance.

“Um. Yeah. Well, we didn’t, I- I just gave her a…aaand you’re actually going strangle me if I keep talking.” He babbled, his breathing now jagged. Bear was his friend, but Ritchie was smart enough to know that no one was exempt from his fury when it came to his little sister. He had no doubt that if he wanted to, Bear would flatten him with one punch and their friendship and everything connected to it would be over. He watched as Bear clenched his fist on the countertop and slowly exhaled, subtly shaking his head at Marty to either warn him to stay away from the phone, or to signal that there would be no need to call the cops.

“She doesn’t love you.” Bear mumbled. “She never will.”

“Well… it’s a bit early to be talking about tha-” Ritchie attempted to counter

“-you think I’m some kind of retard, Ritchie? Huh? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean to-“

“-You should have listened to Axel.”

“No! Axel hasn’t got a god damn clue what’s going on with me and Selene!” Ritchie announced defiantly and with a degree of irritation that Bear instantly picked up on. He gradually shifted his vision to the side, huffing in disbelief at his friends now thinly veiled attitude and releasing a mocking laugh.

“You are so fuckin’ naïve. It don’t matter what you think is going on between you two. I know my sister better than she knows herself. Selene loves Dixon. Not you. That ain’t ever gonna change.”

“Dixon cheated on her.” Ritchie pointed out.
Bear laughed once more, this time with even more mockery as he rubbed a hand over his face.

“You really believe that?” He asked sincerely. “I mean, really?”

“Don’t you?” Ritchie shot back without hesitation.

“No.” Bear affirmed, his fists now unclenching and opening up as if to convey that he was holding onto nothing and his belief was an honest one. “I believe him. I beat the shit outta him and he never even hit me back. We all know Daryl’s reputation, the guys a scrapper but he refused to lay a single punch on me because he knew what it’d do to Selene. I warned him off and he still wouldn’t leave her. Why would he do that and then just cheat on her? It’s bullshit.”

Ritchie thought for a moment, his mind racing. Everything inside him was beginning to thrum with the ache of disappointment, the prospect that Bear could be right, that she would never love him the way he loved her, no matter what happened.

“How do you explain what she saw?” He asked.

“Ahh, wrong place, wrong time. Besides, I know Amy, that girls’ morals hit the ground as fast as her fuckin’ panties.” He grumbled, spinning the whiskey glass around on the surface between his fingers.

“Selene’s pretty convinced. I tried to tell her to talk to him. But she wouldn’t.” Ritchie offered.

It wasn’t a lie. He had tried to urge her to talk to him on a number of occasions. But it was far from it being for her own good, he had his own agenda and deep down, he knew in his heart from her obvious fury that the chances of her seeking Daryl’s side of the story would be very low indeed. But he was her friend, and he had to keep up appearances and act no different to the way he normally would or suspicions would have been raised regarding their relationship a lot earlier.

“She’s stubborn and she’s hurt. She wouldn’t even listen to Ray for once” Bear explained “But think she wants to believe Daryl. She misses him. I could see it when I caught her staring our of the window in the mornings, like she was waiting to see him walk by like he always did. She still does it, she still looks for him. I may not be the sharpest tool in the box but I see it and I hate her being unhappy.” He glanced to the side, meeting Ritchie’s eye. “I’m not going to lie to you, I want to knock your fucking teeth out for touching her. You’re sposed to be her friend, man”

“I’m sorry dude, but It’s not like she didn’t want to.” It was a risky move, the admission that it wasn’t all one-sided. The reminder that it did, indeed take two and Ritchie felt it necessary to make a point of it. “She kissed me first, she initiated it. She wanted to. So did I. But It isn’t just about the sex, man.”

The words seemed to make Bear wince as Ritchie said them and he turned his big frame to the side, gripping onto the edge of the bar with his fingers.

“Listen to me and listen good.” He warned “I asked you here so I could tell you the truth, because she won’t. She can’t. Her heads all messed up. Do yourself a favour, stop sleeping with her and go back to being her friend.”

Ritchie was desperate, he had to try and make his friend understand that this was not some fleeting crush, this was serious to him and his intentions towards Selene were real and true. He didn’t know if an honest confession of how he felt would help or hinder the situation, but it was all he had.

“I love her, Bear. I really fucking love her.” He admitted.
The flicker of one eyebrow, slightly raised gave Ritchie the impression that he hadn’t expected to hear such a thing and that maybe, just maybe, his confession had gone some way to lessening Bears need to punish him for acting on his feelings. But it was soon gone, replaced by a penetrating and enraged glare as Bear got up, grabbing a fistful of Ritchie’s hoodie at his chest and dragging him to his feet. He stooped down, levelling their eyes, his face so close that Ritchie could feel his angry breath on his cheek.

“I don’t give a fuck” Bear growled. “If you wanna keep our friendship, if you wanna keep your friendship with Selene and if you wanna keep this symmetrical face of yours, you’ll stop fucking my sister.”

Daryl was working on a motorcycle in the garage under his apartment when he’d got the call. He picked up his cell with oil blackened, calloused hands and stared down at it. The name on the phones screen made his heart drop. Was she calling him to make sure he was home so she could stop by for another emotionless and blank encounter that left him feeling emptier than the last? Or, was this something different? The idea that she could actually want something else was the only reason he found himself hitting the green, answer button.

Two hours later he sat in the coffee shop opposite the tattoo parlour, his eyes cast out of the window, observing Ray making a pig’s ear of re-painting the outside window frames of the Ink Cabinet. For someone that made a living from such delicate and painstaking work, Rays ability to transfer paint from a brush onto the wood was questionable and Daryl could see that he appeared to be wearing more black paint on his shirt than there was on the frames. He huffed and shook his head, smiling to himself when Selene appeared and burst into a fit of giggles at Ray’s appalling painting job.

She was dressed casually, her black Ink Cabinet T-shirt with ripped, tight jeans and knee-high boots. Her shiny black hair shimmered as she dodged Ray’s attempt at slapping his paintbrush around her face. That was her. His girl. His Selene with her vibrancy, her contagious sense of humour and two-tone eye that he missed more than he could ever put into words. With her picture still saved on his phone, he tried not to expect too much when he opened the camera roll after taking her call and looked at her pretty features. He dared to hope. Even after realizing that it would only drag out the hurt, a hurt that had never really gone away to begin with. She wanted to talk to him. It was broad daylight and she wasn’t stood in his apartment, luring him into giving another piece of his soul away with another meaningless tryst. She wanted to buy him a coffee and have a conversation. Should he hope? Or was that a dangerous thing to possess?

He watched as she made her way across the street, her gaze picking up on the solitary figure sat at the table by the window. She raised a hand in a greeting and he did the same. It was already a world away from the last time he’d seen her, when they’d conducted a sad and seemingly final exchange. Without using so many words, he’d told her he didn’t want to keep sleeping with her without being able to truly have her. She’d simply remarked that it was his choice. Now, she was waving at him as she crossed the street, her face bright with a smile.

She ordered him an African blend coffee; a reminder of a day seated long in the past. ‘Surprise me’ He’d said. And so, she did. Settling in front of him, she ran her hand through her hair and offered him another smile.
“Thank you for meeting me.” She said.

Of course, he was going to meet her. Once he’d heard her tone of voice and her request, there was not a single doubt in his mind that he should go. He hated this, her speaking to him as if he was a stranger, thanking him for agreeing, for turning up.

“No problem.”

She sipped her coffee and noticed his bike parked outside. It really was her dream bike and she was sure that there was no one that would look better on it than Daryl. He had changed, moved into the real world and was able to cut ties with the world of drug dealing. If anything, a small amount of good had come out of all the pain. Daryl had been given the chance to move out of a town that was poisoning him and start again. It was because of this that she would never regret her decision not to tell her father the truth.

“I uh…” She started, a short, breathy laugh interrupting her sentence. “I had this whole thing I wanted to say to you and now you’re here, it’s gone.”

Daryl fiddled with the cardboard sleeve on his coffee cup as he tried not to get lost in her features. He had to stay focused. For what, he wasn’t sure. But something in the back of his mind told him he needed to stay and hear what she had to say.

“In that case, you mind if I ask ya somethin’?”

She shrugged one shoulder up and shook her head. Daryl sat forwards in his seat, leaning on his elbows and lacing his fingers together in front of him.

“Why didn’t ya ask Amy what happened?” He questioned.

He was under no illusions that his question would kill her smile and it did just that. Her face dropped and her eyes lowered, focusing on the grain of the wooden table. Daryl shoved the guilty feeling away, he needed to know and was no longer going to tiptoe around her. His direct approach the last time they set foot in the coffee shop resulted in him re-connecting with her, albeit physically but she was there nonetheless.

“I would have killed her” Selene whispered. “Not myself. I would have just told my dad. But then he would have killed you too.”

Her eyes raised when she addressed him. His job, his home, his bike, his new and improved life was all down to her and whatever lie she’d told her father. It was not lost on him and it was something he would never be able to convey his thanks for. But he would have traded it all in just to go back to the past, back to when times weren’t so complicated, back to when he would wake up beside her, run his hand over the curves of her body and kiss his way across her chest, up to her lips, indulging in her and being allowed to love her like he never knew he could.

Daryl decided there and then to lay all his cards on the table. If he had even a slight chance of being winning her belief, she had to know everything.

“You need to know some stuff.” He sat back, sighing and scratching the back of his head. “That night, before you, when I took Amy home…” He began “…I didn’t want to. Merle, he heard me say no. Called me a faggot in front of the whole bar. I was never the kind of guy that went out lookin’ for a girl to go on with. That was Merle n’ I guess he wanted me to be the same.” He paused, surveying her reaction. She was still, her vision locked on him, her hands clasped around her coffee cup. She knew how unusual it was for Daryl to talk about the past like that, even more
unusual was for him to open up so readily and offer his innermost thoughts on a topic that to him, was not something he would have wanted to talk about. So, she listened intently and without interruption. “I was never really good enough for nobody. Not my mom or my ol’ man. Not Merle. I wasn’t like them. But I tried to be. It was all I had. So, I took Amy home because Merle wanted me to. We did a few lines of coke n’ yeah, I had sex with her and it was…well, it was just sex. Y’know? Nothin’ special. I was high as fuck but I still didn’t feel nothin’. She wanted to stay the night, do all kinds of crazy shit but I wasn’t interested. Asked her to leave and she did. She’s made comments, since I been with you. Guess you could call it flirtin’ or some shit. I didn’t know that at the time though. I aint so good with that stuff. You know that. So, when she kissed me, I just froze up. I didn’t know what the fuck was happenin’. She asked me to meet her there and threw herself at me. I needed to know why, so I went to the Rabbit that night n’ I asked her myself. She said she knew I had a girlfriend but thought I wanted it anyway. I didn’t and I didn’t do nothin’; to make her think that. I aint never given her a reason to think that I wanted anythin’ more than a drink and a conversation at the bar. And uh…I threatened her.”

Selene seemed to jolt and turn her head slightly as if she’d misheard him.

“Threatened her, how?” She asked.

“Said I’d beat her until she couldn’t earn a dime.”

She couldn’t help it, she winced. An involuntary reaction to an admission of violent intent towards another woman coming from the one and only person she had truly loved in her life. Daryl sense her unease immediately and before he could even think, his hand shot out and took hold of hers across the table.

“I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t have done it” He assured her “I aint no danger to you. I would never raise my hand to you or any woman. I was just so pissed, so fuckin’ mad. I was tryin’ to scare her.”

Her heart lurched at the panic on his face. Of course, she understood that Daryl would never be a danger to her, nor was he some kind of brute that went around beating women. But it didn’t make the knowledge of such a threat any easier to listen to.

“I know, Daryl. I know you.” She soothed. Allowing him to keep hold of her hand. A small triumph to Daryl, who was gripping onto her fingers like they were the holy grail. “Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you scare her?” She asked.

Daryl remembered the look on Amy’s face, the stammer of her speech and the defensive body language she displayed. She’d never looked at him that way before, always seeing him as the safe, quiet one of the Dixons. She was both shocked and terrified and it was plain as day.

“Yeah, I did.” He nodded

“Good.” Selene responded, the smile had crept back onto her lips and Daryl couldn’t help but mirror it. There it was, the first, genuine smile they’d shared in months. Since before it all fell apart. He found something in how her eyes lit up and how her plump, pink lips curved. He was home. She was his home.

“I’d like us to try being friends.” She told him.

Friends. It was something. But was it enough? Could he really have a friendship with a woman that he loved so deeply he would give up every ounce of his settled life in a heartbeat if she asked? He
didn’t know if it was possible, but he was sure he couldn’t live another day thinking that he’d lost her altogether. At least this way, he would still see her, still be able to sit in coffee shops smiling with her. Maybe it would lead somewhere like it did at the start.

“For now?” He tried

“Friendship is all I can offer.” She confirmed, taking her hand away from his and sipping her coffee.

The stab of defeat in his chest was hard to ignore. So strong he thought she might be able to see the blood dripping from his heart where a piece had been ripped away. Friendship was not going to fill that void. But he wasn’t angry, he understood that the way to keep her in his life was to agree and do his best not to fall apart.

“That mean ya gonna stop turnin’ up at my apartment wearin’ hardly any clothes?” He mentioned with an unquestionable and knowing smirk.

“Yes.” She said into her coffee cup with a roll of her eyes.

Daryl nibbled his bottom lip. If he said their past trysts never crossed his mind he’d be lying. He also couldn’t deny that they’d been among the most passionate and intense experiences of his life. She’d been devoid of any emotion but her actions, her deliberate, forceful and demanding touch and her desire to feel every inch of him, to need him so much had left him with a collection of memories like the frames of a film flickering though his imagination. When he thought back to those occasions, it turned him on and scared the hell out of him at the same time.

“Shame.” He muttered under his breath.

“Daryl.” She scolded over the top of her coffee mug. He laughed quietly and locked her in a lingering stare.

“I’m just kiddin’. Relax.” He said. “I want you in my life. If bein’ your friend is all I can have, then I’mma take it.”

“Good.” She chirped, her attention moving to the window where Ray was still painting on the other side of the street. By now, the colourful tattoos on his forearms were blocked by smears of black paint. Selene wondered how he’d managed to make such a mess and made a mental note to never task him with anything similar in future.

“Seein as we’re friends now, can I run somethin’ by ya?” Daryl asked.

She gave him a short nod, curiosity piquing her interest as she leaned forwards and observed him dig a hand into the inside pocket of his leather vest. She’d done well not to leer at his sleeveless arms too much, her eyes wandering once or twice. She missed being able to drag her nails over the ripples of his muscles, but not being able to do so was something she’d have to get used to. He retrieved a small piece of paper and unfolded it, placing it on the table between them. A black and white image of a winged demon stared back at her. Similar to the ones he had tattooed on his shoulder blade.

“Thinkin’ of getting this, on the inside of my arm. Kinda put off by it lookin’ weird, y’know with the movement.” He tried to explain.

“You mean on the inside of your bicep?” She asked.

“Yeah, right here” He said, lifting his arm up. Selene tried to remain in professional tattoo artist
mode but his arms were always her weakness. She cleared her throat and lowered her vision back to
the image.

“Should be fine, provided you’re not at an odd angle when it’s done.” She suggested.

“K, thanks” he mumbled, taking the image back and sliding it back into his pocket.

It was on the tip of her tongue; the words being formed before she could stop herself. It was so
natural to offer. After all, hers was the most reputable tattoo studio in the area.

“Stop by tonight, around seven and I’ll do it for you.” She offered.

Genuine surprise appeared on his face and his eyebrows lifted slightly. She couldn’t be sure the
whole thing wouldn’t be awkward and if she could stand a entire sitting of him looking at her like
she was some kind of angelic being sent specifically from the gods to him. It wasn’t that she
disliked how he looked at her, it was more that she found it hard to ignore.

“What? Naw, you don’t have to do that. I only asked ‘cause ya know what ya talkin’ ‘bout.” He
remarked.

“I understand if you don’t want a tattoo by your ex-girlfriend.” She said softly, meeting his eye. A
tense silence suddenly formed between them and Selene instantly realised she’d said the wrong
thing.

“Don’t do that.” He warned.

“What?” She questioned.

“You ain’t no ex-girlfriend to me.”

You’re my girl. You always will be.

“I’m your friend.” She concluded, brushing off the temptation to respond directly to his comment.
“Look, the offer is there.”

Daryl finished up his coffee, deciding to make a move from the situation before it took a nose dive
and smiling at one another rapidly became a thing of the past. She didn’t move when he stood up
and reached to the next seat for his bike helmet. He looped his hand through the visor hole and
looked down at her.

“Only if ya let me pay ya. Straight up, tattoo artist- client transaction.” He reasoned.

“Deal” She grinned.

“See ya tonight.” He nudged his head up and made tracks to the door, able to feel her stare as she
witnessed his departure.

Selene was nervous. Having breezily sent everyone home for the evening as if nothing untoward
was happening, she’d obsessively cleaned every workstation in the room in case she found herself
unable to decide which one to use. She’d also changed her clothing three times. Wanting to be as physically comfortable as possible, despite her gnawing anxiety, she’d eventually selected a long, black gypsy skirt and a simple black Cami top with a lace edging. Her hair was tied into a bun and she wore black-framed glasses. A new addition that Daryl didn’t yet know about. Sometimes, she just didn’t have the energy to mess about with contacts anymore. The music was changed twice before being switched off altogether.

Silence.

No. That was too quiet. He might actually be able to hear the thoughts as they trailed through her head. She pressed ‘play’ and again and turned the volume down. What was she thinking? Was this even a good idea after all? A small part of her would have been offended if Daryl had chosen a different studio to brand him for life. But there was so much history between them, she couldn’t say that sitting quietly, alone with him for so long was the best idea she’d ever come up with. But it was done and it was happening and when there was a knock at the back door, she sprang up from the office desk and paced back and forth three times before heading to the door to open it.

Daryl was leaning on the doorknife when she opened it, his arm raised and his finger hooked through the loop inside the neckline of his leather vest, which was draped over his shoulder. It was obvious from the way he did a double take that her glasses had caught his attention. She waited for a comment but it didn’t come straight away. Not until she’d ignored how attractive he looked, invited him in and asked him to sit on the tattoo bed Axel usually used.

“You got glasses.” He commented.

“Uh, Yeah.” She said. “I hate them, but they’re easier than contacts.”

He tilted his head to one side, admiring her shamelessly.

“I like ‘em.” He expressed.

“Thank you. Let’s have that design.” She requested, holding out her hand. He pulled the piece of paper from his jeans pocket and placed it in her hand. “I just have to draw this up, won’t take a sec.”

*Take as long as you like. I could look at you all night.* He thought.

He watched her closely, caring little for her noticing or being put off. The way she drew fascinated him, much like everything else about her. Her delicate penmanship seemed so effortless as the design appeared and he wished he’d watched her draw more often; her talent was something he appreciated and admired. When she was finished, she held it up to him.

“That look accurate enough to you?”

It was. In fact, it looked even better than the original.

“Perfect.”

“OK, lay back, get comfortable and put your arm out on this.” She instructed, signing as she spoke and tapping the film covered arm rest. Daryl could sense her anxiety, mainly because he felt it too, he was just much better at masking it.

She snapped on some black, latex gloves and cleaned his inner bicep with antiseptic, all the while trying to ignore how deliciously toned and appealing his arm is. Transferring the design onto his skin left a bright purple image as a guide.
“This positioning alright? If it not I can wipe it off and start again.” She checked.

He quickly peered down t it and nodded at her. “S’fine.”

She switched on the tattoo gun and tested the voltage and power with the foot pedal. Lowering the needle to his skin she drew a line without any ink beside the design.

“That’s what it’ll feel like. That OK for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Right, you’re no sissy.” She commented, the corner of her mouth lifting slightly.

Assuming that conversation would be kept to a minimum was the right thing to do on Daryl’s part. When one of the Demon’s wings was complete, neither of them had uttered a single word. The sting of the needle entering his skin over and over soon became a distant memory due to the warmth of her arm resting on his and the sight of her every time he turned his head to face her. She sat back and tilted her head, wiping off the excess ink gently and taking a short break.

“I don’t usually like to ask about the meanings behind my clients tattoos. They’re personal and if they want to tell me, then great but that’s up to them. I have to admit though, I have my own assumptions about yours.”

He examined her closely as she leaned forward and resumed tattooing him. Her glasses were not the only new additions. She had stretchers in her ears that she never had before and the front of her hair was shorter, giving her bangs. She wore a rolled up, black bandana as a hairband and he could see that she also sported a new tattoo along her collarbone. Tiny letters in an italic quote that was so small and obscure it couldn’t be read from where he was.

“Go on.” He said, encouraging her to express her opinion about what his tattoos mean.

“Demons. Each one stands for something, right?”

“Mhmm.” He hummed.

“But they’re not like Azazel or Leviathan. They’re inner demons.”

She glanced up at him, not wanting to probe too much, she stopped talking and concentrated on the body of the design. He didn’t look away from her for a single second, trying to make sure he could recall every inch of how she looks.

“Rebellion and Revolt.” He uttered.

She lifted the needle from his skin but didn’t look up, he saw her slowly lick her lips as if thinking over his words.

“How I always thought of ‘em. Remind me to stay on the right path.”

“And this one?” She asked, her eyes still cast down at the half-finished tattoo.

“Regret. Fallin’ from grace.” He rasped.

Regret for not trying harder, not being good enough, failing to ensure that she would never believe he would betray her. It wasn’t like he’d breezed into a new life with no mistakes being made along the way. He’d turned to alcohol, got into fights, indulged in drugs and almost lost everything once or twice. But he was still there having picked up the pieces. He had his regrets, that much was true.
“Have you?” She asked “Fallen from grace?”

“Almost.”

Falling from a grace he never thought he deserved in the beginning. Her grace. She blinked at him, wanting to lunge forwards and kiss him. To tell him that he has the strength to never let himself fall. To make him promise that he won’t give up being the best version of himself because of her. Instead, she carried on with his tattoo.

Selene was known for taking her time with her work. Daryl’s was a simple black outline with no shading or details but she was still meticulous in her craft and kept him there for longer than was probably necessary. In that time, she was able to sense him staring at her and eventually had grown used to it.

“Ya changed ya hair and ya piercings.” He mentioned.

“Yeah, trying something new.”

“What’s the new tattoo say?”

“It’s personal”

“So are mine.”

“Maybe one day.” She said plainly, scooting back in the chair. “Take a look in the mirror right there.”

He sat up and lifted his arm in the mirror in front of him, a small smile on his face.

“It’s great” he said, looking round at her “good job.”

“Glad you like it. Something like that wouldn’t usually take me so long. I just wanted it to be perfect for you.”

“It is. How much do I owe ya?”

“About that, I don’t you to pay.”

“Naw, c’mon we had a deal.”

“Really, I’d rather you didn’t. I don’t feel right taking the money from you. Just, see it as a favour… for a friend.”

He wanted to scoff and tell her that the word meant almost nothing to him. That he didn’t want to be her friend, that he wanted to be what he was before everything changed. But as with his other emotions and opinions, he stuffed it down inside, agreeing with her and allowing her to wrap his new tattoo.

At the back door, he rummaged in his jeans pocket. Pulling out something metal but not allowing her to see it. He gazed down at her curious face.

“Thank you.” He says sincerely.

“You’re welcome. Hope it’s not weird, having me brand you for life.”

“It’s a good thing.” He told her. “Look, if this is a favour to me, then I guess we’re even.” He held
out a truck key to her that she recognised as her own. “Your truck works now. Take it grocery shoppin’ next time.”

“You… you fixed my truck?” She whispered. Her mind raced with scenarios in which he could have got away with sneaking her truck out of the lot without her noticing.

“Yeah. I knew you kept the key in the sun visor. Also knew you wouldn’t notice it was gone.” He explained.

She couldn’t help it, a laugh escaped her and she dipped her head, bringing a hand up to her forehead and shielding her face for a moment. The sting of embarrassment washing over her. He was right, she used her truck once in a blue moon and it could have been hauled away by a tank, right under nose and she still wouldn’t have picked up on its absence.

“That is some sneaky shit, Dixon.” She commented.

“Yeah, Sorry. Here.” He said, handing her the key.

She gingerly took it from his grasp and he turned, stepping out into the lot and heading away from the building.

“Daryl, wait.” She called out. He stopped and she quickly walked to him with intent, his eyes widened bit he expected nothing, the biting fear of being rejected all too prevalent. She halted in front of him, took a deep breath and slid her arms around his neck. It was a reaction he had no control over, he closed his eyes and held his breath. He’d been dreaming of a touch like this, a touch that had something behind it, that meant something. It almost completely annihilated him.

Sunday morning’s were usually spent eating breakfast with Ray or, as recent events dictated, watching morning TV with Ritchie on the couch. Having to exercise some self-restraint around him meant that she was able to spend time with him without the need to feel so guilty and confused all the time. Watching TV, playing a video game or having a beer at Marty’s were not out of the ordinary activities for Selene and Ritchie and she’d made a point of the fact that she didn’t want those things to stop. He sometimes pushed the boundaries, but a stern glare and clearing of her throat put him straight back in his place and thus kept things between them the least complicated they’d been in a while.

But this Sunday, Selene was not with Ray or Ritchie. She was standing outside of Daryl’s workplace, staring at a locked gate and seeing no movement at all on the street. It was 8am, maybe a little early to be making a weekend drop in. She could only wait so long, and so decided to get her caffeine fix at the Bistro across the street, thanking her lucky stars for it’s early, weekend opening times.

Inside, the place was quiet. One man sat in the corner with a newspaper, while an old couple smoked and shared a croissant at a table outside. The tall, redhead behind the counter threw a bright, red-lipped smile her way as she approached the counter and dutifully took her order. While she waited for her coffee, Selene placed the wooden box she’d been clutching in her hand on the countertop. On the lid of the box was Daryl’s name written in italic, custom, tattoo script.

“Early morning caffeine hit?” The woman asked her.
“Oh, yeah. Need it.” Selene replied.

“Know the feeling.”

Selene looked over her shoulder at the still-closed gate across the street. Furrowing her brow, she turned back to the woman making her drink.

“Do you-do you by any chance know what time they open across the street?” She queried. The lack of opening times on the gate had been mildly irritating, but if anyone would know, surely the staff of the business opposite would.

“Ten thirty on a Sunday.” She informed her.

“Oh, shoot. I gotta be in the next town by then.”

The woman slid the huge coffee cup across the counter to her, gesturing to the milk and sugar without a word. She watched as Selene plucked the plastic lid from the top, emptied four sugar sachets into it and stirred it vigorously.

“You got a car that needs fixing or something?” She probed.

“Oh, no. I just wanted to leave this for one of them.” Selene responded, slapping the lid back on the cup and holding the box up.

“Why don’t you leave it with me? I can take it over later.” The woman suggested.

Selene thought for a moment. Maybe she knew Daryl if she was so willing to offer such an idea.

“Really? Are you sure? I don’t want to put you out.” Selene expressed.

“Oh no, don’t be silly. I’ll probably go over there anyways. The guys call us up and order a half a dozen sandwiches every day. Who’s it for?” She wanted to know.

Oh, so you do know him. Interesting.

“Daryl. Daryl Dixon. He’s the motor--”

“-the motorcycle mechanic. Yeah. I know him.” She beamed.

*Pretty, confident redhead like you. Surly, mysterious hottie like Daryl. I bet you do, sweetheart.*

“Oh. OK. Well, this is kind of you.” Selene said sincerely as she handed the box over. The woman gently trailed her fingers over the name on the top of the box. It was obviously decorated by hand, the lettering unusual and unique. She wondered what was inside, but it was not her place to open it.

“I’m Cassidy.” She said as she looked up from the box and smoothed a hand over her black apron.

“Thank you, Cassidy.” Selene said before turning on her heels and quickly moving to the door before she was asked her own name. Wanting to keep as under the radar as possible with anyone Daryl might associate with. She didn’t know if anyone knew their story and wanted to avoid people making assumptions about Daryl or thinking badly of him.

“Oh, wait!” She heard from behind her. “Who shall I say left it for him?”

*Dammit.*
“Selene.” She said quietly before opening the door and vanishing.
That afternoon Cassidy noticed Daryl smoking outside his work. His head was low and his attention was focused on his cellphone. She grabbed the box Selene had left with her from behind the counter and strutted across the street, not bothering to remove her apron. As she neared him, he looked up and she moved the box behind her back in order to prolong their conversation and allow her to look at him for just a little longer. He was exactly her type, rugged, handsome, troubled. He was perfection if ever she saw it and it bothered her that the one, single and seriously attractive guy she’d seen in years was tied to someone else. It was a shame; she couldn’t help but imagine how she would utterly destroy him in bed. Hiding her thoughts and putting a smile on her face, she greeted him.

“Hi, Daryl.” She chirped.

His face dropped when he remembered what had happened the last time he saw her. His frantic need to have sex with her cut short and spun around to thoughts of nothing but Selene and how much he still loved her. He’d walked out. Deserted this beautiful woman that was offering herself to him. He was crippled with guilt from deserting her like that.

“Hey. Look, about the other day, I owe ya an apology.” He started as he shoved his cell into his pocket.

“No, no you really don’t. It’s fine.” She clarified with an open palm held towards him. But Daryl had to say his piece.

“I didn’t mean to humiliate ya like that. I was an ass. I’m sorry.” He offered sincerely. She flashed him a sympathetic smile and shook her head

“Really, it’s ok. I understand. You thought you could get over her.” She suggested.

“Yeah.” He nodded. Laden with the thought that he did indeed think he could push Selene aside and have sex with another woman without any issues. He had been wrong, very wrong and in the process had risked hurting Cassidy as well as himself. But his mind was fogged and he was at a loss.

“As much I don’t like being used as a rebound, I hope it’s shown you that you should really try and talk to her. You obviously love her a lot.” Cassidy advised.

Daryl shrugged and thought back to previous conversations with Selene.
“I tried. She’s real stubborn. Gotta give her time.”

Cassidy swished her A-line skirt about her legs like a small child about to admit to drawing on a wall and Daryl wondered what she was about to say that had made her so nervous.

“Ok… I have a confession.” She sighed with a pained look. “I met her.”

He squinted at her in the sun for a few seconds.

“What?!”

“Selene. Your complicated girl. She came by the Bistro this morning. She was looking for you. Wanted to give you this.” She held out the box to him and he stared at it for a while before taking it. His mind struggling to comprehend that in this small world, the two attractive women in his life had met. “She didn’t know when the place opened, so I offered to pass it on to you for her.”

*She was here. Selene was here.*

“She say anythin’ else?” He quickly demanded.

“Just that she had to be back in the next town by ten thirty. Nothing important. What is it?” She asked, motioning to the box with her hand.

He studied the swirling, italic handwriting across the top of the black box. The name was written in silver pen. He slowly gripped the edges of the lid and lifted it with his fingertips. Inside, was a blue, satin lining on a cushioned middle. A guardian bell looked back at him. Silver and polished. A small piece of paper was tucked underneath. He plucked it out and opened it.

*‘For fixing my truck. Ride safe. S x’*

“What is that?” Cassidy asked again.

“Guardian bell. Bikers have ‘em for protection on the roads.”

“You don’t already have one?”

“Naw. Ain’t sposed to buy em. Sposed to have ‘em gifted to ya.” He explained.

“I see. Then, that’s a really nice gift, right?” She questioned, perturbed by his lack of a smile and his sagged shoulders.

“Yeah, it is.” He grunted.

“She just went and made things way more complicated, didn’t she?” She concluded. Call it woman’s intuition, or maybe it was the lost little boy look that was emanating from him, but Cassidy could tell that a part of Daryl wished that he hadn’t just received the most confusing and possibly misleading present he’d ever got.

“Yes.” He agreed with a deep sigh. He lowered the box to his side and shook his head, sucking his lower lip into his mouth. Exasperated and frustrated.

“She’s very beautiful, Daryl.” Cassidy offered. She wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was an attempt to push him to her, or maybe it was merely an observation being voiced. As soon as the words left her lips she wondered where they’d come from and why she felt the need to voice them.

“Yeah. She really is.” He mumbled.
“Look, I better get back to work. I hope you work things out. See you around.” She said quickly, stepping back and readying herself to beat a hasty retreat.

“Hey, wait a minute.” He said “Thank you. For this” he held the box up again “For understandin, for bein’ cool.”

Cassidy was well aware of her tendency to be a people pleaser, usually at her own expense. She wanted to think the situation at hand was no different from her being a helping hand and a listening ear to any other friend. But she couldn’t, because it was drastically different. In a way, she was trying to lure him, trying to make him see how much she had to offer. But on the other hand, she was not the type to go after another woman’s boyfriend.

“Its nothing.” She smiled as she backed up and turned, crossing the street and leaving Daryl with his thoughts.

The shiny surface of the guardian bell glinted in the still bright sunlight beyond Daryl’s living room window. It had already taken pride of place on his bookshelf, the lid discarded and the box tilted up to show off the object displayed so nicely inside. Reluctant to put it straight on his bike, he needed to evaluate how he felt about receiving such a gift first.

Wearing a thin, tight grey T-shirt, his leather vest and black jeans, he evaluated whether it was worth heading out to a bar as he usually did when his mind was screwed up and jumbled. But he couldn’t tear himself away from the bell and so, he remained on the sofa, with the TV off, his phone on silent and his eyes moving between his gift and the beautifully written note that arrived with it.

When the buzzer from the main entrance rang through the apartment, Daryl, who’s thoughts were so full of Selene, flinched at the sound and half expected her to be standing at the door when he opened the window and leaned over the railing to check who his visitor was. To his dismay and irritation, it wasn’t Selene.

Daryl had failed to provide Merle with his new address for a reason and his current situation was that reason. He didn’t want him turning up, unannounced and trampling all over his new life. Merle had a habit of taking something good and turning it to trash and so every time Daryl was asked to leave his address on the notepad by the door when he was moving out, he’d conveniently ‘forgotten’.

Merle, noticing his brother’s presence at one of the windows on the third floor, stepped back and opened his arms in a dramatic fashion.

“Well would ya look at that! It lives!” He cried.

“The hell are ya doin’ here?” Daryl wanted to know, aware that to have acquired his whereabouts, he would have needed to do some serious digging. His tone was angry and he did nothing to disguise it.

“Thought you’d dropped off the damn earth. Been blowin’ up that cellphone o’ yours for the last two hours.” Merle complained. “You gon’ let me in or am I gonna have to holler a ton of personal shit at ya from down here? Bet ya neighbour’s gonna just looove that!”

Letting him in was so far from what Daryl wanted to do that he nearly told him to knock himself out, there wasn’t much he could say that would cause much concern anyway. The entire block would just think it was a drunk guy yelling a bunch of incomprehensible stuff and call the cops.
Instead, he disappeared inside and pressed the button for the door release on the ground floor. Above all else, he really wanted to know why Merle had travelled half an hour to turn up at his apartment when he usually complained about having to walk for five minutes to the store. Daryl opened the front door, leaving it ajar and headed to the kitchen. No doubt the first thing Merle would ask for would be beer.

From the kitchen, he heard footsteps and muttering as the door was slammed shut. Then, an impressed whistle sounded out as his older brother wandered into the living room. Daryl stopped at the end of the kitchen counter, able to see him from the open plan space.

“You got any-” Merle started, silenced when Daryl shoved a beer bottle into his hand. “Nice.” He nodded, taking a large gulp. “I noticed I didn’t get an invite to the housewarmin’ party.”

“What do ya want, Merle?” Daryl snapped as he perched on the arm of the heavy armchair that lived in the corner of the room by the drinks cabinet.

Merle moved further into the room, slowly taking in his surroundings, step by step and leaving no stone unturned. As he investigated the details of Daryl’s new abode, he provided the answer to his brother’s question.

“Got ya address from Delilah, she ever tell you she knows how to get into Bill’s filing cabinet? Popped that lock with her god damn fingernail, I’ll be damned if she aint some kinda spy or somethin’.” He rambled “That is some cool shit right there” He remarked, pointing to the motorcycle wheel fashioned into a clock on the wall. “Anyways, got me some information you need to hear.” Noticing the whiskey in the cabinet, Merle headed straight to it, squinting at the bottles through the glass and licking his lips. “God damn, kid. That is some fine juice in there. How the other half live, huh?” He straightened again, taking a long look around the room and craning his neck to glance into the kitchen “Nice digs, boy.”

“Thanks. What ya gotta tell me?” Daryl pressed impatiently, seeing Merle raise and eyebrow and sigh loudly. He rubbed his chin and ambled over to the couch, where he sank down and motioned for Daryl to do the same in the chair he was perched on. Obliging, Daryl’s eyes never left his brothers.

“Delilah and me, we got to talkin’. ‘Bout you, ‘bout that firecracker of an ex of yours. Somethin’ just didn’t add up with that shit.” He took a long gulp from the beer bottle and his eyes bulged as the liquor hit his throat. Daryl didn’t buy cheap beer anymore, only the stronger, pricier brands would do now he had the luxury of having a choice. “Damn, that hits the spot!” Merle exclaimed, much to Daryl’s annoyance, he leaned forwards, levelling his gaze.

“You gonna get to the fuckin’ point, man? I aint got all night” He demanded.

“Hmph. Well, Delilah, she’s harpin’ on about how she don’t believe a word of the bullshit that comes outta Amy’s mouth. So, we had ourselves a bet. I bet her fifty bucks that you cheated on ya girl.”

Daryl shot up from his seat, his eyes flashing with anger and his hands balled into fists.

“What the fuck, Merle?!” He raged without a single thought for his neighbours, who could probably hear the whole conversation thanks to Merle’s big mouth and ability to anger Daryl in mere seconds. “I never cheated on Selene! That fuckin’ whore made a move on me!”

“Woah, woah. Simmer the fuck down n’ listen!” Merle cried “So, we had ourselves a fiesta back at my place. Got Amy so high she got all loose lipped. Turns out, she’s as windy as a sack full of farts.
Bitch is a damn liar, little brother.”

Daryl's brow furrowed and his chest constricted as he stared at Merle, who's words were whirling around inside his head.

'Bitch is a damn liar, little brother.'

Behind the front desk of the The Ink Cabinet, Ritchie busied himself with updating the Social Media pages for the studio at Ray's request. He uploaded special offers, pictures of the weeks best tattoos and some of Selene’s unusual and unique designs that were up for grabs at set prices. Ray made sure that Ritchie made himself useful if he insisted upon wandering back and forth between clients and failing miserably to hide his anxiety. Bear glanced up intermittently between shading a tattoo for a client and locked Ritchie in a death glare so intense that even Axel noticed as he was drawing.

The dreadlocked piercer drummed his fingers on the surface of the desk and fiddled with his tongue piercing, hooking the bar over his teeth and creating a clinking noise that, coupled with the erratic clicking of the mouse was doing nothing to ease Bear’s fury.

Click…clink…click click…clink…

Bear shifted his position and wiped the excess ink from his clients wrist while the petite, timid woman silently grit her teeth and took a deep, grounding breath. Axel flipped a page in his sketch pad and moved his eyes from Bear to Ritchie, putting the pieces of the jigsaw together and coming to a conclusion; Bear knew about Ritchie and Selene. Part of him was relieved that he wasn’t the only one to have to bear the burden of keeping such a secret, the other half of him was deeply concerned that the glue holding their friendship group together was wearing away rapidly.

Clink… click click click

“Jesus fucking Christ, Rich.” Bear snapped “I’m going to rip that damn bar outta your mouth and shove it up your ass if you don’t stop playing with it. I’m trying to concentrate here”

Ritchie sucked both lips into his mouth and dipped his head.

“Sorry.” he grunted

Ping

Saved by the message tone, Ritchie retrieved his cell phone and opened up his messages.

'You have lunch soon, yes?'

A smile spread across his face and he didn’t even bother to hide it. He knew she was upstairs in her apartment and he’d wanted nothing more all morning that to charge up there and kiss her. She’d distanced herself from him in recent weeks and while she wasn’t ignoring him altogether, he had undoubtedly experienced the ache in his heart from longing to be near her. His fingers worked quickly to reply to her message, his stomach hummed with anticipation as he hit the send button.

‘Yeah, in five minutes. Why?’

Axel watched from his workstation, irritation prodding at his temper. He knew he had to keep quiet
or Ritchie would have both him and Bear on his back and in defiance, he would only push back at
them and become more stubborn. To Ritchie, the room had dropped away and it didn’t take a
genius for his friends to work out that it was Selene he was texting. Another message alert had
everyone in the room observing him.

‘My door is unlocked.’

A raised eyebrow went perfectly with his wide grin and Bear felt the blood in his body begin to
boil. His client craned her neck to meet his eye and asked if he was OK when she noticed the vein
bulging in his temple. He nodded swiftly and offered her his best forced smile, trying with
everything he had to focus his attention on the intricate script tattoo that he was now halfway
through on her wrist while Ritchie’s fingertips frantically replied to Selene’s last message.

‘I’ll be there’.

In her apartment, Selene was sprawled out on the couch under a black, fuzzy blanket watching a
black and white movie. Her hair was messily scraped up into a bun and her face sported only traces
of make-up, foundation to cover her blemishes, her shaped eyebrows and minimal, winged eyeliner.
When Ritchie slipped through the door to her apartment, he closed it quietly behind him, hoping to
evaded Axel and Bear’s hostile glares. But he knew there weren’t stupid and that they were
both more than clued in on what was transpiring.

Wordlessly, he sat beside her and was surprised when she threw the blanket back and held an arm
out to him, beckoning him to lay down with her. He shuffled down behind her, spooning her as she
covered them both and sighed deeply. She continued watching the movie while he pushed his face
into her neck, taking deep breaths of the smell of her shampoo like it was another of his vices that
he couldn’t get enough of. His hand snaked over her waist and he was soon snuggling her and
leaving light kisses on her collarbone, wondering what he did to deserve this treat.

“What is this, Selene?” He asked against her skin. “What are we doing?”

“It’s doesn’t have to be anything. It can be nameless.” She purred back, enjoying the feeling of his
lips peppering her shoulder with kisses. She found his hand at her waist and laced her fingers with
his. Something warm and hard pressed against her lower back and she knew instantly what it was.

“You pleased to see me?” She smiled, pushing back slightly and applying subtle pressure on his
errection. He emitted a subtle grunt and bit his lower lip.

“I’m always pleased to see you, I just don’t have to hide it anymore.”

She giggled and turned onto her back, allowing him to cover her lips in a series of tender kisses that
made her body flush with desire. Quite how they managed to create so much sexual chemistry with
each other, she couldn’t fathom. Her hand snaked up around his neck and pulled him closer, further
over her, cementing her need for physical affection and blurring the lines between logical thought
and acting on her impulses.

But she did like him. She did feel something for him and she had always cared about him. What
she wasn’t sure of, was if those feelings translated into the multifaceted nature of a genuine,
romantic relationship. She liked him touching her, his sometimes-hesitant brushing of her skin that
so reminded her of Daryl. Was that it? Was that why she kept going back? Daryl was her friend
now and she wasn’t sure if he would ever be anything more than that now the trust had been
shattered. She had to move on.
Ritchie’s tongue was soon rolling over her lower lip, bumping over her lip rings and urgently seeking entrance. She obliged, now moving her hand, dipping it under his arm and fanning her fingers out on his back. Applying enough pressure to tell him that she needed him pushed against her.

“Shouldn’t…” she heard him breathe “…be doing this”

“Why?” She replied against his lips.

He pulled back, a smirk on his face and his nose rubbing gently over hers.

“Can’t go back to work with this huge boner.”

“Have to get rid of it then.” She whispered, her eyes still closed as she slowly slid her hands into the back of his jeans, under his boxers. His body juddered and he drew in a sharp breath when he felt her drag her nails over his skin, up his toned back, to his shoulder blades.

“You gonna help me with that?” He asked, his voice laced with a lust fuelled undertone and his fingers travelling over the curves of the side of her body. She slipped a hand between them, skilfully releasing his skater belt and jeans button with one hand. She reached inside. He gasped. She grinned.

“I certainly am.”

Daryl’s working day was one of the busiest he’d ever had. With a Motorcycle rally happening in a five days’ time, he found there was an influx of locals wanting to get their bikes serviced and perfected in time for the event. Outside of work, he also had a bike half-built and its completion deadline was looming. Time to himself had been rare for the past few days and he could only think it to be a good thing. Work to keep his mind distracted and away from Selene was welcomed. It wasn’t that he didn’t like to think of her, more that it was just too frustrating and painful to constantly remind himself that the love of his life was now nothing more than his friend.

When his phone buzzed in his pocket, he was crouched next to the custom-built bike he had so tirelessly worked on for his private client. His hands were covered in oil, blackened and calloused. He tried to ignore the urgent need to check his messages but his gut told him he needed to concede and as he sat back against a large metal toolbox, he dragged his fingertips over his pants, leaving black, smeared lines and tugged his cell from his pocket.

‘Hey. Please can I come over to your place tonight?’

She hadn’t asked before and it was the first time she’d sent him a text in months. Initially, he’d been glad, the knowledge that Merle had given him needed to be relayed and as soon as possible. But there was also the prospect that she would turn up and lure him into the same bizarre, emotionless sex as before and toy with him once more, like a cat tortures a mouse. Well aware that if she did, he wasn’t strong enough to say no, he tilted his head back and groaned to himself.

“Ahh god dammit, Selene.”

When he looked back at her message, his eyes picked out the fine detail of the words on the screen, black dots making up a sentence that had the potential to throw everything up in the air, once more. Merle’s words rang through his mind and his stomach lurched when he considered that no matter what he told her that he thought to be true, she could still choose to disbelieve him. But all he could
Standing on the sidewalk under the glow of a street light, Selene peered up at the illuminated windows of Daryl’s apartment. She drew her black trench coat around her waist and absentmindedly tapped a boot on the ground. She was nervous. More nervous than she’d been in a long time. She wandered across the deserted street and stopped in front of the entry panel. Her finger hovered over the button, once it was pressed, there was no going back. She was going to say what she’d travelled there for. Already, she felt like crying.

Daryl’s TV was on in the living room and he reclined on the couch. His eyes were fixed on the moving pictures before him but none of the information was sinking in. His hands were still stained from his labour and he wished he could fast forward time and have Selene arrive so he could find out what the hell was going to and calm his uneasy soul. When the buzzer finally sounded through his home he shot up, granted her access and unbolted his front door. Surprised by the very real possibility that the churning sensation in his chest and the mild ache in his head was, in fact, anger.

She stopped just outside, sliding her coat off and checking her reflection in the glass of the fire escape. She was dressed casually; black, ripped jeans, ankle boots and a tank top with a leather harness added for detail. She took a deep breath and strutted inside to find him switching off the TV and drawing the drapes.

Instead of kissing and touching him straight away, she kept her hands to herself and actually managed to look him right in the eyes as she lingered in the living room entrance and sheepishly slid her coat onto the arm of the couch. He stilled and took in the sight of her. It made him weak, he’d missed being able to glimpse into her soul like that.

“Thank you for seeing me” She uttered politely, as if she didn’t know him and was about to sit down to a job interview.

“No problem. Come in. How you doin’?” He asked as he beckoned her inside. “You want a drink or somethin’?”

“Uh, no, thanks. And I’m Fine. You?” Her voice seemed a lot smaller than she was expecting and her confidence had waned considerably already. This most polite and unfamiliar of interactions confusing her and throwing her off guard.

“Yeah, I’m OK.” He nodded, sinking down into the armchair opposite her. She witnessed his choice to attempt to relax and decided to mirror him, taking a seat on the couch. Her eyes flickered to the arm beside he, where her coat now rested and her mind presented her with a series of memories from the last time she was on his couch. She blinked away images of fingers dug into flesh, sweat beading on skin and his moistened lips dragging across her collarbone.

“You look good” He told her with ease. Friends could complement one another and that was exactly what he was doing. Her vivid memories of their rough tryst rapidly dispersed and she locked eyes with him.

“Thank you” She whispered “So do you” He did. His rough, slightly dirty appearance, his ruffled hair and his settled demeanour was doing something to her. She always thought he was at his best when he was perfectly imperfect.
“Nah, just finished workin’, aint had time to take a shower or nothin’.” He huffed.

“You always look good.” She blurted out involuntarily. Where it had come from, she had no idea and panic struck her heart when she addressed the ease in which the words had appeared. She would have to keep a tight reign on herself to avoid any more awkward truths emerging.

Daryl said nothing. It wasn’t exactly something he didn’t want to hear from her. He wanted her to think he looked good. He wanted her to still find him attractive. He wanted her. His entire body become motionless and he dipped his head, glancing up and holding her in a long stare. Selene’s hands began to turn clammy and her heart rate quickened. She swallowed hard and saw his jaw tense. He’d picked up a few things along his journey with her, one of them being knowing exactly how to get her attention without using words.

*I know what you’re doing, you sexy son of a bitch. But I am not here to have sex with you.*

She cleared her throat and broke eye contact with him, scanning the room for something else to focus on. Her vision swept over the bookcase and up to the Guardian Bell she’d gifted him, proudly displayed as an ornament.

“You got the bell.” She smiled. Her attempt to get him to ease up on the intensity only made him more determined and only his lips moved when he responded after a long pause.

“Yeah, I got the bell.” He rasped.

It wasn’t Daryl’s intention to try and seduce her or initiate anything other than a conversation. In his head, all he could think of was how much he needed to control the situation. What he knew could change everything and a small part of him felt like he deserved to be the commander of how it was delivered. Then, there was the fact that if he was completely honest with himself, he loved it when he was able to get her flustered and uncomfortable. She’d had her time doing it to him, now it was his turn.

“Do you like it? I can change it if you don’t.” She offered.

“It’s perfect.” He told her. “Ya didn’t have to do that.”

He was unwavering, still smouldering as he glared at her through tired but longing eyes.

“I wanted to. You needed one. I’m glad you like it.” She chirped.

A short puff of air escaped him at how she was trying to converse with him. As if neither of them knew what was simmering under the surface between them. He shook his head, appearing to her like he’d found her statement amusing and finally, he looked away.

“You’re real fuckin’ confusin’, y’know that?” he threw at her with a small sneer. Now, the game was changing and he was beginning to enjoy having the very rare upper hand in their dynamic.

“It’s a thank you gift, Daryl. That’s all.” She clarified with a roll of her eyes.

“Right.” He muttered after an incredulous snort. He was tired and more ill-tempered than he’d thought. Selene’s mind games were wearing a hole in his temper and he wanted her to either get to the point and tell him why she was there, or take off her clothes. One or the other. Such was the state of his opinion on things at that point.

“She’s very attractive, by the way.” She commented. She didn’t have to explain who she was referring to. Daryl was smart, he would be able to put two and two together without her being
patronising. He raised an eyebrow at her, picked up a bottle of beer from the table beside his chair and sipped it before placing it back on the surface.

“Cassidy? Yeah, she’s hot.” He shrugged.

She could tell this wasn’t him. It wasn’t the way he usually composed himself, nor was it normal for him to speak to her in such a provocative way. For a moment, she pondered that he sounded more like Merle.

“She likes you. She was on me like a fly around a blue light when she saw your name on the top of that box.”

“Why’s that matter to you?” He probed, deliberately trying to goad her into admitting that she didn’t want to be ‘just friends’ any more than he did.

“I like her. She’s nice. You should be with someone like that. Mature, sophisticated.” Came the suggestion that was like a hot poker in his soul. He let out a quiet but extremely mocking laugh and rubbed at his chin.

“Just fuckin’ stop it, Selene.” He snapped. “You know I don’t want her. I want you.”

She shook her head and held up a hand to signal that he should put a stop to any thoughts that he had along those lines.

“We talked about that. We’re doing good. Why are you being like this with me?” she wanted to know.

“Oh, come on!” he suddenly raged “The only time you ever show up here is when you want me to fuck the sadness out of you. Sadness that’s only there because you don’t fuckin’ trust me. Because you won’t trust me. I can’t handle your damn mind games anymore, girl. I’m fuckin’ tired of it.”

Her face dropped and he could tell he’d touched a nerve. She was peering at him like he’d kicked a puppy and he was sure he saw her bottom lip quiver slightly.

“You’re different” she croaked. “With your new life. Your nice apartment. Your stunning, Jessica Rabbit, red head friend. You read. You have decent liquor.” She motioned to the bookcase, followed by the drink’s cabinet in the corner. “Even got a cell phone from this century. You’re different. This whole thing between us was breaking me but I know I hurt you too and I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I just want to see you happy.”

Maybe it was the knowledge that he held and the evidence he had, the power that he was in possession of that gave him the confidence to be so brutally honest and cruel to her. Or maybe, he really was just tired of it all.

“Naw. I’m still me. But I ain’t happy. So, you either get to the point n’ tell me why you’re here or ya pick a room where ya wanna fuck.”

She refused to look at him. It was all she could do to hold herself back from slapping him. He really was cut from the same cloth as Merle and it was evident, now more than ever that he was from the wrong side of the tracks, brought up with such savagery that it would always be present in him somewhat. She hoped the switch in him wouldn’t become the norm from then on. Because she was about to throw a ton of fuel on the already blazing fire.

As she tried to push his venom away, she noticed other things in the room. A motorcycle wheel made into a clock on the wall. His crossbow mounted on two hooks on the other wall. Fishing rods
sored in a basket and leaned against the corner. Now, he was able to embrace who he was without living in his brother’s shadow.

“Ok, fine. I have something to tell you.” She said, finally and very uncomfortably meeting his gaze.

“I got somethin to tell you too. You go first.” He mumbled.

“OK um…” she looked so nervous he almost couldn’t watch. She stood and wrung her hands as she walked over to the window and turned back to him. “Since we’ve been apart, I got close to somebody else.”

Daryl felt every muscle in his body tense and he closed his eyes briefly, struggling to keep a hold on his temper. She evaluated his reaction, not liking what she saw.

“How close we talkin’ here?” He growled.

“Close enough.” She said with little to no desire to disclose the details for fear of his reaction. She didn’t know what she was expecting. But it wasn’t the onslaught of questions that she got.

“You and him, you a thing?” he demanded.

“Not yet. He wants to be.”

“That what you want?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It could be something…that’s why I wanted to tell you. But I’m not sure.”

“Why not?”

“I’m trying to move on… but I still love you.”

“I still love you too. This is fuckin’ bullshit.”

“It’s not that simple though, is it?”

“Why? Is to me.”

She sighed loudly and played with the wispy ends of her hair, twisting it around her finger. Daryl remained seated, his vision never leaving her.

“So, what? You really like this guy or somethin’? You want my blessin’?” He spat

“I guess I do like him. Known him a long time. He cares about me. I just thought you should hear it from me.”

“Ya ol’ man know about him?”

“He doesn’t know what’s going on. But he does know him.”

In a flash, Daryl had connected the dots and before he could even try to muster a controlled response, he realized his hand had closed around the beer bottle beside him. The smash on the opposite wall made Selene jump and she couldn’t help but yelp as glass showered the couch and a damp, firework shape of beer emerged on the wall. He leaned forwards, bracing his arms on his knees and rubbing his face with his hands. A strained growl sounded from his throat as Selene watched on, horrified. When he finally raised his head to see her, his eyes were filled with pure
fury.

“It’s Ritchie… ain’t it?”

Anxiety bubbled in her chest. She couldn’t decide if she was afraid of him or not. But still she nodded.

“FUCK!” Daryl bellowed angrily as he sprang from the chair. She knew he wouldn’t like what she had to confess, but such a display had totally knocked her for six. He paced back and forth a few times, his chest heaving and his temple glistening with sweat from the stress. When he stopped, Selene held her breath. He tilled his head back, looking down his nose at her.

“Now, it’s my turn.” He informed her with a confidence that was laced with spite. “Merle turned up last night with some information about Amy.” At the mention of her name, Selene’s body flashed with rage and she took a deep breath to ground herself. “All those times I told ya I never cheated on you? I fuckin’ didn’t. She was paid. Somebody paid her to make sure you saw her kiss me.”


He closed the gap between them, locking her in a death glare.

“It was your precious Ritchie.” He snarled.

Her face dropped and months of flashbacks replayed in front of her eyes like a movie in seconds. All the things he’d said to her, the moment she kissed him, the times they’d been intimate, how she felt drawn to him, how he’d been there for her. All planned. It all now made a devastating amount of sense.

“He paid her to fuck with me ‘cause he wanted you for himself.” Daryl added for some extra clarity.

Selene began to shake her head as her eyes darted around the room.

“No. N-no. No. He-He wouldn’t do something like that. I know you’re mad at me but please tell me you aren’t making this up to get me back”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” He yelled at her “Like It aint bad enough that ya think I cheated, now ya think I’m lyin’ to ya about this? C’mon! I may be fuckin’ clueless about this shit but one thing I am is honest. I do want ya back, I ain’t scared to admit that. I don’t need to fuckin’ lie!”

“Alright, alright! Please just… stop yelling at me. I-I don’t know. I don’t know what to think anymore!”

“Merle didn’t think I’d believe him. Him and Delilah got Amy high and recorded the whole damn confession on her cell. She sent it to me. Here.”

He swiped his cell up from the coffee table, navigated to the messages, pressed play and slapped the phone back on the glass tabletop. Amy’s voice filled the room and Selene wrapped her arms around her body, hugging herself as she listened.

“Yeah, he pays well, that dreadlocked hottie from the tattoo place. Paid me to screw him and then he tells me that he’s like, in love with Selene or some shit. Since we were both lit, I let him into a little secret of my own, You know this one, D…that I fucked Daryl for free because every time he looks at me with those baby blues I wanna bang him so hard I can’t see straight” There was a
pause where Amy just laughed, the sound was slurred and exaggerated from the drugs and Merle could be heard muttering something inaudible, but his tone was obviously unimpressed.

“So, he tells me we should split them up and get what we both want. Offered me three hundred dollars. I got a kid to look after, y’know? So, I just took the money and agreed to it all. Pass me that line, Merle... thanks. Then he gives me an extra hundred and makes me promise never to tell nobody....Oh, shit. Haha.Oops! Don’t tell baby brother!”

Selene’s knees almost gave way and she had to hold onto the edge of the bookshelf before she collapsed from shock. She couldn’t believe the audacity of Amy. Daryl just puts his cell away and stared at her, wondering why he didn’t feel the smug sense of satisfaction he’d been anticipating. She brought her hands up, burying her face in them and sobbing quietly. He wanted to go to her but the internal conflict he faced from his defensiveness rendered him completely at a loss. He let her cry for a while as he surveyed the damage he’d done by throwing a beer bottle at his wall. When she looked up, her make-up was running slightly, making the corners of her eyes blurred with black eyeliner. Her nose was pink and she frantically swiped at her cheeks to stop tears from falling down her chin. Eventually, she found the strength to meet his eye and in that moment, he wasn’t angry. He wasn't smug. He wasn't satisfied.

“I fuckin’ hate seein’ you cry.” He whispered.

“You didn’t cheat on me.” She croaked.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes not leaving hers. “I didn’t cheat on you.”

“He was there. That day, when I saw you. He was there. He asked me to meet him at Marty’s. After I walked away from you, he turned up as I was trying to get inside. He was there, with his arms around me, he-he was there.” She rambled “and all this time… all this time he’s been asking me if I was sure. He was so convincing. I kissed him… I- liked him… all this time.”

“Jesus.” Daryl muttered. “Fuckin asshole.”

“My best friend lied to me and manipulated me.” She concluded.

She pushed her fingers into her hair and then let them drop, rubbing her chin with her finger, closing her eyes and trying to ground herself. Speaking aloud was the ony way she could find to shift some of the mess that now clogged her mind.

“I was without you for 7 months. Over Half a year” her eyes flickered across the carpeted flooring of the apartment as she spoke, with each word the realisation got clearer and clearer, taking a piece of her heart away in the process. “Because of him. Because of him and Amy and their lies. They took you away from me for all that time. He knew, Ritchie knew I could never be with someone who I thought was capable of cheating. He knew that and he used it.”

“Guess he got what he wanted, huh?” Daryl remarked without thinking.

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?*

“That is enough, Daryl!” She screamed “Don’t you fucking dare! I had no idea about this, I tried to move on with my life, I thought you betrayed me. How the fuck was I supposed to know that he fabricated the whole thing?!”

“I didn’t mean it was your fault but ya could have talked to me, listened to my side n’all” He reasoned. He’d thought it all along, and it wasn’t a big ask. If she’d agreed to hear his side of the story, maybe he would have been able to make her see that cheating on her was not even anywhere
near his radar.

“What was I supposed to do? Stick around and just hope you were telling the truth? What if you were lying to me?” She cried as she threw her hands up in the air. Daryl stepped closer to her, looking down at her and casting a shadow across her face.

“What were you sposed to do?” He asked in disbelief “Lemme tell you somethin’; before I started seein’ you, I was no one. Nothin’. I never went after girls, never flirted with nobody, never went on dates, never knew what it was like to sleep with somebody n’ actually enjoy it. You showed me what it was like to do all those things and…and hell, it really wasn’t easy for me. I never had to talk about how I felt about shit. My feelings were mine but they just got ignored. With you, I had to open up. You saw a side to me that I never knew existed and aint nobody else that’s ever gonna see that again. Yeah, I made mistakes and I freaked out but it was only because you made me feel things that were totally new to me and you know how much it fuckin’ terrified me. But I stayed. Because I trusted you with the most vulnerable part of myself. So, to answer your question, what were you sposed to do? You were sposed to listen to me and trust me, Selene.”

She instantly simmered down, looking at him intermittently with eyes brimming with tears. She reached out and managed to take his hand, is eyes shot down to where she clutched his fingers and he was torn. His rage was steering him towards a showdown, but the delicate touch of her skin on his was dousing the flames.

Instead of arguing with him, saying he was right or wrong or getting into a battle over who should have said or done what. Selene did what her heart told her to do. What she couldn’t even do with her best friends. She disclosed how lost she had been without him.

“I was so lonely without you. You left this huge, black cloud over my life. I didn’t want to get out of bed in the mornings but I did it all with this almost unbreakable mask on. On the outside I was together, I was calm and I could do my job and talk to my friends. But behind it I was falling apart without you.”

He sighed deeply and felt his hand tighten its grip on hers. He did it without thinking, an automatic reaction.

“I know exactly how that feels.” He expressed.
Breaking Point

Chapter Summary

I think I might be trying to kill you all off with the angst. HAH! sorry!
In all seriousness, I love you all so much for the amazing, detailed, rambling and much, much appreciated comments. I am so glad you like it!

Selene left Daryl’s apartment late that night with a headache so bad she could barely concentrate to drive and a heart so broken she was sure there was only one person that was able to repair it for good. But he was reluctant to commit to anything, not even forgiveness at that point. She’d done everything short of begging him to forgive her, to just give them another chance and while he’d never hidden the fact that he still loved her, he’d given her nothing else but the promise that he would be at her place at 7pm the following day as she’d requested.

Sleep did not come easily to either of them and as Selene rolled a joint by her window at home while the rest of the town enjoyed a blissful slumber. Daryl was also awake, sat up in the darkness of his room, back against his headboard with his cell phone in his hand. Selene’s proud face beamed back at him from the picture he’d captured of her from the online article. It wasn’t as if he didn’t want to forgive her for assuming the worst of him, but he’d been through enough by that point to not have his defences firmly back in place.

The following day dragged for Selene, who solemnly went about her work, choosing to keep such a huge revelation a secret from the others until she could handle things the way she saw fit. Aware that her judgement hadn’t been the best for the past few months, she’d thought carefully about her course of action and had settled on a timeline of events, a clear plan that she would stick to instead of rushing in and blowing the whole thing wide open. Losing Daryl and finding out how low Ritchie was willing to stoop in order to get what he wanted had given her a kind of clarity in her train of thought. She was not about to make the same mistakes ever again.

The sky had turned to a kaleidoscope of red hues, threatening rain into the night and the next day but providing the evening with a picturesque and seemingly peaceful view. It was a welcome backdrop and a stark contrast to the conflict that raged deep in the pit of Selene’s stomach. Outside in the parking lot of the Tattoo studio, she sat on the bench and finished up a cigarette when Daryl’s truck turned in from the road.

*He kept his promise.*

Throwing the end of her smoke into a flowerpot filled with sand under the bench, she stood up and wiped the front of her jeans down. The faint smell of bleach wafted up as her clothing moved. A tell-tale sign that she’d been cleaning to keep her mind from kicking into overdrive and ruining her plans. Daryl climbed out of his truck and started across the lot, his black and grey flannel shirt undone to almost the middle of his chest. He appeared tired and withdrawn but still as rugged and handsome as she had ever seen him. He was a sight for sore eyes and one that she wished she could keep.

“You sure you want me here for this?” He asked, bypassing any form of greeting and getting to the
nitty gritty. His tone was the same as it had been the last time that she’d seen him. Direct, laced with the troubling sound of resentment but still, she knew he was trying.

Unable to look him in the eye for too long, guilt made her speak to the floor rather than his face and she gently rolled a stone across the concrete under her boot

“I need him to see the damage he’s done.” She told him.

“Alright. How ya gonna play it?” He continued. His need to get to the point with no messing around saddened her. It would be a long time, if ever, that she’d be able to have a conversation with him without the black cloud of his inability to forgive her hanging over her head.

“I have a kind of plan I wanted to stick to.” She muttered with a loud sigh.

Try as he might, he couldn’t ignore that he cared about her. It was something that would never change. Stood in front of him was a broken woman whose heart had been snapped into pieces by one of her best friends. His head was bustling with rage but all at the same time, he knew just as well as she did what the sting of betrayal and loss could do to a person. Daryl was angry, but he wasn’t a monster.

“Selene” He said, softening his voice. “Look at me.”

He saw her swallow hard as she swept her gaze around the parking lot before gradually working up the courage to look him in the eye. Her spark had all but vanished, her vivacious and bold personality had been chipped away. When he could once see life and a future when he looked into her eyes, now, he saw nothing.

“You can do this.” He assured her. “I know ya can.”

Her vision blurred and her chest tightened.

Not again. I can’t cry anymore. I am exhausted.

When tears began to roll down her cheeks, Daryl bit his bottom lip, stepped closer to her and with both hands, tickled over the backs of her fingers. She turned her hands and let him hold onto them gently at her sides. A tilt of her head meant her forehead was soon connected with his and the sound of his breathing and the leathery smell of his vest told her she was home, for the first time in months.

He whispered so softly, so quietly that it could have been a mere gust of wind that blew it away, never to be heard or acknowledged. But she heard him.

“I really missed you.”

She closed her eyes as he brought a hand up and brushed through the side of her hair.

“What do you need me to do?” He asked.

“Nothing. I don’t have a right to ask you for anything.” She replied, moving back slightly. His hand dropped from her face but he kept a hold of her fingers at her side. “I just wanted to see you before I did this.”

“You want me in there with you?” He questioned dipping his head and trying to catch her eye again. She was torn. Having him with her would provide her with more strength than she was able to muster alone. But it also meant that he would possibly hear some sordid details that were likely
to drive him over the edge.

“Daryl, you’re going to hear things you really won’t like.” She warned.

“Been through 7 months of torture, think I can handle it.” Came his mixed response. Both petulant and assuring at the same time. It occurred to her that maybe, just maybe he wanted to see her destroy Ritchie, just like he’d done to the both of them. He wanted to be there to witness his demise and who was she to stand in his way when she had so much to make up for?

“Please, keep a hold of your temper.” She told him.

He nodded and what came next baffled her, but instilled a glimmer of hope in her. He lifted her hand and gently drew her closer to him, raising his other arm and enveloping her in an embrace. He loved the smell of her, an aroma he’d missed desperately; wood smoke candles from her apartment mixed with floral scented shampoo. It exploded in his senses and he clung to her tighter. Selene’s lips were parted with surprise and she blinked rapidly while she attempted to calm her trembling shoulders and hands. She didn’t want to let go but the time was nearing and she had to go inside and mentally prepare for what was to come.

They stood wordlessly in the kitchen, the gentle ticking of the clock on the wall was the only noise cutting through a thick atmosphere of dread and anticipation. When the doorbell finally rang, she shot over to the wall and pressed the buzzer, opening the door as she moved back to her previous position, leaned on the countertop beside Daryl. Footsteps could be heard ascending the stairs beyond the door and Selene changed her mind and decided to take up position in the middle of the apartment, strong and defiant. Daryl remained where he was.

Selene had learned some valuable lessons in the last 48 hours. One of them being that the worst pain in the world goes way beyond the physical and that the knives of betrayal can cut deep and cause a kind of hurt that can’t be described, but they also trim away the nonsense and reveal what really matters. What really mattered to Selene, was the man stood in her kitchen who, through everything, had turned up when he said he would and in doing so, had conveyed that there was still some hope despite the lies, the deception, the mistrust and the pain.

Ritchie casually wandered into the apartment, not bothering to look up from his phone and closed the door behind him. When his eyes lifted from the screen, he stilled. The first person he saw was not Selene. It was Daryl.

Blue eyes glowered back at him through strands of messy dark hair. A hardened and furious face that he was not expecting to see. His heart began to pound in his chest. Then, Selene stepped in front of him and crossed her arms with her head held high and an air of confidence that appeared to arrive out of the blue.

“What’s going on?” Ritchie croaked “What’s he doing here?”

Daryl tilted his head up and looked down at Ritchie, his displeasure sparking already.

“Ritchie, I’m going to have to fire you.” Selene announced firmly which piqued Daryl’s interest straight away. He’d convinced himself she was going to turn full on she-devil at him, but she was controlled and that was even scarier.


“Turning up to work on meth and trying to punch two of my employees, one of which is a manager. I’ve been reading up on the legalities and I am within my rights to fire you for it.” She explained
with a subtle and indifferent shrug of one shoulder. Panic crossed Ritchie’s features when he began to protest.

“That was like, last year! What the hell?!”

“I’m a slow reader,” Selene shot at him defiantly.

Daryl almost smirked at her tactics, impressed and a little concerned at the same time with her savage approach. He was already struggling to stay out of things and stop his anger from boiling over, so her calm and sinister tactics were notable.

_Nicely done._ He thought.

“I need this job, Selene. Where has this come from and why is Dixon here?” Ritchie demanded as he shoved his cell into his jeans pocket and stepped closer to her. She responded with a wider step back and offered him a slow shake of her head that conveyed her intent in no uncertain terms; _Don’t come near me._

Now, it was crunch time and Daryl prepared himself for what was the main course of an entire meal packed with pure rage from both him and Selene. He couldn’t predict what would happen, but for the time being, he decided to keep quiet unless he was summoned.

“I’ll give you the chance to answer that for me. Tell me the truth, Ritchie.” She instructed.

Ritchie was now deeply troubled; his eyes told the truth even through his absence of words. Selene could see the pure alarm coursing through him and to her it was like a kind of fuel, a satisfaction that urged her to continue.

“How do you feel about me?”

Daryl felt his skin prickle and his teeth grind together as he fought to keep his mouth shut. His breathing hissed through his nose while he witnessed Selene tilt her head to one side and wait for the answer to her question.

“You… love… me.”

Then, the stopped and looked him square in the eye, inches from his face.
“Enough to take the person I love away from me? Because that person, wasn’t you?” She whispered.

Ritchie could only stare at her. His rapid breathing was not lost on her and she knew he was terrified.

Fuck. She knows

“Daryl” She said, loudly. As if the declaration of his name would strike more fear into Ritchie. If she intended it to or not, it did. Daryl stood up straight and half expected her to beckon him over to her and give him permission to beat the living daylights out of him. “Please can you play the recording you have on your phone?” She asked instead.

Happy to oblige, Daryl dug his cell from his pocket, opened his messages, adjusted the volume on the device to maximum and placed the cell on the kitchen counter. He looked up and caught Ritchie’s eye as his finger jabbed the play button.

At the sound of Amy’s voice, tears filled Ritchie’s eyes and he began to fidget, rubbing his face with his hands and trying to step closer to Selene, who simply moved further away each time and crossed her arms. When the recording finished, Selene raised an eyebrow at him.

“For four hundred dollars. That what my life was worth to you? My happiness?”

His mouth dropped open and a million and one things raced through his mind that he could say to try and make things right but he knew none of them would suffice compared to the monumental act of deception he’d committed.

“I only ever cared about your happiness-”

“-BULLSHIT!” Selene raged out of nowhere. The switch in her was a split second, bolt from the blue and Ritchie flinched at the searing volume of her fury. “You cared about your happiness! No one else’s! You paid a whore to fuck up my life and you were supposed to be one of my best friends. I mean, what the fuck is wrong with you?! Did you leave your good sense at rehab??”

The sound of her shouting at him almost made Daryl startle, he had never seen such ferocity in her before. Her pain was etched on her face and travelling on her words and his first instinct was to go to her and wrap her in his arms. But this was her show for now and she would call upon him if she needed to. That was until Ritchie disclosed more of his train of thought.

“H-he’s no good for you. He’s a fucking Dixon! They’re nothing but scumbag dealers. I wanted to give you everything you deserved.” Ritchie tried, only digging himself a bigger grave when Daryl heard his comment and simply couldn’t ignore it.

“Hey, junkie. You want a little Crystal; help you mellow out?” Daryl smirked, delivering a harsh reminder of the times when he’d beg Daryl for a hit, telling him he was good for the money and he could pay the rest the following week. Daryl wasn’t proud of his time as one of the distributors of the town’s drugs, but he’d been forced into it by none other than Selene’s father and as far as he was concerned, Ritchie wasn’t any more beneficial to Selene than he was. But at least he hadn’t tried to ruin her life. Selene shot him a look that was sympathetic enough but that also told him she wanted to be left to handle things alone for now.

“I’m sorry, Selene. I’m so sorry. I just couldn’t stand it anymore. Seeing you with him. It killed me. OK, I got a drug problem but I was trying to stay sober and having to see you two together was pushing me backwards.”
Selene was trying not to snap but the mere hint of her having a part in his drug addiction pushed her too far. She threw the bunch of keys in her hand across the room with all her might, resulting in Ritchie having to duck to keep his face intact. The impact rattled through the apartment, louder than she’d expected and it left a dent in the wall opposite the bed. She lifted a hand, jabbing a finger at his chest.

“Don’t you dare blame me for that.” She warned.

“I’m not, I’m not blaming you for anything. Do you know what it’s like to love someone so much and not be able to have them?” He questioned.

Selene looked over at Daryl, an obvious and intentional motion that said everything to Ritchie. Daryl couldn’t help it, he actually laughed.

“Is he fuckin’ serious?!” He said to Selene, who by now was clutching onto the edge of her temper with all the will in the world not to let it go. She walked over to Daryl and stood beside him, a united front.

“I love Daryl and I lost him for seven months” she said “because of you. So yes, I know what it’s like. I don’t want you anywhere near me anymore, do you understand?”

“Please, don’t do this. I’m sorry. I am. Maybe one day you could forgive me. I don’t wanna lose you for good.” He pleaded.

“No.” She spat.

He started to pace, his fingers tugging and pulling at the bottom of his hoodie.

“Shit… Shit. You really didn’t feel anything for me? After all the time we spent together?” He asked “What about when you fell asleep on me, when I held you when you cried, when we watched movies and had a food fight and when I took you to the lake and you almost kissed me, because I know you did. I saw it in your eyes. I saw it the night we first had sex too. We shared something that night and every time since and you can’t deny that.”

The bottom fell out of Selene’s world when the words were spoken aloud and she heard a huff from Daryl and reluctantly stole a glance at him. He was stood with his back to the kitchen counter, gripping onto it either side, his knuckles white and his head held low. Then, he suddenly launched himself across the room and reached out to grab Ritchie.

“SON OF A BITCH!” He yelled.

Selene thought and reacted quickly enough to place herself between them, knowing that Daryl would never hurt her and would be forced to back down. Her hands hit his chest and she pushed back against him, taken a back by just how strong he was.

“Daryl. Look at me. Please” She soothed

His chest was heaving at a rapid rate and his lips were pushed into a thin line, sweat gathered at his temples and his eyes were enraged. Ritchie backed away to a safe distance, ready to bolt for the door if Selene were to just decide to let him go.

“Daryl, please. Look at me.” She tried again.

It was brief at first, but his gaze began to waiver from Ritchie towards Selene before he started to calm at the sight of her.
“I told you that you would hear things you wouldn’t like.” She pointed out “I need you to back off. Please, Daryl. Please”

His face crumpled and his body seemed to sag as he breathed out and shook his head, stepping back then forwards again and pressing his eyes shut. At the sight of him, Selene’s heart all but snapped into two. After a few seconds of agony, listening to him sniff and hold back tears of pure anger, he raised his head and peered at her.

“You slept with this guy?” He asked sadly.

She nodded and brushed hair from his forehead. “Not now. We’ll talk it over later.”

“Fuck, Selene.” He gasped as he turned from her touch and walked back to the kitchen. She turned back to Ritchie.

“I would be lying to you if I said I didn’t feel anything, I did. I was starting to really like you. But you’re not Daryl. I was never going to love you, Ritchie.” She flung out an arm, motioning to the devastated man behind her “I belong to him. So, all your lies and your fucking deceit, it all means nothing. You put me through hell, for nothing” She said firmly.

Daryl was now standing with his hands shoved in his pockets and watching Selene. Her declaration of his ownership over her did little to quell his need to pull Ritchie’s limbs off but after so long wondering if she still loved him, it was reassuring for him to hear.

“I’m sorry.” Ritchie whispered.

“No number of apologies is going to make it OK. I’m not interested. I want you gone. Gone from this tattoo parlour and gone from my life.” She affirmed.

“I got friends here-” He started

“-believe me, when they find out what you did, they won’t want anything to do with you. Least of all Axel, who lectured me about getting involved with you. He tried to look out for you. He’s going to feel like a fucking tool now and don’t even get me started on my brother. He’s going to strangle you and I’m going to let him”

“Selene, please don’t. I’ve loved you for four years” His life over the past few years had been a series of begging for things. Weather it be drugs or Selene’s forgiveness, it occurred to him that when a person gets so used to pleading, something is very, very wrong in their life.

Now, it was Daryl’s turn. He slowly moved closer with Selene on tenterhooks beside him and ready to grab a hold of him should he make a move to attack Ritchie.

“Four years, huh? S’a long time to be in love with somebody that don’t love you back” he commented, much to Selene’s surprise.

Ritchie nodded, showing that he was listening, despite being petrified and rooted to the spot with fear.

“I’ve loved her since I was sixteen years old. I’m almost 30. She was the girl at high school that didn’t know I existed.”

“Yes, I did.” Selene whispered from beside him

“Shut up” He hushed at her. She sucked both lips into her mouth and allowed him to continue,
stifling a small smile at the fact that they were still having the same argument over who noticed who at high school, after everything that had happened.

“I waited a long time for her and yeah, she can do better than me. But it wasn’t your place to decide that. You knew I had history with Amy and you set me up n’ stole my girl, man. That shit is fucked.”

“I know.” Ritchie replied “I know. I admit, I was so fucking jealous of you, dude. You were always there, with something I wanted. You were the guy I got my hits from and the guy I used to see in the rabbit that was popular with all the girls. Then, you came outta nowhere and got the one girl I fell for”

Daryl scoffed and hazarded another step closer

“None of that is my problem. It aint hers neither” He replied, throwing an arm back in Selene’s direction. “Now, I swear to god If you don’t quit beggin’ her I’ma break ya fuckin’ face before Bear gets anywhere near ya.” He threatened in the calmest and most menacing tone Selene had ever heard from him.

“Ritchie?” Selene said, moving out from behind Daryl.

“Yeah?” He sniffed.

“Get the fuck off my property before I call my father.”

She waited and waited and still nothing presented itself. Daryl had been standing by the window for upwards of fifteen minutes after Ritchie fled the building with tear stained cheeks, no job and no friends. Selene settled on her bed with her legs crossed under her and waited until he at least graced her with a glance. She picked nervously at a thread on her black sweatpants, unravelling the seam and not caring one, little bit about the damage she was doing. The street below was deathly quiet and soft rain filtered down the window pane. She opened her mouth twice to try and coax him into a conversation, but quite what she wanted to say, she wasn’t sure. It felt like forever, the torturous quiet. Then, he finally spoke.

“Can’t believe you fucked him.” He muttered under his breath.

“Daryl, I’m sorry” was all she could offer in return. She believed he would stay where he was and that would be the end of it. The prospect of digging up the details wouldn’t appeal to him. But when she saw him look over his shoulder at her and noticed the red tint to his skin, she understood. He was furious with her.

“Was he good? Was he better than me?” He spat

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Don’t.”

“Answer me! I wanna know!” He raged as he crossed the space between the window and the bed in less than two seconds. All at once, he was in front of her, looming over her.

“No, you don’t. You’re just angry.” She squeaked. There was not once, single ounce of the confidence that she displayed with Ritchie left in her being.

“Damn right I’m fuckin’ angry!” He yelled, tearing away from her and storming around her apartment as he shouted. “I couldn’t be with anybody since you and it ain’t like I never had the chance neither! Cassidy, the redhead? You were right, she liked me. But she got her hands in my
pants and I backed off. Y’know why? ‘Cause I still love you n’ I never actually wanted nobody else!”

Allowing herself some time to adjust to the volume of his voice, she took a deep breath and told herself not to, under any circumstance, yell back at him.

“No, I didn’t but being alone forever wasn’t an option. I had a life to live.”

“You went back for more though. So, he must have been good, huh? How many times was it? You beg him for it like ya begged me?!”

She recoiled at the nature of his attack. He was being crass and offensive as was the typical, angry Dixon mode. She hated it and knew he was better than to use vulgarity to get his point across. While it wasn’t the time to lecture him on his communication skills, or lack thereof, she wasn’t about to let him get away with it without pointing it out.

“Jesus, Daryl! Stop being so crude. This isn’t you! You’re sounding more and more like your fucking brother!” She informed him.

Her words seem to fall on deaf ears as he swept everything from her dining table across the room in one, swift movement. Paperwork, her cell phone, lip balms and a lamp. She didn’t move, didn’t even flinch. She only made a mental note that if he calmed down before leaving her apartment, he was going to pick every single item up from the floor and replace it.

“Were you fuckin’ both of us at the same time?!” He demanded.

“Oh my god! Stop it!” She cried

“Answer me!”

“No. This isn’t achieving anything”

“It is for me!” He declared loudly “How many times?”

“Daryl-“

“HOW MANY FUCKIN’ TIMES, SELENE?!”

She braved a peep at his face, now it was an even deeper shade of red than before. He had tried and failed to control his anger and his time spent in front of the window had only served as time to wind himself up. She had never seen such behaviour directed at her from him before and although she wasn’t afraid of him, she couldn’t say she could predict how this was going to end. She knew she had to try give him what he wanted or he would never let up. Daryl was as stubborn as she was.

“Three.” She choked out.

“Three?! Three?!” He repeated in devastation.

“He manipulated me! I thought I liked him. I did like him. But all I really wanted was you.” She expressed, desperately trying to placate him. But nothing was working.

“I WAS RIGHT HERE!” He bellowed, his voice splitting through the air and making her eardrums hum and her heart slam in her chest. His face reddened with fury and veins protruded in his neck as he shouted at her and pointed firmly to the floor, signalling that although he had moved away, in his mind, he had never really left. Her mouth slowly dropped open when she noticed him back up
and lean forwards slightly, a loud sob wracking his chest. She jolted towards him, stopping herself when she considered that the last thing he would want was for her to touch him. A loud sniff followed and he raised his head. Selene’s stomach flipped when tears rolled down his cheeks. “I was- I was right here… fuckin’ waitin’ on you” His voice cracked with emotion and Selene felt a surge of unbearable guilt wash over her. Her hand shot to her mouth and she broke down with him.

*I’ve really, really hurt him.*

“You- you wouldn’t even talk to me” his voice was rough and breaking with every word. He wasn’t shouting anymore. Now, he was too distraught for that kind of energy.

The penny dropped there and then for Selene. It wasn’t even about her having sex with Ritchie, it about her ignoring him and pushing him away. Discarding him like he was nothing without even giving him a chance to explain. Just like he’d said back at his apartment. She understood that he was mad at her but what she didn’t fathom until that moment, was just how much.

“This isn’t just about me having sex with Ritchie, is it?” She asked.

Daryl messily swiped at his cheeks with the back of his hand and focused on the way his boots sank into the rug. He needed a small thing to fixate on until he was able to pull himself together. He couldn’t remember the last time he cried and he would rather forget this occasion. But the level of emotion that was clawing at the inside of his entire body was so overwhelming he had let go of the reins and now needed to regain some of that stability. He paced towards the bed and sank down onto the corner, inches away from Selene.

“I shoulda known. This was bullshit. All of it. I dunno why I ever got involved in this. I was better on my own. I shoulda stayed away from you n’ all ya fuckin’ drama.” He mused to the sound of her distressed sniffles “But I- I couldn’t. I fuckin’ fell for you and I can’t stand it. I been an idiot, sleepin’ with you, thinkin’ maybe you wanted me back but it was all I could get so I took it. I wish I never agreed to go on that first date with you.”

She felt like he’d stabbed her in the heart and the air rapidly left her lungs. She gasped over and over and placed a hand on her chest to try and stop her soul from seeping out of the emotional wound he’d left behind with his last statement.

“You regret being with me?” She questioned somehow. Her voice was barely there, fuelled only by pure desperation.

“I… No. Yeah. No. Shit…I dunno *what* I mean” He complained “It ain’t- It aint you. I ain’t angry at you…” his voice cracked again and he roughly wiped at his eyes once more, the tears that were forming making him more irritated.

“You are. You’re very much still angry at me.” She told him “And I don’t blame you.”

“I don’t want- I don’t wanna be.” He said sadly.

Selene decided to risk moving closer to him. Shuffle across the quilt cover, she stopped facing him side on. With one leg bent by his side and the other one stretched out behind him, creating as much of a wall around him as she could. Then, with every bit of bravery she could muster, she took hold of his hand.

“But you are and that’s OK.” She soothed with a wobbly and raw voice. "I think…I think other than Ritchie and Amy, I was the bad guy here. You have things you need to say to me and have to just say it or it’ll eat away at you. Just tell me."
He gradually turned his head to find her eyes peering back at him, as glassy and watery as his own. Inhaling deeply, he opted to do as she suggested.

“I hate that ya didn’t believe me, that ya didn’t even ask me what happened. That ya just gave up on us.” He said. Her throat felt like it was closing up and sadness seemed to deep into her bones. “I hate that ya kept on havin’ sex with me but ya wouldn’t talk to me…n’ I hate that I pussied out n’ wasn’t strong enough to say no to you. I hate that ya screwed my head up so much. I hate that I waited, I tried with somebody else, somebody real nice who liked me, but I just couldn’t do it n’ you did.” He pauses “I really fuckin’ hate that ya slept with Ritchie… I mean, shit. How am I sposed to get past that? I don’t know what I’m doin’ and…and I want you but I’m pissed, Selene. I’m real fuckin’ pissed.”

She swallowed hard and blinked away tears, feeling them drop from her cheeks onto her forearm where it rested on her leg as she clutched Daryl’s hand tightly. It wasn’t easy hearing him say the things that had caused him pain, all of them because of her. But without hearing it, she couldn’t even start to try to repair it and Daryl wouldn’t be able to heal with it all still locked up inside the darkest depths of his being. It was almost like a small apology in itself. To let him unleash his pain at her, so she could try to ease it.

“I know. You’re allowed to be.” She assured him.

“Y’know…” He added

He paused and looked at her and it crossed her mind that she’d never seen him so broken and never wanted to ever again. So far, she was astounded by how vulnerable he’d made himself in front of her.

“…I should have known. After all this time. After lovin’ you in high school, seein you around n’ wishin’ you were mine, after our first kiss, how I freaked out after we first had sex, all of it… I just…I should have known that I aint the kind of guy that girls like you fall in love with. Was it ever even real for you? Cause I tried so hard, Selene n’ I can’t think of another reason why you’d just throw me away like that.”

She didn’t think about it. Not once. She quickly shifted onto her knees and positioned her hands on either side of his face after brushing his damp hair away from his eyes. She studied his face, wiping away a stray tear from his cheek with her thumb. He avoided her gaze, his blurry vision dropping to the floor instead.

“Look at me.” She ordered. He reluctantly and slowly raised his vision to her face.

“I have never loved anyone like I have loved you. Like I still do. You are the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about before I go to sleep and all the hours in between are caught up with thoughts of you too. You are always in my head. I daydream about you, I fantasise about you, I miss you so much it kills me. I never gave up on you, not really. I lost myself and I made some decisions I shouldn’t have. But you were always right here” She took one of his hands and placed it over her heart “I was lied to and taken for a fool and as a result, I made a huge mistake. One I can’t even forgive myself for. I thought I was protecting myself by not hearing you out, I was convinced by what I saw and I was wrong. OK? I was wrong, Daryl. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I hope that one day you’ll understand that.”

He had no idea what to say. Tears still dropped from her eyes and he could feel her heartbeat thudding in her chest under his hand. When all was said and done, he was now at a loss. What was he supposed to do now he’d yelled and wrecked things and cried? What else was there left to do?
“You are everything to me.” She reiterated. “Please believe that” Giving him no choice, she nuzzled at his face, kissing his cheeks and nose with no regard for how salty his tears tasted. He didn’t stop her and while his hand remained over her heart, he could literally sense the regret transferring from her body into his. She was sorry, he knew that much and something so complex could not be rectified overnight, but there had to be a starting point somewhere. He pulled her onto his lap, her legs clinging to his thighs either side as his arms clamped her body against him. She moved with ease, happy to be locked in his embrace and feel him shove his face into the crook of her neck.

“I’m so confused” he whispered

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She sniffed.

There it was. The truth was all finally out and their pain was laid bare, the naked truth as cold and bitter as it was. The simple, spiteful actions of two people had snowballed and caused such a ripple effect that lives had almost been shattered and changed forever. For Daryl, it was the hardest thing he’d ever had to contend with because not only did he have to accept the callous and deceptive acts of others, he was also forced to endure his own turmoil and ultimately, he wasn’t sure of much anymore. Except one thing; he loved Selene. Sitting on her bed with her curled around him, hearing her gentle sobs and ragged breathing…he decided to start the process of forgiveness. Not because she apologised or acknowledged the hurt she’d caused him, but because maybe their pasts were meant to be broken. So, when they fit back together it wouldn’t be perfect but it would be reinforced and stronger than ever.
Recovery

Chapter Summary

Here I am with another chapter! Hope everyone likes! Soooo much thanks for all the love <3 I really hope it’s not been so long that you’ve all forgotten what’s happening ;) 

Coming clean to her friends and the staff of the Ink Cabinet was a task that struck dread into Selene’s heart. She already couldn’t handle the shame, the anger, the humiliation and the sadness that came with Ritchie’s betrayal and when she thought of her actions during the month’s of Daryl’s absence, her skin literally crawled with discomfort.

The day that followed Selene and Daryl’s showdown with Ritchie felt like the longest day of her life and she buzzed around the studio looking for things to distract her, at one point even emptying the desk drawers and organising them for the first time since the day she’d first opened the doors. The staff noticed her wired demeanour but said nothing, having learned the hard way that it wasn’t always wise to confront Selene when she wasn’t herself and as long as she was safe and her business was running smoothly, Ray would usually be the one to either stay with her or drag her out for a drink.

At the end of the working day, Selene knew she had to tell her friends the truth. Not only because they deserved to know the reason behind her erratic and strange behaviour, but also because they needed to be told who their friend, Ritchie, really was. That day, she’d scheduled for everyone to work, stating her reason for such overstaffing as needing to get a few things in order, meaning she was a mere extra staff member.

They guys were all grabbing their coats and bags when Selene locked the front door, flipped the sign to closed and waited for them to round the partition. When they did, she realised that telling the truth was about to be a lot more difficult than she’d thought.

“Before you all go home, there’s something I need to tell you guys.” She announced bravely as she watched them move to the couches. She moved to sit before them on her desk chair and felt her anxiety rise while she tried to find the right words. But nothing was presenting it’s self, except for an insatiable need to cry. Her eyelids flickered and she swivelled to the side on her chair to hide her glassy eyes. After a concerned glance was exchanged between them all, Ray leapt forwards, moved her chair back to face them and held her hand.

“Whatever it is, take ya time” He told her. She nodded tearfully, sniffing loudly and fanning her eyes. After a deep breath, she looked down into her lap and began to speak.

“Um. Well, you might have noticed Ritchie isn’t here and-and that is I because I fired him.” She started.

“Ahh shit.” Shorty sighed. “He turn up lit again?”

“No. He didn’t. Uh… he paid a hooker to kiss Daryl in-in front of me. Then he-he manipulated me into having sex with him.”

The cold, hard truth about the situation hit her like a train when she said the words. It all seemed so
alien, as thought it was happening to someone else. But it was her reality and it had been for the last seven months. The resulting silence in the room only heightened her anxiety and she watched them all slowly look at one another with shocked expressions.

“You’re shittin’ me” Ray whispered to her. “He paid Amy?”

“Yes.” She nodded

“Selene, that’s a pretty big accusation” Shorty intervened as the voice of reason “How do you do know that for sure?”

She noted the others; Axel leaned forwards with his elbows on his knees and his hands pressed together, as if praying, in front of him. His eyes were locked on the magazines on the Table. Bear was staring at Selene as if she’d grown an extra head but his face was turning a deep shade of red and she could already sense his rage boiling over.

“Merle Dixon and Delilah from the Rabbit, they had a bet on whether Daryl cheated on me or not. So, they got Amy high and asked the right questions. Merle recorded her whole confession. Daryl has it on his cell” She informed them following another loud sniff.

“What the fuck?” Axel uttered into his hands.

Bear shot to his feet and began pacing from the couches to the door and back again. “I knew it. I knew he didn’t cheat on you. I never believed it from the start.” He ranted.

Selene caught his eye “why didn’t you tell me that’s what you thought?”

He stopped walking for a moment and held his hands up in disbelief at her question.

“Are you serious, sis? You wouldn’t have listened. You wouldn’t listen to anybody.” He pointed out. She was now beginning to see now how closed off and narrow minded she had been. How clever Ritchie’s manipulation was. “You wouldn’t even listen to Ray and you always listen to him.”

“I know.” She croaked.

Axel was still quiet, now staring at the floor and slowly rubbing his chin with his fingers. In his head, he went over and over the events of the day he’d walked in on Selene and Ritchie in the Store Room, feeling guilt at how he’d handled the situation with Selene afterwards.

“Are you alright?” Shorty wanted to know.

She went to answer that she was, but she didn’t feel it at all. Tears flowed to the surface and erupted, trailing down her cheeks as she shook her head. “No” she squeaked

Ray stood up and wrapped his arms around her, hushing her. Then, Bear waited for his turn and engulfed her in a hug, kissing the top of her head.

“Shh. It’s ok. It’s all going to be ok” he hushed.

“We’re here, we got you, boss” Shorty offered.

When Bear finally let her go he sat her back down but wheeled her chair next to one of the couches so he could take over from Ray and sit and hold her hand.

“You talked to Daryl, honey?” Ray asked, wiping under one eye for her with a Kleenex and
handing it to her.

“Yes. He was there when I confronted Ritchie.” She replied.

“Really? Surprised noodle head is still alive” Ray remarked.

Selene dabbed at her eyes with the tissue, taking care not to smudge her perfectly applied, waterproof eyeliner that formed part of her identity, her uniform.

“Believe me I wanted to let him kill him. But that’s not the answer to all of this. I think Daryl knows that too” She mused.

Shorty, who had clocked Axel’s telling silence and concluded that he may know more than the rest of them, observed his still form for a moment before turning back to Selene. He wasn’t exactly a romantic, but he did believe in fixing what was broken instead of throwing it away.

“Tell me you two are going to try again” he stated.

Selene wanted nothing more than to try again. To pick up the broken pieces and figure out the puzzle together with Daryl, the one man she’d loved more than anything or anyone in her life. But it wasn’t that simple, and explaining why proved to be very difficult.

“I don’t know. He’s going to have a hard time forgiving me for not hearing him out in the first place.” She paused to take a breath and to steady her shaky lungs “But I think he wants to try. I really fucking hurt him. I didn’t even realise how much. I feel awful.”

Shorty thoughtfully toyed with the corner of a magazine as he weighed up her words and tried to put himself in Daryl’s shoes. What would he do if this were Maria? It was a complicated question but one with a very simple answer. He loved her, so he would work on it.

“Well, if he’s willing to try. No one can expect much more at this point. He obviously still loves you so, I can’t see him giving up that easily” Shorty reasoned

“God, I’m a terrible person.” She sobbed “I’m a monster, guys. I treated him so badly.”

Both Shorty and Bear chimed in with the word ‘no’ in unison. Looking at one another, Bear motioned towards Selene with his hand, signalling that he should be the one to continue argue this point.

“No. You’re not. This was Ritchie and Amy’s doing. Not yours. They found a weakness and took advantage. You might have made some mistakes but we all know you never would have hurt Daryl on purpose. He will know that too.” He explained.

“I wanna kill Ritchie. I actually wanna kill him. Have you told dad?” Bear asked

Selene stared at Bear with worried eyes, dragging the Kleenex across her nose and sniffing. The thought of her father finding out was yet another facet to an already complex turn of events that she didn’t yet have the energy to even think about. But she had to and during the small hours when sleep evaded her, she ruminated over the consequences and knew the main reasons why it was never to be an option.

“No. And you won’t either. He’ll know I lied about what happened then and he’ll go back to having me followed. I don’t want Daryl’s life to be uprooted again. Plus, as much as I hate Amy, she has a child. If dad finds out he will shoot her and her kid will be an orphan.” She expressed, all the while maintaining eye contact with her brother in a firm warning.
“That’s mighty big of ya. Don’t think I could be as thoughtful as that.” Ray remarked honestly with a huff of surprise.

“I’m in this situation because I didn’t think about anyone but myself. I learned my lesson. I don’t want any of you to go after Ritchie. Please, just leave him alone.” She pleaded, glancing from one face to the next and seeing that Axel still hadn’t moved but he was nodding in agreement, the same as the others.

Selene brought the taxing meeting to an abrupt end, announcing that she needed to go up to her apartment and try and get some sleep. The exhaustion of every element of the situation was weighing heavily upon her. Ray, Bear and Shorty all offered her hugs goodbye and each repeated the same thing; that she should call if she needed them. She was grateful for the outpouring of support after initially being wary of them thinking less of her. But her friendships were stronger than she’d anticipated and although she’d lost one friend in Ritchie, the ones she had left were extremely precious to her.

The one that did concern her was Axel, who hung back from leaving and pretended he’d forgotten something at his workstation. When he heard the door close, he slowly ambled back to the front desk, clutching his backpack in both of his hands at his front.

“You OK, Axel?” She asked.

He shook his head sadly.

“I’m so sorry.” He croaked “For what I said. I defended the guy and made you out to be the asshole and the whole time… the whole time he knew he’d set the whole thing up.”

From behind the desk, Selene stood up and reached out to him, catching the fabric of his hoodie between her fingers at his forearm.

“He’s your friend, of course you defended him.” She reasoned. But Axel shook his head and hoisted his backpack further up his shoulder.

“No. You’re my friend too. I took sides and I shouldn’t have.” He corrected.

“You didn’t know, Axel. It’s OK. I shouldn’t have done what I did anyway. You tried to stop me and I wouldn’t listen to you” She offered up, making her misgivings quite clear had been difficult in every respect but it felt cleansing to do so.

“You thought you liked him.” He shrugged.

“I did like him.” She agreed reluctantly “I just didn’t know he’d manipulated me into it. I feel so stupid.”

He stepped around the desk and drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly and finding that she didn’t want to let go. Her body shuddered and she sniffed loudly, She was crying on his shoulder. He stroked her hair, gently and subtly swaying from side to side as he hushed her.

“It’s gonna be alright. You’ll see.”

Four days had passed and Selene was no closer to even beginning to understand the events of the last week. She busied herself as much as possible, booking in clients and pouring her heartache into her artistic talents, translating them into some of the best work she’d ever done, or so Ray kept telling her. Daryl had dropped off the radar and with each passing hour of silence from him,
another piece of her fell away and she began to believe that he would never want to see her again. While her tribe rallied around her, making sure she was eating and was talking to them about how she felt, she couldn’t shake the heavy, sickening feeling in her stomach that it was all over.

Axel and Bear took her out for a steak and watched in dismay as she barely touched her meal. Bear made no bones about finishing for her and buying her ice cream instead, which seemed to do the trick for the time being. Ray slept over at her place after cooking for her one night and Shorty was in charge of doing her morning coffee runs due to the dread that she felt at running into Ritchie by accident.

While tattooing a client that was in for his second sitting in a week against her advice, she heard her phone ping from the front desk. At first, she tried to ignore it, putting it down to one of the guys texting her or yet another marketing text from the company she’d bought her TV from. She carried on shading her client’s arm until it dawned on her; all of the guys were at work and she’d opted out of those marketing texts two days ago. She sprang up from the seat, switching off the machine.

“Sir, let’s take a small break. I’ll get someone to bring you a coffee” She told him. She didn’t wait for a response before she was racing across the studio, ripping off her gloves, slam dunking them in the trash and snatching up her phone.

“What is it?” Ray asked.

“Can you get my client a coffee please, Ray?” She asked, ignoring his question and missing his dramatic eye roll in the process.

“Fine” He sighed.

She threw herself into the leather, wheeled chair and quickly opened her messages. Holding her breath, she slowly raised her eyes to find Shorty peering at her from the couches.

“It’s Daryl.” She whispered.

Shorty, needing no encouragement, rose to his feet and approached the desk, sitting on it sideways and waiting for more information. Selene stared down at the message.

‘Hey. Just want you to know I’m still here. I just need time’.

She swallowed hard and turned the cell around so the screen was facing Shorty, he could tell by her expression that it wasn’t necessarily what she wanted to see. He squinted at the tiny words.

“What’s does that mean?” She asked.

He wrinkled his brow at her and knitted his eyebrows together in disbelief. Selene, a woman without a single, female friend was asking a question that she already knew the answer to.

“You don’t have enough male friends to know what that means?” he remarked.

“Shorty…please” She begged, her shoulders sagging as she leaned back in the leather seat.

“It means what it says, Selene” He conveyed as sympathetically as possible. “He doesn’t want you to think he’s never going to talk to you again. He’s figuring shit out.”

She sighed deeply and tapped a long, black nail on the screen of the phone, the sound jarred Shorty but he said nothing, he only watched as the cogs turned in her head.
“Do I reply?” She asked, clueless.

“That depends what you’re going to say.” He smiled. “No begging. I know you want to, but you’re better that that. Ray and your brother would say the same”

She nodded. He wasn’t wrong, all she wanted to do was beg and plead for things to go back to the way there were. But she was better than that, she’d never begged anyone for anything and wasn’t about to start now, even if it was Daryl. She typed a short message and held the phone up again.

“Thank you for telling me. I’m here when you’re ready.”

Shorty took the phone from her grasp, nodded once and hit the ‘send’ button.

To figure things out for Daryl meant to throw himself into any work he could find during the day and to dull his overactive brain with beer of an evening. He hated his new routine and thought it harked of his brother or worse, his father. But he was neither of them and to keep himself in check, only bought a certain amount of alcohol each week. Although it meant some nights, usually Friday’s meant he found himself at a bar.

All he wanted was Selene, but to be so badly betrayed and hurt wasn’t an easy thing to come back from. She’s given herself to the enemy and the thought instilled a venomous rage into his veins that made him want to destroy everything in his wake. But he refrained, knowing that a slip up could be costly and his demons could quite easily take over.

Before heading out to the bar on that particular Friday evening, He checked himself in the bathroom mirror, wiping the steam from the glass from the shower and shrugging at his own reflection. He wasn’t really aware of what looked good or what didn’t, nor did he care much and that was why he worse the same thing as usual, a black, sleeveless shirt with his leather vest and dark jeans. The buzzer from the door below rang through the apartment and Daryl wandered out to the hall, pressing the button from the intercom.

“Yeah?” He grunted.

“Uh, Daryl? It’s Brad. Just wanted to talk to you.” Came the tinny voice from the other end.

The hell is this? He thought, considering that brad could well be there to beat him up for some bizarre reason. Only this time, he was going to give as good as he got. A fight hadn’t been on his agenda for the night but he figured it may aid him in releasing some of the anger he carried with him. Or, maybe Brad was telling the truth, maybe he did just want to talk to him after finding out the truth about Ritchie. He pressed the intercom again.

“Come on up.” He instructed before going to the door and opening it. He stood in the outside hallway, waiting for his visitor’s arrival and deciding that until he was made aware of Brads true intentions, he wasn’t going to allow him into his home.

Brad appeared at the end of the hall, slowly walking towards him and seemingly without an ounce of aggression. But Daryl wasn’t stupid enough to take any mor risks.

“What are you doin’ here?” He asked.

Brad halted in front of him and pushed his hands into the pockets of his baseball jacket, a seemingly placid gesture but Daryl was smarter than to believe what could be a façade.

“Like I said; I just want to talk to you. About Selene. About Ritchie.” He said with a sad tone.
“So, you know?” Daryl asked.

“Yeah. I know. I’m so sorry, man.”

Daryl witnessed Selene’s huge brother and his downcast expression. His body language was inoffensive and non-threatening and he appeared to be genuinely heartbroken by the situation.

“Come in.” Daryl offered, backing up into the apartment and stepping aside. As Brad walked through the door, Daryl’s arm shot out, blocking his path. “If you swing at me, I swear to god I will kick your nuts up into your throat.”

The threat stayed with Brad and he peered down at the man his sister loved, impressed by his fearlessness and bold approach to things despite their size difference and history. Accepting he’d been wrong about Daryl had been difficult. He spent too much energy likening him to Merle and listening to the whispers about the reputation of the Dixons and not enough time focusing on how happy he made Selene. Now, he knew he liked Daryl and if it wasn’t for their previous violent situation, he never would have realised it. To Brad, Daryl was relentless in his pursuit to love and protect Selene. He was also willing to take a beating for her and had stepped so far out of his norm to please her, it was evident to everyone. If he wanted his sister to be with anyone, it would be someone like Daryl.

“Relax. I’m not here to fight with you.” Brad assured him.

Daryl let him pass and directed him to the living room after closing the door behind them.

“You want a drink or somethin’?” He asked.

“Strongest thing you got.” Was the clear response from Brad, who was settling on the couch and admiring the décor of the room, paying particular attention to the motorcycle wheel clock on the wall. Daryl headed to the drinks cabinet, selecting an expensive whiskey and pouring some into a glass tumbler. He turned and handed the glass over, sitting opposite his unexpected visitor.

“Thanks.” Brad sipped the liquid, pulling an impressed face and holding the glass up to study the liquid inside. It was smooth and woody, a decent whiskey.

“How did ya get my address?” Daryl demanded.

“Selene has your business card pinned to her noticeboard in her kitchen.” He told him. “Look, I’m just going to cut the bullshit here. I know you and I haven’t got along real well so far, but I love my sister and I know you and her… this sounds real dumb…. But you’re meant to be together. I didn’t want her with Ritchie. He was my buddy but you were better for her.”

Daryl was surprised that Brad had travelled to the next town just to tell him this and could only conclude that what he was hearing was genuine. After all, Brad would gain nothing from lying at that particular moment.

“Pretty shitty what he did to her.” Daryl mused.

Brad took another sip of his drink, a larger one this time that saw half of the serving diminished. He winced and grunted, holding up the glass with his index finger extended.

“What he did to both of you, you mean.” He corrected. “Thought you should know that he bailed. Packed his shit at his mom’s place and left. Didn’t even tell her where he was going” He paused and caught Daryl’s eye, who was now leaning forwards with both elbows on his knees. “I found him.”
“What?” Daryl blinked in surprise.

“I know where he is.” He reiterated “He’s staying with Amy. Taken a lot of self-control not to pummel him into the asphalt. But he has to live with the fact that Selene won’t ever talk to him or even look at him again. That’s enough to kill him every day for the rest of his life.”

Pondering the situation that Ritchie now found himself gave Daryl a much deserved and profound sense of satisfaction. Brad was right; it was enough to make the rest of his days miserable, at least until he moved onto his next obsession, which Daryl had no doubt would happen eventually. There was no evidence to suggest that Selene was a one off, but the lengths Ritchie had gone to, the level to which he stooped to make her his were the makings of a stalker and a dangerous obsessive.

“Ya aint wrong.” He agreed.

Brad finished his drink in one, big gulp and positioned the glass on the side table by the couch. His vision swept around the room and he noticed how well Daryl had done for himself in recent months. His apartment was clean and tidy, boasting some interesting trinkets and the motorcycle in the parking lot downstairs was bound to be his. A lot of things could be said about the Dixons; they were volatile, unpredictable and almost always involved in some kind of illegal activity, but it occurred to Brad that his family name was not much different. His own father fit perfectly into the same box and the only difference was, he had money behind him.

But Daryl wasn’t your average Dixon. He was the black sheep and Brad could see that it boded well for him. If he was anything like Merle there was no way he’d have let him near his sister. But Daryl was smart, intuitive and protective of Selene and didn’t possess the crass and vulgar side that his older brother had. Yes, Daryl was different and it had been ironically evident to Brad since he’d beaten him up and received nothing but a highly controlled threat in response.

“You gonna get back together with my sister?” He asked.

Daryl wished he could just say yes. He wished he could move on with the woman he loved more than anything and put everything behind him and while he was usually able to shove trauma and difficult situations aside, this was something that he could not risk failing. It was too precious, too rare and something that he was not ever going to find again.

“I aint sayin’ no. I just need to get my head around all this shit. A lot of stuff has happened. Can’t just go runnin’ back in like it’s all okay, cause it aint.” He explained in the only way he knew how; short and to the point. “Don’t wanna lose her for good.”

“That’s fair.” Brad nodded “I want you to know, I uh…I believed you the whole time, man. You took a beatdown from me and still refused to stop seeing her. I knew you wouldn’t give her up for Amy.”

Through it all, Brad had been the one to put his foot down and declare his irritation at Selene seeing a Dixon brother. He’d voiced his unwanted opinions and even resorted to violence to try and run Daryl off, but he hadn’t succeeded in his quest, he’d discovered something else instead; that his opinion of Daryl was wrong and that he was, in fact, deeply in love with her.

“Naw, never.” Daryl mumbled, slowly meeting Brad’s eye again.

“You still love her?” Brad asked.

Normally, such a question coming from a guy he didn’t know so well, especially someone so close to Selene, would have made his chest constrict with anxiety and his throat dry at the thought of
talking about his emotions. But with the massive changes in his life came an unavoidable change in his attitude. If he ever hoped to be happy with Selene again, he had to continue being as honest as he’d tried to be throughout the entire mess he’d endured. Brad had turned up for a reason and that reason was now clear, he wanted Selene to be happy and it was something he and Daryl had always had in common.

“Y’know, it’s weird…In a way, I kinda get where Ritchie was comin’ from.” Daryl confessed reluctantly and desperately hoping that he was about to explain himself properly to save coming off as just another guy that was obsessed with Selene Taylor. “I been in love with your sister since I was a teenager” Brad slowly leaned forwards, mirroring Daryl’s positioning, on the edge of his seat and still resting on his elbows. “Saw her around as we grew up. Was kind of a pussy, didn’t have the balls to talk to her or nothin’, thought she didn’t know I existed n’ I wasn’t no dummy, I knew she wouldn’t have been interested anyways. But I never liked nobody else, not like that. It was always her.”

“I remember seeing you around in the halls. You had more black eyes than I had hot meals” Brad pointed out. “People always said you were a scrapper”

“Yeah, I was. But the black eyes, they were mainly from my ol’ man, he uh…he was a violent son of a bitch. That’s another reason why I never talked to Selene, didn’t want her anywhere near my dad or my brother.”

Brad’s sentiments about Daryl’s need to protect her had been proved right and little did he know, it reached back many years, to when they were teenagers.

“Remember that jerk she dated for like two weeks? The one with shitty tattoo on his neck? He kissed another girl at senior prom, right in front of Selene, like he wanted her to see. Him and his little buddies stole a projector too, put that damn nasty picture of her up on the fuckin’ wall” Daryl mentioned.

“Yeah, I remember him well. I remember the look on his face when I dangled him off the dock like a worm on a hook. Asshole couldn’t swim.” Brad smiled to himself at the memory and recalled how the boy that cheated on his sister had screamed like a girl when he lowered him down far enough to dunk his head under the water. “Everybody thought I’d drowned him but the cops found CCTV footage of him leaving the docks after I dragged his ass back over the fence. I couldn’t have done much more to him, we were team mates, y’know. Fuckin’ football before everything else. Nobody knows what happened to him after that though.”

“I do” Daryl rasped as he watched Brads smile grow wider.

“What the fuck, man? What did you do to him? Tell me he’s spinin’ in his grave right now.” He chuckled.

“Naw, dude. I aint no killer.” Daryl scoffed. “He went to Juvy. I planted enough crystal on him to get him five years.”

“Holy shit!” Brad laughed, reaching out and holding out his hand. Daryl did the same and Brad granted him a manly handshake “You’re a savage, Dixon.” He added.

“Nah…He deserved it, I knocked him out and went through his shit, he had this notebook full of girls names, some crossed out like he was workin’ his way through the school or some shit. I just couldn’t stand her bein’ hurt. So, to answer your question; do I still love her? I aint ever loved nobody or nothin’ like I love that girl. That aint ever gonna change.” He assured him.
His point had been made loud and clear and Brad was more than satisfied that this was the man he wanted to see his little sister with. Someone who would love her without question and protect her with his life.

“Okay. That is more than good enough for me.” Brad announced, rising from his seat and pushing his hands into his jacket pockets. “I only came over here to make sure you were cool and I just wanted you to know that you won’t get any more shit from me. I know you’ll look after her. It’s fucked everything up back at the studio, we all feel like idiots.”

Far from needing anyone’s approval, Daryl appreciated the fact that Brad had taken it upon himself to seek him out and speak to him face to face and apparently without Selene’s knowledge. It was now obvious that if he wanted his sister to be with anyone, it was him and after everything, Daryl Dixon was nowhere near as bad as he’d first imagined. In fact, he was the kind of guy that he wouldn’t have said no to a friendship with.

Daryl also stood up and cleared his throat as Bear extended a hand for a handshake. Looking down at his huge palm, an idea crossed his mind.

“I was on my way to a bar when ya got here. You wanna get a couple drinks and a game of pool?”

Cassidy had seen Daryl almost every day since they’d met and she didn’t know if it was his decision to take over ordering lunches for everyone at the motor repairs garage or not, but she was mostly pleased about it. He was like clockwork, at 9am every morning he’d show up and order a large coffee and slap a long list of sandwich requests on the counter for collection later on. Then, he’d chat to her at the end of the counter or by the chairs outside for a while. Long enough for her to admire the quiet yet mysterious demeanour that made him so incredibly sexy to her.

But she was conflicted. The ever growing, powerful crush she had on him was beginning to hurt like hell and was morphing into something quite powerful. Every time she saw him seemed to hurt more than the last. To her, he was a constant reminder that she’d not liked anyone so much for a very long time and he happened to be exactly her type and a decent man to boot. A part of her wished he was some kind of chauvinist or that he carried an arrogance that would completely put her off. But he was neither. He was always polite, respectful and nice to her.

“Hey, Cass”

That voice, that gravelly, smokes-too-much voice that she longed to hear whispering in her ear during a post-coital daze but it was a mere fantasy that she indulged in, a damaging one.

She grinned as he closed the door behind him and dug into his pants pocket, retrieving the days orders from the hardworking mechanics. He approached the counter and Cassidy whispered his usual coffee order to the girl beside her, sending her scurrying off to the coffee machine. She’d dragged it out of him, but he’d eventually told her about the recent events with Selene and Ritchie and she’d watched him talk with her mouth wide open in shock, unable to believe that someone who professed to love a person could be so downright destructive and sadistic. It was an automatic response for her to offer him advice and to sympathise with his situation because she couldn’t deny that she cared about him. As a result, Daryl opened up to her more and more and their friendship had turned into one where secrets were shared and trust was formed. But Cassidy was falling in love with him and the knowledge gnawed at her every time she looked at him, fought off the butterflies in her stomach and remembered that it was highly unlikely that he would ever love anyone else but his mysterious girl, Selene.

“1pm?” He asked
“Sure thing. As usual. How are you?” She folded a cloth as she spoke, furrowing her brow at his low mood.

“Good.” He grunted without making eye contact. He glanced around the empty Bistro, the smell of coffee beans tickling his senses. He needed caffeine. Another sleepless night missing her plaguing his mind.

“You’ve not seen her yet, have you?” She sighed.

He said nothing, only showing her a sheepish look at told her in no uncertain terms that she was right. “Daryl, it’s been almost two weeks, why not?”

“I dunno. Just keep thinkin’ ‘bout her… with him.” He admitted. The nights were the hardest for him, especially since she’d turned up more than once and offered herself to him, needing to feel his hands on her and all but admitting that she missed him as much as he missed her.

“But she’s not with him.” Cassidy pointed out “She’s waiting for you. You can’t stay mad at her forever. You love her”

The young girl behind the coffee machine passed Cassidy a large takeout cup filled with steaming liquid that awakened his mind. She thumped a plastic lid on the cup and slid it towards him on the counter. He took the cup, catching her eye and giving her a feeble smile.

“See ya at 1 with sandwiches.” He told her.

He turned away from her and swiftly left the Bistro. The bell on the door dinging loudly as if it were some kind of siren, a sign that once again, the man she was falling hard for, had left the building. She closed her eyes and gripped the fabric in her fingers, throwing the cloth down on the side and following him into the street. She caught him about to cross the road and panicked. She opened her mouth and called out to him.

“We can’t be friends.” She yelled over the noise of the traffic. He stopped and hesitated before walking back to her clutching his coffee.

“What are ya talkin ‘bout?” He asked, confused by her sudden outburst. She was usually so composed and certain about her actions. Rarely showing any kind of weakness or vulnerability. But now, she was standing in front of him and her hands were wringing in front of her and her shiny, bright red hair was blowing across her face and she looked more uncomfortable than he’d ever seen.

“Look, I really think you need to just be with her. I-I can see how much you love her and…and that’s the reason we can’t be friends. It’s not fair.” She stammered, somehow managing to say the words that were trying to choke her.

Daryl was baffled and wasn’t even trying to hide it, he stepped closer to her, lowering his head after quickly looking around to make sure no passers by were listening.

“Not fair on who?” He questioned.

“Me, Daryl. Me.” She said firmly.

His face dropped and she noted how sad he looked behind his initial expression of surprise. Guilt washed over her, the last thing she’d wanted was to hurt his feelings and if she was honest, she thought it would be a lot easier for him to walk away from her, for him to make the decision for her.
“Oh.” He grunted.

“I like you- I…No…I…” She tried, feeling herself becoming emotional. Tears brimmed in her eyes and she huffed out a sigh of frustration at her own inability to hold her feelings together. “…I’m falling for you. Screw it, I have fallen for you. And you love her. So, we can’t be friends. I’m sorry.”

Needed a few seconds for her admission to sink in, he blinked at her, stunned and convinced he’d misheard her. How could this have happened? Why was she falling for him? He gently touched her elbow and moved away from the side of the road, guiding her with him. Stopping under the canopy of the store next to the Bistro, he watched her swipe a tear from her cheek and hold her eyes up to the sky to prevent any more from spilling over and revealing the extent of her sadness.

“Cass, I don’t how this happened” He started “I thought we were friends. You-you can’t mean that. That can’t be true. People…women…they don’t fall for me.”

“Selene did.” She croaked. “I did. You fucking idiot” Although her words were harsh, she smiled tearfully at him, tenderly tickling his fingers at his side. He tilted his head to the side and presented her with a look so regretful it only made her heart hurt even more.

“I’m so sorry, Cass. Did I-did I do this? I mean, is this my fault?” He asked.

She immediately shook her head, briefly looking down at the floor and taking a deep breath before meeting his eye again.

“I guess you could have been a major douchebag and a hell of a lot uglier.” She sniffed sadly with a small laugh. “No. It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

“It really gotta be like this?” He questioned.

Aside from Selene, he’d never met anyone like Cassidy. Classy, intelligent and outwardly independent and sure of herself. She was beautiful, tall, vivacious and as he was now realising, an incredibly selfless person. She’d plied him with advice and encouragement, urged him to be with the woman he adored even though he was the unobtainable one that she lay awake thinking about while his thoughts were with Selene. He’d benefitted greatly from her expertise with emotions and her general presence in his life. Even his colleagues at work were beginning to prod jealous fun at the fact that he knew such attractive women and try as he might not to let it stroke his ego, it did just that. He’d come a long way from who he was and with a new life and a new found confidence, came with it some knowledge that would always remain a baffling notion to him; he was not only desired sexually and emotionally, he was also the kind of guy that gorgeous women fell in love with. As he stood before Cassidy with her big, glassy eyes, he felt nothing but guilt.

“Yes. I just can’t do this, it’s incredibly difficult when I see you every day and have to pretend it doesn’t bother me. Selene, she’s a lucky girl. I really can’t bash her taste in men. You’re so handsome and you’re everything I wanted. But you’re not for me. You’re for her.” She expressed, her voice breaking with each sentence.

Daryl turned his hand against hers and grasped her fingers. His warm grip sent a stab of despair through her.

“The guy that ends up with you is gon’ be damn lucky too, Cass.” He wanted her to know.

“That’s sweet of you. Thank you.” She smiled.

“M’sorry. If I led ya on or some shit. I didn’t mean to be a dick. You been a good friend to me n’ I
appreciate all the advice ya gave me. I wasn’t lyin’ to you at first or nothin’. Think ya stunnin’ n’
awesome n’ I liked ya, I just—”

“-You didn’t lead me on. It’s OK. You don’t need to explain. I get it” She cut in before she had to
endure any more compliments from the man that she wanted but could never have. “I’ll get Annie
to drop your lunch off at 1. It’s probably best if you just call to place orders in future. I can have
one of the girls deliver your coffee in the morning. Just for the time being, until I get past this.”

He let go of her hand and stepped back, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

“Ahh Jesus.” He growled to himself “Alright. You take care of yaself.”

“You too.” She squeaked.

He backed up, holding eye contact with her for a few seconds until he turned and returned to the
side of the road.

“Daryl?” She called from behind him. He looked over his shoulder to find her standing outside the
Bistro. “Neither of us is like that Ritchie guy, but we both know how hard it is to love someone we
can’t have. Just talk to her. Please”

Turning the situation around in his head, he tried to imagine how he would feel if Selene had told
him that she was in love with someone else. The thought made him feel physically sick and he
sucked in a breath through his nose. Despite the horrendous feeling it provoked in him, his heart
told him that if she was happy with someone else, then he would love her enough to let her go. In
that moment; he finally understood why Cassidy was pushing him towards Selene so much; she
cared about his happiness.

“Alright. I will.”

Bear wrapped his arms around Axel in a manly hug in the middle of Marty’s bar. Chuckling loudly
when he tried to wriggle free of his embrace with no luck and recoiled in horror at Bears pursed
lips and kissing noises. Finally managing to dislodge himself from his big friends grip, he shook
hands with Shorty, followed by Ray and settled down at the table. The four of them had arranged
to meet without Selene to discuss the destructive event that had rocked their workplace and
friendship group. Leaving Selene out of their meeting had been more of an act of mercy than a
need to talk about her behind her back. All of them agreed that she was still too fragile to be made
to relive everything and that given time, they would work through it with her. No one wanted to
leave their job no matter how tense the atmosphere was and deserting Selene in her hour of need
wasn’t even an option. Ritchie had left them all reeling and feeling like they’d somehow managed
to overlook such a giant thing that was happening under their noses.

Axel stared at the fishbowl glass in front of Ray as he stirred it slowly and rested his chin on the
palm of his hand. He wondered what kind of alcohol was present in the glass to give it the pink and
yellow hues it boasted and concluded that whatever it was, he would probably hate it.

“Take it you didn’t find him.” Ray commented as he lifted out his cocktail stirrer and licked the
end of it.

“What makes you think that?” Bear asked before nudging his head up at Marty over at the bar and
signalling that he wanted a beer with an extended finger.

“Let me see…” Ray said “You’re not in jail for a start”
Shorty, who was texting on his cell phone, nodded enthusiastically and jutted his bottom lip out to show he was actually listening and agreed with Ray. He expected to have been roped into stopping Bear from going on a rampage by that point and had been quite surprised at his calm way of dealing with things. It wasn’t like him and when he really thought about it, Shorty figured that his explosive reaction may well just be delayed and that Ritchie would soon be six feet under or tending to some very nasty wounds at least.

“Oh, I found him. He just doesn’t know it yet.” Bear commented.

Shorty locked his cell and placed it on the table. “Bear, what are you doing, man?” he asked.

“Biding my time.” Was the response. Shorty rolled his eyes and exchanged an irritated glance with Ray, who was blowing bubbles in his rapidly emptying glass. Axel, who was nibbling on his lower lip and rotating a beer mat around between his fingers and the table, suddenly sat forwards and commanded Bear’s attention.

“Dude, you gotta know that I tried to stop Selene and Ritchie seeing one another. I really did. I gave both of them such a hard time and-”

“-I know, Axel. I heard you. I brought Ritchie here one night, warned him off. Dumb ass didn’t listen” Bear told him.

Ray flinched as if he’d been slapped and slowly moved his glass aside, his body staying rigid and his perfectly shaped brows pinching together.

“Hey, pretty boy, you knew Ritchie was boning Selene?” Ray questioned at Axel.

“Yeah. Didn’t you?” He replied.

“What the shit?! I thought I was the only one that knew!” Ray cried as Marty wandered over and thudded a bottle of beer in front of Bear before storming off, angry that no one seemed to be able to order drinks at the bar anymore.

“Wait a minute.” He demanded “Ray, you knew too?!” Bear exclaimed.

“Yeah, she told me and I had to watch him eye fucking her at every given opportunity. I warned her off too. She turned up in the middle of the night in the damn rain, all dramatic like in a movie n’ said she’d just peeled Ritchie’s banana.” He explained casually before dragging in a large sip of his drink and licking his lips. “That is some good shit. Anyways, I been keepin’ this gem to myself all this time so I didn’t cause no ruckus at work and you two knew about it anyways?

Axel and bear swapped glances and nodded. Axel now appearing even more uncomfortable while Shorty was starting from one face to another with his eyebrows raised, wondering what had been happening right in front of him and why he didn’t pick up on it.

“Apparently married life has made me very unobservant.” he mused.

“I think I win the competition for who knew the most. Or rather who saw the most.” Axel mumbled. He tilted his bottle up to his lips, filling his mouth with a mouthful of beer and swallowing hard while he prepared to confess what he’d seen.

“What do you mean?” Bear asked

Axel put his bottle back down and nervously scratched at the back of his head. “Um, I walked in on them.”
The table fell into a shocked silence as wide eyes all gawped at him and Axel sighed to himself. Why did he have to be the one that walked into the store room that day? Why was he always the one walking in on Selene in compromising positions?

“Excuse me?!… where was this Axel?” Ray asked

Axel began picking at the label on his beer bottle with his heavily tattooed fingers while the others all waited patiently for an answer.

“Storage room at work” He mumbled.

“Oh, Jesus.” Shorty commented with a curled lip. “I’m not going in there anymore”

Bear leaned back in his seat and rubbed at his face with both of his hands while Ray, who was seated beside him, shot a hand out and squeezed his broad shoulder in an effort to keep him calm.

“Well I’ll be damned. She screwed him at work. That is a new low and I am not impressed.” Ray confessed. His best friends’ actions were now so drastically wrong, he couldn’t justify them or stand up for her, but it didn’t mean that he thought any less of her as a person. He understood people made mistakes and he was not exempt from that with his long track record of mistakes that Selene had helped him rectify and move on from.

“Neither am I.” Bear offered after dropping his hands to the table and shaking his head.

“I feel like I need to apologise to you on her behalf” Ray expressed. “I’m her sergeant at arms. I’m sposed to know all the shit she gets up to. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“If it’s any consolation, I wasn’t nice about it” Axel admitted “I was real pissed off. But the thing is; I was angry at her, for taking advantage of him. When it was the other way around.”

Shorty felt the need to intervene with some perspective. His perception of Selene had never changed and now he knew her dirty, little secret, he was still sure that she was one of the best friends he’d ever had. She’d given him a job and been his confidant and source of advice when he met Maria and in turn, he’d tried to do the same for her ever since.

“Guys, I know I’m a little out of the loop here. But I think I need to provide a little clarity.” He suggested “Selene hasn’t been right for months; we all know that. The decisions she’s been making, even the small ones at work, they’re not good. I’m not excusing what they both did in the store room. It was wrong and kinda disgusting. But she’s our friend and she was struggling. She just didn’t know how to tell us. I think finding out your friend paid somebody to wreck your life is punishment enough.”

A silence followed what Shorty felt was more akin to a telling off than the provision of clarity in the end, but he believed in what he’d said and was ready to stand by it. Bear sighed and downed the rest of his drink.

“Yeah, you’re right.” He said to a chorus of hums of approval. “I um, I went to see Daryl”

“You did what?” Ray cried, craning his neck to the side and staring up at Bear, stunned.

“Oh Relax, Drama Queen” Bear snapped back “I needed him to know that I believed him the whole time. Call me selfish but it felt like I was making up for what I did to him. We’ve all been so focused on Selene and we should be, but Daryl…shit, he’s been through the ringer with all this crap.”
“Who are you and what the hell have you done with Bear?” Ray remarked.

“He’s got a point” Axel expressed. “How’s he doing, Bear?”

“Well, we went for a drink. He told me he’s still pretty angry. But seriously…the guy really fucking loves her.” Bear told them, taking his time to scan each face peering back at him and finding that no one was surprised.

“Fuck Ritchie.” Ray spat out of nowhere. “Seriously, fuck him. Hurtin’ my queen like that and makin’ Daryl’s life hell too. That man is too damn fine to get stress wrinkles. Fuckin’ noodlehead is gonna be sorry if I ever see him again.”

Shorty began to chuckle loudly like a person that laughs at funerals and everyone turned their attention to him.

“I’m sorry. It’s just, what exactly are you going to do, Ray? Take an eyebrow off and use it as a throwing knife?” He giggled. Axel snorted from beside him and covered his mouth by settling back in his chair and placing his closed fist in front of it. Ray stared at Shorty, narrowing his gaze.

“Thank you for the compliment. But I’m madder than a cat gettin’ fuckin’ baptized over this, if I ever see that dirty little junkie again, I’ma shove my boot so far up his ass, he’ll be tyin’ my laces with his teeth.” Ray announced to the entire bar.

“Me too” Axel agreed.

“Same” Shorty echoed.

“Yup” Was the response from Bear.

The table all sniggered at Ray’s comment and everyone’s agreement. It was much needed humour they needed to break the icy subject and ease them onto a new one that was not as draining or heavy. Bear was still seething but managed to restrain himself long enough to enjoy a night out and a few beers with his friends while they tried to come to terms with the evil that obsession could do.

The window of the Ink cabinet stretched across the entire front of the unit, covering three quarters of the shop front and was lined by black, wooden frames and Black panels along the bottom. The windows constantly needed cleaning and the frames were painted every six months. Selene kept telling herself and everyone else that one day, she would get it all replaced with plastic frames that needed hardly any upkeep or, even better, block the entire window up and make the place seem even more mysterious.

Cleaning the windows was usually always done by Selene or Ray due to the others magically being ‘too busy’ or ‘booked up’ to take the time out to grab the window spray. Selene refused to waste money on a hired window cleaner, she was determined to save as much money as possible and save it for something more exciting, like the motorcycle she always wanted or some major improvements to the studio. When Ray declared he’d pulled a muscle in his shoulder in the gym, Selene didn’t bother to question him. He would only regale her with some dramatic tale about how he almost died and his pulled muscle was the result of a near death experience. She did remind him that he had no need to lie, and that he could have just used the fact that he had a two-hour tattooing session booked in. He pouted at her and waved her off, settling at his workstation and tracing the clients design onto tracing paper. She grabbed her cleaning supplies and headed for the window.

Half of the studio’s front was sparkling clean when Ray’s client arrived and Selene politely directed him to the couch and knocked on the glass, attracting Ray’s attention and pointing to the
man in the waiting area. She hummed to herself, a slow and melodic tune that she’d been listening to while providing a young girl with a terrible butterfly design tattoo that she’d insisted was not tacky or cheap looking and that she really wanted it. Her obnoxious attitude prompted the need for music of the slower variety and as she remembered the words and began to sing to herself while spraying the window, her eyes lifted to see someone she recognised across the street.

Ritchie was outside the coffee house, walking slowly with his hood up and peering at her with blackened eyes and cheeks covered with cuts. His bottom lip was huge and split. He looked away immediately upon clocking her presence and carried on walking with one hand in his pocket, his other hand was wrapped around a crutch to aid him with a bad limp. He turned at the corner and vanished from view.

Selene’s heart began to hammer in her chest and her temper spiked. She threw down her cloth and charged inside, slamming the door and making everyone jump. Including Ray, who happened to be wiping excess ink from the tattoo he had just started the time the noise thundered through the building.

“Holy cow” he muttered to himself as she stepped around the partition with her hands on her hips and glared at them all. Shorty, Axel and Bear were all at their workstations, pens in hands and hunched over lamps, drawing. Their faces peered expectantly at her.

“Show me your hands. All of you. Now” she demanded.

Everyone glanced uneasily at each other, none of them wanting to argue with an angry Selene.

“Why?” Shorty asked bravely.

“Just do it. Get up. Show me your knuckles. All of you. Come on!” She ordered.

Shorty, Bear and Axel all rose from their seats but remained reluctant to do much else before they knew what was going on.

“Uh, Selene?” Rays voice whispered from beside her. She turned to him and his client both staring up at her in shock. “I’m um…kinda in the middle of somethin’ right now” Snapping out of her rage for a moment, Selene remembered she was standing in the middle of her place of work, her business and she had to act professional or word of mouth could be a dangerous thing for the takings.

“Oh, I apologise sir.” She said to his client. “Carry on, Ray” She nudged her head to the side at the others, telling them to follow her as she rounded the partition wall and stopped in the waiting area. Axel, Bear and Shorty were shocked when she began picking up each of their hands and examining them. Exchanging baffled glances at one another, they decided to humour her at first, whatever she was doing was executed with such intent that there must have been a good reason for it. Finding no bruises or grazes that would indicate a fight. She retreated away, backing up to the desk and taking a deep breath.

“Thank you, guys. Get back to work.” For the rest of the working day, Selene could only assume that Ritchie’s injuries were caused by a drug dealer or one of the unsavoury people he associated with. It wasn’t any more than he deserved, but she had to be sure it was no one she knew. She finished up cleaning the window and stayed behind her desk until the end of the day rolled around. Ray bid a happy goodbye to his very pleased client and the guys began to gather their jackets and bags.
“Before you all go, I need a word.” She called out from the desk without even looking up from what she was drawing. Axel looked over at Bear, who’s face was pinched into a suspicious frown, he shrugged to signal he had no more of an idea what was wrong with her than anyone else did before joining Shorty and Ray on the couches.

She stood from her seat and towered over them all with her arms crossed like a cross principle about to tell off the unruly kids in her school.

“If any of you touch Ritchie, I will not be happy” She told them. “I saw him today, across the street. Somebody beat the shit out of him.”

“So? He deserves it.” Axel argued, his defences going up even though he knew that he was not the one responsible for rearranging Ritchie’s face. It wasn’t lost on him that any one of the guys in the room could be the culprit after their conversation in Marty’s and Daryl was also a suspect. But he couldn’t understand why Selene was so angry about it after everything that had happened.

“Yeah. He does.” She agreed “But by beating the crap out of him we are giving him the upper hand. He has something then” She expressed with her arms crossed and locked at her chest. Her long sleeved, knitted sweater covered her hands and hung from one shoulder, exposing a smooth, tattooed patch of skin.

“What do you mean?” Bear questioned

“Ammunition” Shorty added, directing his comment at Bear “She thinks he’ll go to the cops… Right?”

She met his eye, nodding and figuring that Shorty would be the first one to put the pieces together. He always had a way of seeing the bigger picture.

“I do. After what he did to me… me and Daryl. I have to expect that he is capable of getting someone charged with assault. The guy’s got issues, he’s not right in the head.”

“He wouldn’t. The amount of illegal shit he’s wrapped up in? He hasn’t got the stones for that” Ray contributed, pulling his Ink Cabinet Hoodie sleeves over his hands and twisting the cuffs around.

“He had the stones to fuck with Bill Taylor’s daughter. I don’t think we should be underestimating the risks he will take.” She pointed out to a half shrug from Ray and a mumble of approval from Brad “What I want for him is way worse than a couple of black eyes and some broken bones. What I want for him doesn’t involve physical pain.”

“Elaborate?” Shorty requested; his interest piqued.

“Think about it. He lost his job, his friends, he’s living a prostitute and the woman he loves won’t ever speak to him again. He’s left with two things that are so much more dangerous than anything physical. His drug habit and loneliness.”

“Thank god one of us got the brains in our family” Brad smiled, seeing his sister offer him a wink. “None of us are going to touch him, sis. I’m sorry to say it, because I like the guy, but you maybe have to think that this could have been Daryl.”

Her head dropped and she scuffed at the floor with her platform boot. Upon seeing the clean knuckles of her close friends, Daryl had been her second thought. He had as good a reason as her to want him hurt, or dead and out of all of them, except maybe her own brother, he was the one that usually resorted to violence to deal with his problems. But she’d seen a change in his tendencies
towards physical aggression since she embarked on a relationship with him and he hadn’t reacted to Brad when he attacked him. He wanted to change and leave his Dixon reputation behind and from what she’d seen, he did. Could Daryl really have been responsible for beating Ritchie up?

After saying goodbye to her friends, Selene plonked down into her desk chair and switched her computer off. Ray was still present, taking his time cleaning up his work area and taking out the trash.

“You staying late?” She asked, as he strolled in from the trash cans at the back door. She was puzzled that he was still present and not rushing to grab his stuff and go home like he normally was. He left his keys and jacket on the tattoo bed and approached the desk, standing over her and looking down at her with a sadness in his eyes.

“Need to talk to you.” He uttered.

“About what? Are you okay?”

He rolled up his hoodie sleeves and showed her his tattooed and battered knuckles. Bruises and cuts littered his skin and her eyes widened as it occurred to her that the one person that she would have thought was least likely to attack Ritchie was Ray and yet there he was, standing before her with his tattered knuckles and sheepish look in his eyes. She couldn’t believe it, her hand shot up to her mouth.

Ray was a capable and talented fighter after so many years training in MMA and Boxing. His frame was tall and built, his physique strong and often, he was mistaken for a straight guy, until he opened his mouth. His need to protect himself was drawn from years of bullying at the hands of narrow-minded jocks in high school and now, he’d reached a place and time in his life where he was happy with the way he looked and how able he was to defend himself. When Ritchie had gone for him during his drug induced rampage in the studio, Ray hadn’t felt a single sting of fear, knowing that whatever happened, he was more than equipped to deal with it. Possibly in a cleaner and less spectacular fashion than the likes of Bear. Usually able to regulate his emotions well through learning self-discipline and trusting his intuition, he’d lost control when he saw Ritchie and everything had changed.

“It was…you?” She croaked at him.

“Yeah” he whispered “I’m sorry, honey.”

“Ray. Oh my god.” She breathed from behind her hand, her eyes filling with tears at the thought of Ray being arrested for assault. He sat sideways on the desk and took her hands, clinging to them in the desperate hope that she would listen to his explanation and forgive him.

“I couldn’t let him get away with it. I just couldn’t.” He gently squeezed her hands and she studied his bloodied knuckles, tenderly rubbing her thumb over them. “I saw him the other night when I was on my way outta the gym. He was pickin’ up a hit by the look of it. I followed him, asked him who the fuck he thinks he is lying to everybody like that. He got all big for his britches and I told him, I said, he aint nothin’ but a pussy if he’s goin’ throw shade after what he did. Then I opened up a fresh can of whoop-ass on him.”

“For god sakes, Ray” She sniffed, refusing to raise her eyes to him. “This is not how I wanted this dealt with.”

He tried to move his hands away but she clung to one of them, bringing it to her face and nuzzling her nose into the back of his fingers.
“Yeah I know, I heard your little speech n’ it was smart as hell but if I had the chance to hit him again you can bet ya ass I ain’t gonna turn it down.” He declared.

She dropped his hand and looked up at him, her lips parted and her stomach dropped, a sudden feeling of nausea engulfed her.

“So, you’d totally ignore what I’ve asked of you?” she asked. She was incredulous, Ray had never gone against her wishes in the many years they’d been friends. He was always the one she could rely on to be on her side and while she had no doubt that he still was, for the first time in their long and trusting friendship, he wasn’t listening to a word she was saying.

“Damn right.” He replied.

“You can’t just go around beating people up!” She snapped “You’re not fucking listening to me!”

He shot up from the desk and slapped his hands on the surface, leaning over her. Intimidated not by his physical capabilities, but by his ability to create reason where there was none, she sat back but kept her head held high and defiant.

“And he can’t just go around Destroying my fuckin’ family! You are my best fuckin’ friend, my sister from another mister…you’re my fuckin’ life, girl. I can’t enjoy my time on this mortal coil if you aint right here with me! I need you here and I need you happy, god dammit!” He shouted at her. One hand flew up and he jabbed a finger in her direction. “I ain’t gonna let nobody screw with you like that and think they got off with nothin but some strong words and a few crocodile tears. He’s lucky I didn’t break every god damn bone in his body.”

She swallowed hard, opening the desk drawer and retrieving a pack of tissues. She dabbed at the corners of hr eyes where her eyeliner was running and stood up, levelling her gaze with his. “OK, Listen to me.” She heaved in a deep bit jagged breath. “I might have lost the man that I love more than anything else in this world. I also lost a friend because he tried to ruin my life. My brother, no matter how controlled he seems, is very much on the verge of a copycat attack just like yours. I don’t have my mother here to help me because she’s dead, my only female role model is a damn stripper and my father is a murdering asshole who can’t know about any of this because if he finds out, we’re going to have a serious body count on our hands and I will not have Daryl put at risk. I cannot lose you, Ray. I need you too…. I need you.”

Tears tumbled down her cheeks and Ray surged forwards, thumbing them away with both hands and she clung to his wrists.

“Don’t cry. Don’t do that. I can’t see you cry no more. Please.” He begged. A strong feeling in his chest was wearing away at any rebelliousness in him because of the sight of Selene breaking down in his hands. It was guilt. If he admitted it or not, he was regretful for making her cry, for upsetting his best friend in the world. His person. The one soul who truly knew him. He was trying to protect her, trying to defend her honour and in doing so, had upset her even more.

“If he goes to the cops, you’re done.” She squeaked “You obviously hospitalised him. What you did was wrong. Please, Ray. Stay away from him. For me. Please” She pleaded.

Ray let go of her and walked around the desk, grabbing at her arms and lifting her to her feet. She collapsed against his muscular frame and sobbed into his hoodie.

“Alright, alright. I will just… stop cryin’.” He said. He stroked her hair until she quieted. Her small sniffs and reddened eyes now the only sign left of her sadness when she stepped back.
“You wouldn’t last five minutes in jail.” She mentioned “your brows would grow out; they don’t allow tweezers”

The broad smile that spread across his face meant the heavy feeling in her chest was dissipated and she nudged him in the arm, knowing and trusting that he should think of repeating his actions in the future, he would think of her first.

Cassidy was right and Daryl wondered how she managed to have such a logical and matter of fact opinion on things when she was battling her own emotions at the same time. It had been two weeks and he had felt every, agonising minute of it. Still working through the disappointment, the anger, the sadness and the overwhelming fury that festered in his soul every time he thought of Selene being with Ritchie in more ways than one, he had come to one, certain conclusion; he didn’t want to live a life without her in it anymore. The problem was, it couldn’t all be corrected overnight and it took a lot for Daryl to trust, having come from a background where trusting a person was a huge risk and one that he wasn’t willing to take. Placing his hopes, fears and faith in Selene had cost him a lot and he couldn’t handle the thought of it all being shattered once more.

He bounced his cell phone on his knee as he tapped a boot on the brass footrest under the bar. The fingers of his free hand grasped a cold glass dotted with condensation and he watched the other patrons of the establishment. A scantily dressed woman who had offered him a blow job for a cheap price which he had politely declined, two men wearing cowboy hats who were transfixed by a game of baseball on the TV and a group of young men, all jeering and laughing at the barely-dressed woman as she attempted to chug an entire beer and failed miserably. He sighed impatiently and tossed his cell phone onto the bar, it skittered across the surface and lit up, the background of his lock screen staring him in the face. It was her. Selene. He’d changed the picture the night before with Cassidy’s advice still whirling around in his mind. He needed to see Selene’s face to be able to push himself to make a move and so, the picture of her from the tattoo convention was now his cell phone wallpaper.

Her pretty face beamed at him from the screen, the colourfully tattooed arm of Ray resting on her shoulders. She wore a black and white horizontally striped tank top and her hair was swept back, held in place by a bandana. Her lips were dark red, her skin like porcelain and her eyes decorated with her trademark, thick, black, winged eyeliner.

I miss you. Pretty girl.

He snatched up the phone and opened up his messages. Noticing a text alert from a local bar about a gig they were hosting that night. He didn’t remember signing up for text alerts, but suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place

Selene was playing pool in Marty’s bar and trying to ignore the pout that Ray threw at her every time she managed to get a ball into a pocket. Off to the side and perched on a barstool at a high table, Shorty watched on, urging Selene to beat Ray so she could enjoy some glory and he could watch with satisfaction as Ray sulked for the rest of the evening. At the other end of the bar, bear was being tempted to accompany a woman twice his age to another bar and while he would have been happy to, he was wary of straying too far from Selene. Choosing to let Daryl tell her that he’d visited him at his apartment, he’d managed to avoid her questioning him and wanting to know if the topic of conversation had been about her. Unsure if Daryl would want her to know everything that was said, leaving the ball in his court was the best course of action that he could see and the others had also sworn to let Daryl take the reins.
Shorty cheered and slapped a high-five onto Selene’s palm when she got down to one ball away from winning the game. Ray glared at her with one hand on a jutted hip and slowly leaned over the table, lining up a purple striped ball. His oversized, loose-fitting tank top hung from his frame, exposing the artwork across his ribs and chest. Ignoring the giggles and goading from Shorty as he took aim, he narrowed his eyes and slowly breathed out, determined to get the shot. Selene held her breath and neared the table. As Ray moved the pool cue back, a loud ping rang through the bar and Selene jumped, causing the pool cue in Ray’s hand to snap upwards, sending the purple ball gliding across the table and slotting neatly against the cushioned side of the table. He stood up and glowered at her.

“Couldn’t have put that thing on silent, huh?” he growled.

“C’mon, Ray!” Shorty laughed “You let that tiny little noise put you off?!”

“Fuck you, short n’ round.” Ray spat back “That better be important, Selene.”

She was staring down at the phone, her hands shaking slightly but a small smile on her face. Ray looked over at Shorty who was climbing down from his bar stool and crossing the space between them. The tiny words on the screen were exactly what she’d been waiting for with each passing day as two weeks trundled by.

‘Hey, got a minute?’

Her face lights up when she raised her vision to Shorty and her hands suddenly felt like they were made of jelly.

“It’s Daryl!” She whispered to him. Shorty frantically flung an arm up and beckoned Ray over without taking his eyes away from Selene. For this occasion, she needed both her gay best friend and her voice of reason. Nestling his head over her shoulder from behind, Ray sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of the message and Selene began to reply.

‘Hey, of course.’

“You know, I’m available if he decides he’s done with women.” Ray remarked to the sound of Shorty laughing and tutting at him. Selene craned her neck to see him and backed away from him, a serious look on her features.

“Too soon? Sorry. He just never stopped being hot.” He shrugged.

When another message arrived, the three of them resumed their previous positions as Selene opened it up with such hope in her heart that she knew it could well be dangerous.

‘Can I see you?’

“Oh my god” She breathed, stumbling back against Ray who placed a hand on her shoulder and made a comment in her ear about not coming across as desperate. Shorty beamed at her, pleased that she seemed to finally be getting what she wanted, an olive branch that she could work with. She smiled at the message for so long that she almost forgot that she was supposed to reply. She flinched, blinked and quickly typed back.

‘Where and when?’

Glancing over his shoulder, Ray spotted Brad who was halfway out of his seat and wondering what was so exciting for the three of them to be huddled together like gossiping schoolgirls. Ray motioned to Selene and mouthed the words ‘It’s Daryl.’ To him.
Bear wasted no time, springing from his seat, grabbing his beer and striding over to the pool table, leaving his older woman sitting at the bar, alone and holding a cocktail glass halfway up to her mouth.

‘The Snakepit. 30 minutes.’

Shorty screwed his face up, as did Ray and Bear looked positively confused when Selene read out the message. Her throat dried up when she took in their reactions and she waited patiently for someone to say something, until what felt like an eternity passed and she lost her cool.

“Oh, for god sakes. What?!” She cried, throwing her hands in the air with her phone pinched between her palm and thumb.

“The Snakepit?!” Ray exclaimed “The fuckin’ Snakepit, Daryl?! Jeez! Boy wants to meet ya at a biker bar. This shit is bizarre. I thought a knew a lot about guys but he is a god damn mystery!”

Selene merely shook her head, plucked her leather jacket from the back of a chair and made for the door. She reached for the handle when Brad’s hand locked around her wrist and halted her. She spun around, glancing down at her wrist and slowly looking up at him.

“You need me, you call me. I don’t care what time it is.” He told her.

She instantly relaxed and he let go of her when he saw her offer him a small but appreciative smile.

“I will. I love you, big, dumb brother.” She said with a hint of playfulness.

“I love you too. I hope you get what you want.”

When she left the bar, the breeze bit at her skin and she drew her jacket around her middle, wincing against the chilly air and running towards the tattoo parlour. She thanked her lucky stars she’d only had one beer and had a working truck that would see her arriving at The Snakepit in around twenty minutes. The nervous humming in her stomach only made her run faster and she figured she would run down the highway and all the way there if she needed to. She would run as far as she had to, if it meant that she could have Daryl back.
Hi all! It’s been a while! I apologise. Here’s a new chapter :) Thanks for all the love, much appreciated. Means tons to me to know that people enjoy this story after so long :) There may be typos, please ignore them! I just wanted to get this posted.

The Snakepit was an active biker bar and clubhouse for the local Motorcycle Club who Selene happened to be on good terms with due to her work and ties to the club via her father. The bar was set far back from the highway at the end of a blink-and-miss-it turn off. Its sign was dilapidated and half lit, most of the bulbs broken and smashed through the weather and some unfortunate gun fights in the vast parking lot and outside seating area. Rows of Harley’s, Triumphs, Yamahas and other cruisers lined the front of the bar and the decking that led to the door was crowded with smoking patrons clad in leather and patches.

Selene skidded her truck to a halt, kicking up a huge cloud of dust that caught the attention of the twenty strong crowd outside the bar. Conversations ground to a halt when she tumbled out of the cab and slammed the door, straightening her Band T-shirt, leather jacket and studded belt that rested on her hips. Her heavy boots thudded across the lot and at least three of them men outside called her name and held their hands up in greeting. She nodded in acknowledgement and almost stopped walking when she noted Daryl’s bike at the end of the row. She carried on, determined to find him and headed inside the dimly lit building.

People amassed in a three-deep crowd around the bar and when the bartender called out her name, she recognised him as yet another person she’d tattooed. He yelled something inaudible to her and held up a beer, telling the people in front of him to pass it back. The large, bearded man that turned and handed her the bottle told her it was on the house.

She began to wander, checking each face for Daryl until her breath caught in her throat and she finally found him, sitting in a booth in the corner and scrolling through his cellphone. The blueish light illuminated his face and she couldn’t help but smile as she gradually worked her way through drunk bikers and singing women towards him. Reaching the table, she waited for him to notice her, which he did. It only took a split second.

“Hey.” He grunted, lifting a hand and gesturing to the seat opposite him. She slid into the booth and placed her beer, cellphone and keys in front of her.

“Hi.” She squeaked back, a little too nervously for her liking.

“Thanks for meetin’ me.” He said.

She had a quick mouthful of her drink for dutch courage and nodded. “Sure.”

Then, there was nothing. Daryl had a head full of things that he wanted to say but as soon as she was sitting in front of him, they all vanished as if they were never there in the first place. He nibbled on his bottom lip and lowered his head, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment and willing his train of thought to return to him and provide him with the script he’d rehearsed so many times on the drive from his apartment. Selene could see his discomfort and attempted to shift into a more
relaxed position, but she only came off as even more awkward than Daryl, who was now staring at her through his hair.

*Just say something. He thought. Anything. What do I want her to know?*

“Ya look nice.” He conveyed sincerely. She did, the same beautiful, different and confident Selene he’d fallen in love with all those years ago. He was rewarded with a suspicious smile.

“Thank you. But what are you doing?” She wanted to know.

He studied her bright eyes and pretty features and it occurred to him that no matter what he had planned to say, it was bound to leave his mind as soon as he set eyes on her because she was his girl and no amount of learning lines was going to ensure that she remained his. The only thing that could do that, was his honesty.

“Startin’ over.” He told her.

The bar was so loud she struggled to hear him but his lips told her what she needed to know. Her heart felt like it skipped a beat and she wanted to stand up and announce to the whole bar that she loved the man in front of her and wanted nothing more than to start over with him but her actual response was a lot more restrained.

“You sure you want to? I wanted to give you time, y’know…to decide.” She admitted.

“Aint nothin to decide, Selene.” He shot back, looking right at her. If his words weren’t enough to convince her, the look on his eyes was. But she couldn’t forget that night. The night when it all came crashing down and his tears hurt her soul and she couldn’t say sorry enough to make his pain stop.

“You were angry at me.” She reminded him.

He was. He’d been furious, devastated and confused for a long time and recent revelations had only fuelled it. But he stuck to what he knew was true and that was that he’d never love another woman like he loved Selene.

“Yeah and I aint no more.” He said simply.

She drank more, gulping down almost half the bottle, half in celebration, half in anxiety.

“Good. That’s good.” She rambled “I wasn’t sure if you wanted to see me anymore. Thought you might have got close to that pretty red head.”

Cassidy. She remembered Cassidy and saw her as a threat and a threat she was. If only she knew what he knew.

“Naw, that’s… we don’t talk no more.” He offered, attempting to keep the details to himself.

“What? Why?” She questioned, proving that her inquisitive nature was going to override his desire to omit certain bits of information from her.

“Uh, well, she ain’t made it a secret that she’s into me.” He mumbled shyly while tracing his finger along a scratch in the wooden surface of the table “Says that’s why we can’t be friends.”

“Ah. She fell for you.” Selene mused. Daryl wanted to know why he was the last to find out about it, figuring he must have been looking at things with his eyes closed if Selene could even tell. “She
must have it bad for you, to break off your friendship like that.”

“Maybe, I dunno.” He huffed, shaking just head. “You women, y’all are crazy. I don’t get it.”

They both fell silent for a while after a brief chuckle at his comment. Then, he shocked her by rising to his feet and scooting onto the seat beside her. He took her hand and squeezed it while it rested on her thigh. A loud and thoughtful sigh escaped him while she sat completely still, afraid to move in case he were to just leave.

“Just ‘cause I was angry, don’t mean I stopped lovin’ ya. Alright?” He wanted her to know.

“All the stuff you told me, about high school. You watching prom from the roof. Following me home to make sure I was alright. The black tulip. Was all of that true? Was it really you?” She asked. She’d wanted to know since he confessed it all in the coffee house. Her memories of certain events were seen from a different perspective from that day onwards.

He nodded shyly and looked over his shoulder at the busy bar behind him. Thinking his one gesture to be a good enough response and not wanting to embarrass him, she left it there and stopped talking. There were still so many unanswered questions she wanted to ask and she still couldn’t fathom how he managed to be so chivalrous, so protective and so selfless towards her without her ever picking up on the fact that he was always there for her, as far back as high school. Little did she know, there was much more that Daryl did back then that he hadn’t told her yet and he didn’t know if he ever would. After a couple of minutes, she gave into temptation.

“You said you loved me back then. Since you were sixteen.” She mentioned warily.

“I did.” He replied without hesitation. “Just didn’t know it.”

“I still have that tulip.” She whispered to him as she shifted closer. “It’s dried and pressed between the pages of a book. I never wanted to throw it away. Was convinced it was Ray. If he ever got married I was planning to mention it in my best woman’s speech. Good job you told me the truth, huh?” She laughed before noticing him staring at her. She wasn’t sure he’d even been listening because his expression had changed and he appeared worried, like he was about to kill their conversation.

“M’sorry. ‘Bout Amy, for lettin’ her get that close.” He blurted out “it wasn’t just you and it wasn’t just Ritchie. I did wrong too. It just happened real fast. I wanted to kill her. If Merle wasn’t at the rabbit afterwards, I’m pretty sure I would have cut her face off.”

She jolted back at the tail end of his sentence and raised her eyebrows.

“Wow. That’s… brutal.” She remarked.

“Yeah. S’how mad I was at the time. I fuckin’ hate her. Wish I never even knew her in the first place.”

Regret wasn’t always something that bothered Daryl. He preferred to learn from things rather than regret them and more often than not he was able to do so. But sleeping with Amy was one of the rare things he regretted. Letting her so far into his treasured privacy and being fool enough to believe that he could keep her at arms length made him feel as though he’d been manipulated himself and that thought alone enraged him. He did wish he’d never met her, he wished he’d never had sex with her and he wished he’d never answered her request to meet him on that fateful day.
“You and me both. But there’s nothing for me to forgive.” Selene explained “Alright, you let her get close enough, but that’s nothing. Not compared to what she did, what Ritchie did… what I did. I believe that you didn’t want to kiss her. I should have believed that a lot earlier. I don’t want an apology from you, Daryl. I want you to be happy.”

“I am. When I’m with you, I am” He affirmed with another squeeze of her hand “Told ya ol’ man? Bout Ritchie N’ Amy?”

Telling her father didn’t bare thinking about. She knew him and she knew he wouldn’t listen, this resulting in some kind of rampage which would put Daryl’s safety at risk. It also meant that Amy would end up six feet under and her daughter would be a orphan, not to mention Ritchie joining her in the seventh ring of hell and his mother having to live with the death of her son as well as her husband. No, the consequences were too great and unlike Ritchie and Amy, Selene has learned the hard way that every decision has an effect, even on those along the sidelines and it wasn’t fair to inflict that upon any innocent parties.

“No. Ritchie bailed anyway. Besides, I don’t want my dad to know I lied to him. He’d go back to having me followed and I don’t want Amy’s kid to end up orphaned and Ritchies dragon of a mother to have to lose her idiot of a son. Although it was tempting at one point… to get revenge, y’know? But I’m not my father and I don’t want to be anything like him. I don’t want to hurt anyone… I also don’t need his fucking help. I don’t need anything from him.”

More than once, Daryl had grabbed his jacket and stormed towards the door of his apartment, ready to risk his own safety to inform Bill Taylor of exactly what his stripper employee and Selene’s so called friend had done. But he stopped himself every time, the only thing standing between him and relaying the truth being how Selene would react to it. At the time, she’s been visiting him at night and giving herself to him, letting him have a small taste of that which he so craved and he couldn’t stand the thought of it being taken away for good.

“Ya a better person than me. I wanted to tell him so bad.” He admitted.

“But you didn’t.” She corrected. “Merle going to keep his mouth shut?”

He nodded, dragging his drink towards him and knocking the remainder of the alcohol back in one swig.

“Yeah. Talked to him bout it last night. Said Amy’s moved on. Think he mighta said somethin’ to her. Run her off. I heard Ritchies with her.”

“Merle told you he’s with Amy?” She queried.

“Um, no. Your brother did.” He replied.

She shuffled around, now facing him completely and trying to read his face. An announcement from the stage in the corner of the bar caught her attention for a fleeting moment but she didn’t listen, she was too perturbed by what she was hearing from Daryl.

“I’m sorry… what?” She demanded.

“Brad came to see me. Turned up at my apartment. He just wanted to talk. We went for a couple beers.” He said nonchalantly in an effort to play down her brothers most unusual actions.

“What the hell? That’s not like Brad.” She pointed out. It was actually more in Brads nature to use his fists first and do all of his thinking later. With Daryl not being at the top of the list of people he liked, she was shocked at the apparently normal course of action he’d taken.
“That’s what I thought. I almost didn’t let him in. Thought he was gonna switch up on me again. But he didn’t. He kinda just… checked in. Wanted me to know he believed me and asked if we’d get back together”

She was silent for a moment and wondered if he’d had a temporary lapse in sanity, it couldn’t have been Brad. Could it?

“Oh my god. Are you sure it was my brother?” She laughed.

“Big guy, hands bigger than my entire head, has the word ‘Bear’ tattooed across his knuckles? Pretty sure it was him.” He smirked at her

“Wow. It seems both of our brothers have changed. I mean, yours is a dick but he loves you.” She stated. He couldn’t disagree, Merle’s uncovering of all the secrets and lies was not just down to winning a bet and Daryl knew it.

“Yeah, I know. Think he’s kinda soft on you too.” He said as he faintly glided his thumb back and forth over the back of her hand, which he still held in his lap.

She giggled “if anything came outa of this, at least we discovered that Merle has a heart and that Brad isn’t as dumb as he seems.”

Daryl huffed and pursed his lips slightly, thinking that she’d made a good point. Wordlessly, they intermittently glanced at one another, uneasy like two shy teenagers while the bar buzzed with a humdrum of activity.

“This ain’t gonna work unless you trust me, Selene.” His voice cut through the mixed sounds of the Snakepit’s customers laughing and chatting and her eyes were pinned on his. A million lessons had been learned and one of them was that she would never question how trustworthy he was again and if she did, she needed proof that justified it.

“I do trust you.” She affirmed.

“But I won’t rush nothin. If this is what ya want… If I’m what ya want, we start from the beginning.”

He was laying down the groundwork, the boundaries and the rules and was making sure that if a second chance was a possibility, then it was going to be on his terms. Selene wasn’t about to argue and decided that she didn’t dislike the new, firm and self-assured man that was clutching her hand under the table.

“You are what I want, Daryl” she confirmed confidently.

“We’re gonna take this slow again. I ain’t havin’ nothin’ Fuckin’ this up again. We do this right or we don’t do this at all. ‘Sides, there’s a few things I’d have done different the second time ‘round anyways.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll see. But you gotta talk to me, be honest with me, trust me. That’s what I want from you, alright?”

His ownership of the situation and desire to imprint firmly what he wanted from the relationship and how he wanted it to happen impressed her. It was the least he deserved and she was just fine with that.
“Alright.” She smiled. “Why The Snakepit, Daryl?”

She couldn’t leave without asking him, least of all because Bear, Shorty and Ray would all want an explanation about the strange choice in venue to meet and discuss such a taxing topic.

“There’s a band on in um…” He checked the time by hitting the home button on his cell. “…’bout an hour or so. You got three ticket stubs on your kitchen noticeboard from seein’ em’ before. I know you like ‘em. Thought you’d wanna hang around n’ see ‘em… with me”

She was certain her heart skipped a beat.

“You’re almost as wonderful as cake, Daryl” She grinned.

_Daryl Dixon. Full of surprises._

Selene chewed on a pen at her desk two days after she'd met Daryl and spent the evening watching a band she loved purely because he'd remembered the contents of her kitchen noticeboard. The night had been magical to her despite the fact that during the performance, he never touched her once. Never tried to kiss her or hold her hand. But he did buy her drinks and stayed by her side until the small hours when he escorted her to her vehicle and bid her a goodnight. She didn't mean to and if she'd thought about the words before she said them, she would have kept them to herself, but she asked him if it had all been some kind of cruel dream. His response was that even if it was, he'd waited for such a night for a long time.

Ray’s delighted squeal at the door of the tattoo studio alerted everyone inside to something exciting that was transpiring and Selene flinched and dropped the pen from between her teeth. Axel and Shorty raced to the partition and craned their necks to find Ray beckoning a tall, older woman inside. She was overdressed to the max for a body art studio visit; wearing a red, Jessica Rabbit style, strapless dress that revealed one leg and a black fur coat.

Delilah stepped inside and glanced around at the art adorning the walls, the dark chesterfield couches, the magazine filled coffee table and the perfectly preened, pretty gay man stood before her.

“Hold up” Ray grinned. “Somebody get the red carpet!” he announced, increasing the volume of his voice as he spoke “Lady D is here! And the D don’t stand for ‘dick’, not all the time anyways! Oh lawd, look at you! I haven’t seen you in a hot minute!” He flung his arms around her and she gratefully returned the gesture, gracing him with four air kisses before she even considered moving away.

“My little Ray. All grown up. You're lookin’ amazin’, sweetheart.” She purred at him before running a hand down his torso “My god, look at this body. I could beat a rug against those abs. And these brows… sharper than a knife.”

Ray scoffed and rolled his eyes with a wide grin, flicking a hand at her.

“Oh, you’re too kind. What brings you here?”

Delilah averted her gaze to find Selene behind Ray, leaning against the desk with her arms crossed and one shoulder exposed under her black, knitted sweater. She wore a slouchy, peaked cap and her hair down and straight and Delilah pondered that even considering everything that had happened, she finally looked content.

“She does.” She told ray as she sauntered past.
Ray looked over his shoulder at Selene who straightened up as her long-term friend approached. Delilah raised her arms and enveloped her in a tight and prolonged hug. When she pulled back, Selene sniffed loudly and composed herself, she’d been emotional enough over the past few months and was completely done with crying at everything.

“Thank you, for what you did. Exposing it all.” She said sincerely.

“You don’t need to thank me. It was Merle’s idea.” Delilah replied. She brushed a section of Selene’s hair behind her shoulder. “Can you believe that moron actually has a brain cell floatin’ around in there somewhere?! I just wanted to check on ya, hope you’re settin’ all this aside and bein’ with Daryl. You aint gotta worry about Bill either, what he doesn’t know can’t hurt nobody.”

Then, at the mere mention of Daryl’s name, Selene grinned.

“We’re working on it.” She whispered.

“I know. I saw Daryl last night. First time I seen him smile in months and he ain’t usually a smiler at the best of times. He had the spark back in his eye. We had a couple drinks, I had to drag it outta him but he told me how much he’s missed ya, sweetheart.”

It was just what she needed to hear. Her reconciliation with Daryl at The Snakepit had been the first step towards repairing what she once thought was irreversible damage to their relationship, but hearing that he was smiling again and that he’d missed her, even though a third party gave her hope and faith that they could progress back to what they once were.

“That’s really, really nice to know.” She confessed.

Axel, Shorty and Bear were all as supportive and happy for her as she’d expected them to be when she broke the news about what had happened at the biker bar and each one of them vowed to be there for her if, for any reason, it didn’t work out. But she didn’t need their reassurance, she was determined to make it work and if it didn’t, she knew they always had her back no matter what.

Daryl picked through the Dixon house with a black trash bag as if he were in the middle of a flashback from when he used to live there. Merle’s housekeeping skills had not improved and the house was growing dilapidated and in need of some decent repairs. His new apartment was a world away from the home in which he’d grown up and while he shoved beer cans into the bag and emptied the ashtrays, Merle watched him from a chair in front of the TV, scowling at him as if he were being treated like a geriatric who couldn’t look after himself anymore. Picking up a Chinese takeout box, Daryl opened the top and sniffed the contents. The smell of mould spores and rotten food almost choked him and he threw it into the bag and scoffed at his older brother.

“What?” Merle barked.

“You’re fuckin’ disgustin’. That’s what.”

“I wasn’t born to do no chores. That shit’s for women. And you. Things got a little messy since my maid moved on outta here, that’s all.”

The knock on the door arrived just in time before Daryl had a chance to empty the entire bag over Merles head and call him a number of choice words that were gathering in his mind and queueing up to be let out. If he wanted to live amongst his own garbage, then that was fine with Daryl. He exhaled slowly and dropped the bag, heading for the front door.

Selene was stood on the other side, silhouetted against the bright security light that Daryl had
installed for Merle in the grounds at the front of the properly. Her soft, black hair covered her shoulders and she slowly wrung her hands at her front, silver rings rotating under the loose knit sweater she wore. Her skin was flawless as usual and her eyes less blackened. Two, perfectly executed lines of eyeliner were enough to make the blue of her pupils stand out and Daryl’s body hummed with the desire to step forwards and wrap her in his arms.

“Hey.” He croaked. Then, it occurred to him that she wasn’t supposed to be there and there must have been a significant reason for her presence. “Did you call me or somethin’? I aint had my cell on me for the past couple hours. I been cleanin’ up after Merle. Trashy sommbitch is gonna catch the damn plague or somethin’.”

“I’m actually here to see him.” She disclosed.

His brow furrowed and he gave her a suspicious look. Why on earth would she want to see Merle? And over him to boot? No one ever wanted to see Merle unless they really had no choice.

“Merle?! Why?” He questioned.

“Is he here?” She asked, skirting around his question.

“Yeah. Come in.”

He stepped aside and she slowly passed him, her eyes briefly meeting his and gracing him with a small smile as she wandered into the living room to see Merle padding out of the kitchen in a white vest and his underwear, with a beer in his hand and scratching the back of his head. The smell in the room was putrid. Stale beer, smoke and sweat and try as she might, she could not help but wrinkle her nose.

“Yo, dumbass. You got a visitor.” Daryl announced to Merle while he shot to the window and flung it open as if he was ashamed to think of it before answering the door.

Merle stopped by his chair and smiled slyly at Selene. It was almost a sneer and she quickly concluded that he’d had a fair few beers before she’d arrived and so, she prepared herself to take anything he said with a pinch of salt.

“Miss. Taylor. It’s been a minute.”

Without a word, she crossed the room, walked up to him and took his beer from his hand. His eyes shot down to the empty space between his fingers and he followed the cold can as it was passed to his younger brother. Seconds from bursting into a fit of anger at having his alcohol removed, he was silenced by Selene pulling him into an embrace. Merle Dixon was not a hugger and much like his younger brother, his only brushes with real physical contact had been from whores or violence. Being hugged was a strange experience to him and as Daryl stood back and watched his completely ridged body and baffled expression, he was surprised to find Merles hand lifted and he lightly pat one of her shoulder blades.

“Ya wanted some action, ya only had to ask.” He quipped. His hand lifted higher and he stroked her hair as his other arm wrapped around her. Daryl rolled his eyes at his brother’s inability to take anything seriously that wasn’t running drugs and fighting.

Asshole has got a beautiful woman wrapped around him and all he can do is make fuckin’ jokes.

“Merle…thank you for what you did.” Selene whispered over his shoulder.

He quickly broke away from her, looking her right in the eye and wanting to run at the idea of
anything remotely emotional going on.

“Get outta here.” He snarled, sitting down in the Merle-shaped crater in his chair.

“Why did you do it? Why did you get her high and record her?” Selene demanded as she stood over him, a towering reminder that his actions had resulted in a huge impact on not only his younger brother but the also the daughter of his boss and the woman that Daryl loved.

“Shit n’ giggles, I guess.” He grumbled.

It wasn’t enough for Selene and she was not leaving without a clear explanation as to what was going on in merles head when he fed Amy drugs and acquired the most damning of recordings. She stared down at him, resting her hands on her hips and raising one eyebrow. Merle did a double take up at her and sighed when Daryl turned down the volume on the TV.

“Ahh, fine. Was grindin’ my damn gears, him moppin’ around with a face like a hound-dog chewin’ a wasp every time I saw him.” He explained, motioning messily to Daryl by throwing a hand up. “Go to work and Delilah don’t wanna talk about nothin’ else no matter how many double martinis I waved in her face.”

Selene Sank down onto the arm of the couch and managed, much to his dismay, to make eye contact with him.

“That recording. It changed everything. For the better.” She told him.

He shifted uncomfortably and Daryl could see the uneasiness in every one of his limbs. He wasn’t used to such sincerity and that was probably because he’d never actually done anything to benefit another person so much in his entire life.

“Well… I’m glad for that. Even though I lost that god damn bet.”

*Had to get somethin’ outta it, didn't ya?* Daryl thought.

“You’re not so bad, Merle Dixon.” Selene smiled.

“Likewise, Morticia. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m go take a piss.”

He rocked forwards in the chair and rose to his feet, padding out of the room and throwing Daryl a look of discomfort that told him he didn’t much appreciate being cornered in his own home and forced to talk about such matters. But Daryl couldn’t have cared less and turned to find Selene peering up at him. He opened his leather vest and pulled out a white envelope from his inside pocket.

“You timin’ is perfect.” He smirked.

“What?”

“Wait n’ see. You’ll like this” He assured her as he placed the envelope onto the table beside Merle’s beer. Selene stood up and surveyed the room. Daryl was right, it was a mess but she could only imagine what it had been like before everything was put into the almost full garbage bag in the middle of the room.

“You thanked him?” She asked.

“Yeah. He wasn’t havin’ it though. He aint used to this stuff.” He explained.
She nodded and heard the bathroom door open. Merle shuffled back into the room and planted himself back in the chair.

“Oh, you got mail, dude” Daryl mentioned casually.

“Me? Mail? I never open no mail, boy. Ya know that. Only ever folks wantin’ money from me” He gruffed without even touching the envelope. But Daryl was prepared for this and used his time tiding the house to formulate a plan.

“Well, ya might wanna open this, looks like a card of some sort.” He suggested. “Y’know, it’s Father’s Day tomorrow, right? Somethin’ you wanna tell me?”

Merle rubbed a hand over his balding head in puzzlement and looked up at his brother.

“Father’s Day? Get outta here, asshole.” He dismissed.

Selene watched with amusement as he became increasingly more anxious and his expression started to change to one of panic. “Can’t be no Father’s Day Card. I ain’t got no kids.”

“Yeah, that you know of.” Daryl scoffed “maybe one of ya old flames has got somethin’ to tell you.”

“Naw… Naw… I’d know ‘bout it.” He insisted, staring down at the card with wide eyes “I mean there’s this one girl… but she said, she told me, she said she was on that pill. She promised me”

“People lie, man.” Daryl added.

Selene, trying to hold back her laughter shifted her vision back and forth between them. It was a first for her, having never witnessed Daryl wind Merle up before. She’d seen them throw insults at one another, call each other names and yell obscenities, but playful jesting in this way was both fascinating and endearing.

“Shit… ya think..? Naw. Can’t be.”

Daryl glanced to his side and saw the sparkle in her eyes and her lips pushed together. Unable to hold it back anymore, she burst out laughing with Daryl soon following suit.

“It’s your fuckin’ paycheck, dumbass.” Daryl chuckled “I stopped by The Rabbit to see Delilah, she said you were too fuckin up to remember to collect it the other night so they were gonna send it to you. You should see your fuckin’ face!”

Hiding behind Daryl and feeling slightly guilty for finding the whole thing so funny, Selene sniggered and held a silver-ringed hand in front of her face.

“Fuck y’all!” He cried “get outta my damn house!”

“Alright alright.” Daryl agreed “Happy Father’s Day, bro.”

“Kiss my ass, the both of ya. Slicker’n owl shit!” Merle yelled after them.

She didn’t ask him to, nor did he offer but Daryl walked her to her truck and hovered around her in the glow of the security light. She leaned against the door and thought that maybe he might kiss her. It was a far-fetched notion, especially after he’d stressed that they would be starting right from the beginning and taking things slowly. But she would have given anything to be able to touch him again. It had been months since she’d felt his lips on hers and although she knew it was mostly her
thought for not being able to kiss him if she didn’t trust him, everything had changed and, in that moment, she wouldn’t have pushed him away. She offered him a small smile which he instantly mirrored, only his was more bashful and laced with nervous intent.

“So, uh. Will…” He struggled “…Ahh… god dammit”

“What is it?” She asked.

“I’m so bad at this” he huffed shyly and shoved his hands in his pockets. He was awkward but she saw him as nothing but totally adorable and displaying the same refreshing difference from every other guy she’d known.

“Bad at what?” She wanted to know.

“Um… will ya…will ya go out with me? Like, on a date?” He managed.

Her smile grew wider until she was sure she felt her cheeks ache and she spoke without hesitation.

“Yes. I will.”

“OK. Ya said yes. That’s—that’s good.” He stammered as he said the words more to himself than to her. Selene couldn’t help but chuckle at him and she was astounded by his seriousness about starting from scratch and his insistence on doing things properly. “Um, tomorrow night? I’ll pick ya up.”

“Sure” she grinned “Where are we going?”

Panic crossed his features “I’m sposed to decide that now?!”

“Well, no. I just need to know if I should wear a large jacket and walking boots or a dress and heels.” She explained, feeling like a teenager again. It was working. Starting over was the right thing to do and she was excited to experience everything all over again with him.

“Oh.” He grunted “Oh. Right. Well, I dunno. Whatever ya want”

She should have known that Daryl may have been different in many ways, but ultimately, he was still a typical male in some respects and his flat and clueless response spoke volumes.

“Are we going to be inside or outside?” She enquired.

“Inside” He nodded “Yeah. Inside.”

“OK. What time?”

“Uuhhh…Seven?”

“See you at seven.” She beamed while opening the truck. She climbed inside and wound down the window noticing with some surprise that her hands were shaking with excitement and her stomach was fluttering with butterflies. “Looking forward to it”

“Me too. See ya tomorrow.” He said as he raised a hand and backed away.

She didn't know if she deserved it. Who even decided that? But what she did know was that she felt lucky. Lucky enough to still even be on Daryl's radar. Lucky enough that he still wanted her. Lucky enough to find that although he had changed, it was for the better. His confidence and stability in life was not only sexy but admirable. He'd risen from the ashes, from something devastating
damaging and through it all, he'd managed to prosper. She only wished she could say the same and as much as she tried to shove it away, there was still a niggling feeling in her heart that she would not be able to forgive herself for not being clever enough to see what was right in front of her, for failing to hear Daryl out and considering both sides. Along with that, was her belief that after it all, she was no longer good enough for someone like Daryl.

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