Running on Empty

by Sage8771

Summary

He's a bounty hunter that just wants to make it to retirement. She's on the run for murder, and worth enough money to get him closer to that goal. Using his wits and his beloved car, Negan sets out on a cross-country trek to haul in a woman that may or may not be the best thing that ever happened to him.
Stale cigarette smoke. Cheap whiskey and even cheaper perfume. The mingling concoction had set up camp in his nostrils, probably permanently. It roused him from the black nothingness that he’d been enjoying, frankly. That and the sharp fingernail poking his left cheek, dangerously close to his asshole.

“I’m not into that shit,” he mumbled, rolling onto his back with some effort.

“Get up, idiot. My husband’s gonna be home soon.”

Forcing his eyes open, he looked up to see Brenda standing over him, looking put out. She was wearing a pink and black silk kimono, holding his jeans and shirt, and she tossed them into his lap. “Well, good morning to you, too, sweetheart.”

“Seriously, I need you to leave. Like, now.”

“All right. Jesus.”

Sitting up, Negan swung his legs over the side of the bed, taking a minute to stretch his arms and crack his neck. “Your bed fucking sucks.”

“Well, no one told you to stay here,” Brenda said, waving her hands at him to get him moving. Negan slid the jeans over his legs slowly, trying to avoid catching his balls with the zipper as she lit up another cigarette, coating the room with smoke. It was way too fucking early to be upright, and he shimmied into his shirt, looking around the bedroom.

An overflowing ashtray was teetering on the edge of the nightstand, clothes were strewn all over the floor, and an empty six-pack was sitting on the dresser. Typical of a night at Brenda’s.

“When’s your old man headed out of town, again?”

Brenda pushed him through the bedroom door and down the hall, tossing his jacket in the general direction of the front porch, stubbing out her cigarette in an old piece of pizza that was laying on the counter.

“Look, Negan, we’ve had some fun,” she said as he fished around for his keys, “but I’m not interested in seeing you again. You understand, right? This was just a temporary thing.”

Of course, he fucking understood, and he winked at her just before he stepped outside, taking a deep breath through his nose to clear away the stagnant smell. Chicks like Brenda, fuck, all chicks liked hanging out with Negan for roughly a month or so, until they realized that they were never going to get any more from him but sex and crappy jokes. It usually suited him fine, because he didn’t have the emotional capacity to offer anything else, but he liked Brenda. She was tall, with long, frosted blonde hair and juicy lips that were made to…

Her husband, Larry, drove a truck, so he was out on trips for at least four days at a time, and when they hooked up at his favorite watering hole, it was an awesome arrangement. She was attracted to him, and he for damn sure was keen on her. A quick fuck in the back bathroom led to a drunken phone call a week later, inviting him over for beer and some good times. And, shit, were they good. But like clockwork, it had been about four weeks, and enough was enough for her.

Negan drove home, unlocking his front door, immediately assaulted by the smell of rank garbage,
and he fought a wave of nausea as he moved through the tiny living room, carrying the bag filled with old Chinese food, moldy pizza, and other assorted fast food that had been marinating in his kitchenette for who the fuck knew how long. Old Man Johnson was tossing pieces of paper one at a time down the chute, muttering to himself as Negan came walking down the hall, and he steeled himself for the crazy, thinking that it was way too fucking early in the morning to deal with this.

The elderly kook turned to stare at him, and he gave Johnson a tolerant smile, holding up his bag with a smile. “Good morning, Mr. Johnson. Just need to toss this real quick. Mind if I squeeze around you?”

“You need to shut that damn cat up,” Johnson muttered, giving him a googly-eyed stare. “Howled all damned night long.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Johnson. My apologies.”

Christ, he didn’t even own a cat, and as he shoved the offending refuse into the slot, Negan wondered if he wasn’t going to wake up some day to find his batshit neighbor standing over him with a butcher’s knife or something.

Five more years, he told himself. Keep your fucking head down and your eyes on the prize, and you’ll be retired and bangin’ senoritas on the beach.

He left Old Man Johnson to his paper count and chucked his clothes into the laundry basket on his way to the shower, scratching his balls as he turned on the water. While he waited for it to get hot, he brushed his teeth, studying himself in the mirror. His face was tanned but lined and creased from too many drinks and not enough vegetables, he guessed, but he still looked good. Negan was well aware that he was handsome, with black hair that only had a few grays around the temple and brown eyes. His lashes were long and thick, and when he batted them in the right way, panties dropped in a twelve-foot vicinity.

“Large and in charge, motherfucker,” he muttered after he rinsed his mouth out, flexing his muscles. “You still got it.”

Ten minutes and a quick jerk later, he opened his closet, selecting one of his white t-shirts and his favorite pair of Levi’s, whistling as he dressed for the day. One more mirror check and a spritz of Drakkar later, he was ready to roll, tucking his gun into his boot and carrying his jacket as he stepped into the hall. Fucking Johnson was still there, and he went in the opposite direction, taking the back entrance out to avoid the crazy fucker.

The one lady in his life that he could depend on needed a refill, so he pulled into the Amoco station, grabbing a cup of coffee before filling up the tank of his baby, his Pontiac. Black, sleek, and always ready to go wherever he needed her to, she and Negan were a package deal, and it was the only thing he spent actual money on. His apartment was a shithole, his clothes were basic, his food was cheap, but his Pontiac was where he spared no expense. All of his money was sitting in a bank, earning interest so that he could enjoy an early retirement, but his girl, she was worth working a few more years, dipping into his savings now and again to keep her pristine.

Ajax Bail Bonds was housed in a suburban strip mall, cloaked by a jewelry store on one side and an insurance company on the other. Adam Jackson, bail bondsman extraordinaire, was sitting at his desk when Negan came rolling in, a cigar in one hand and a turkey sandwich in the other. In his fifties, with silver hair and a belly that made it impossible for him to actually sit flush with his desk, Ajax was not the easiest guy to work for, but he paid a good rate for skippers, and he usually called on Negan first when he had a job available.
“You’re early for once,” Ajax observed, taking a bite of his sandwich as Negan sat down opposite him, resolving to pick up a salad for lunch. If he wanted to live to see his retirement, he needed to take his health a little more seriously. “Whose bed did you get kicked outta this morning?”

“Brenda’s,” he shrugged, taking a generous drink of his coffee. “The shine’s worn off, I guess.”

“I don’t get it,” Ajax set the food down, reaching for his cigar. “You’re a good-looking guy. You have women chasin’ after ya all the goddamned time. Why don’t they stick around? Is your personality that fucking bad?”

“Apparently,” Negan grinned, getting irritated. It’s not like he didn’t know that he was an asshole, but to have this fat fuck point it out was offensive, and he had half a mind to tell him that he fucked his wife, but thought better of it. Ajax would more than likely shoot his dick off, and have to bail himself out of jail, and he needed his cock for his retirement. Besides, MaryAnn was lousy in bed, and they slept together before she married Ajax. “You got a job for me, man? Not that sitting here watching you deep throat that stogie isn’t the highlight of my day.”

Ajax opened his left drawer, the cigar dangling out of his mouth, sending smoke directly into his eye as he produced two files, handing them over. The first one was no surprise, a frequent flier named Bruno.

“What the fuck did he do now?”

“Knocked over Jeb’s liquor store,” Ajax shook his head as he leaned back, resting one hand on his stomach. “He hasn’t skipped out yet, but his sentencing is this afternoon, and you know how twitchy he is. I need you to make sure he shows up.”

“Easy enough. What’s the other?” He set the manila file aside, opening up the thicker of the two, his eyebrow raising as he studied the picture.

“April Brower.”

She looked vaguely familiar, and he remembered it was because her face had been splashed all over the news a few months ago. April had been arrested for murdering her boyfriend, Johnny Durring, in their bed. Head nearly cut clean off. “Holy shit,” Negan whistled, looking up into Ajax’s very pissed off face. “Half a mil?”

“The bitch skipped town as soon as she was released,” he said, grinding out the cigar and picking up the sandwich. “I’ve had tracers out looking for her for three months and nothing. Then out of the blue, Joey Calhoun calls me with a tip. Thinks she fucking served him at a diner outside Albuquerque.”

“New Mexico?”

“You know any other fucking town named Albuquerque?”

“That’s a long drive, man. What’s the rate?”

“Fifteen percent,” Ajax told him, and Negan stood up, holding the file to his chest. “I want her back within ten days, or I’m sending Cage in.”

“Fuck off,” he said under his breath, and Ajax smirked, knowing that it would light a fire under his ass. Caleb Cage was young, hungry, and gunning for Negan’s spot as the top hunter in Virginia. He’d snaked two skippers out from under him, just in the past couple of months, and there was no fucking way he was getting his hands on this score.
Negan stormed out of the office, tossing the files onto the passenger’s seat and gunning the engine, reversing out of the parking lot. First, he needed to get Bruno, and then he was going to pack a bag for a road trip, and at the first stop light, he took out April’s picture, memorizing her face. No one was bringing this woman in but him, and if Caleb even sniffed at his fucking bounty, he was a dead man.
In case you haven't figured it out, this little story takes place in the late 80s. 1989, in fact, and I think that it makes the possibilities a lot more fun.

Lucille had gotten them about ten hours outside of Albuquerque when Negan saw a sign for a Howard Johnson’s flicking the turn signal to exit the interstate. He was somewhere in bumfuck Oklahoma, near the Texas border, and he just couldn’t drive anymore. His ass hurt, his back was throbbing, and he needed to take a shit, giving up for the night. “Good girl,” he murmured to the Firebird as he cut the engine, tapping the wheel before hefting his bag onto his shoulder and walking into the brightly lit lobby of the motel. Red and cream lines of tile directed him to the front desk, where a pockmark-faced kid in his early twenties was chewing on the end of a red pen, thumbing through a motorcycle magazine.

When he saw Negan approach, he shut the pages, stowing it under the desk and wiping the pen off on his pants. “Good evening, sir. How may I help you?”

“I need a room for the night. A single,” Negan set down the bag, producing his credit card and tossing it onto the counter.

“Yes, sir,” the kid, named Lester, sadly enough, opened the login book, taking down his information and ringing up the charges. Negan signed the copy, stuffing it into his coat as he looked around for the diner.

“You guys still cookin’?”

“No, sir. The kitchen’s closed, but I could probably get you a cold sandwich if you like. You’re in room 120, just around the corner,” he handed the keys over, following Negan towards the door. “I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“You’re a good kid, Lester.”

Room 120 was exactly like he’d thought it would be for twenty bucks, and Negan set his bag down on the orange and green bedspread, closing the drapes and cranking up the air conditioning to chase away the aura of public space. He sat down heavily, prying his boots off and wiggling his toes, ignoring the smell of fifteen hours of funk. A knock at the door announced the arrival of his food, and when he opened the door, Lester handed him the wrapped sandwich and a can of Coke, thanking him eagerly when Negan tipped him a twenty. “Have a good evening, sir.”

The sandwich was good enough to chase away the gnawing hunger that had been nagging at him since he’d grabbed lunch at a McDonald’s at about noon. The Coke, though, wasn’t satiating his thirst, and he debated aloud about heading back out to find a local bar before finally talking himself out of it. He still had seven hundred miles to go tomorrow, and he needed to be back on the road at dawn, to get there in the early afternoon. Instead, he made do with the big three: shit, shower, and a shave, and stowed his dirty clothes in the side pouch of his bag, propping himself up against the headboard and pulling out April’s file, flipping the television over to the Tonight Show.
As Carson monologued in the background, he reread the file for at least the fifth time, setting her picture to the right of his hip as he studied it. April Brower, thirty-one. She’d been found on the street in front of Johnny Durring’s house at two in the morning, covered in blood and ranting incoherently that he’d been murdered. When a neighbor looked outside and saw her under the streetlight looking like Bloody fuckin’ Mary, they’d called the cops, who went into the house on a welfare check and discovered Johnny’s corpse in the bed with his head almost severed completely. Ajax was nice enough to include a pic of the crime scene, and it nearly made him heave up the turkey sandwich at the sight.

The vic, Johnny Durring, was thirty-five at the time of his death and had a rap sheet with minor infractions, including possession of drug paraphernalia. Witnesses said that the couple was known to fight, but that it was nothing serious, just regular relationship crap. Frankly, Negan didn’t care. He just wanted to find the girl and get his money, getting one step closer to paradise. It never bothered him if the perps were innocent or not. He wasn’t a judge and jury, just a delivery guy.

Her booking photo was the last thing he looked at, giving it a detached once-over. He’d seen a lot of pictures in his day, and they all ran a similar vein. About a third were defiant, a dare to really come for them, that they weren't bothered by what they'd done to land their asses in the clink. Men, in particular, liked to add a special bit of bravado to their posture when they were standing in front of the wall. Women were mostly either teary or drunk, and a few men were, too. Still, others were in shock or stunned, thrown by the events that led them to be arrested. April looked to be a mixture of all of them, which intrigued him.

A scene like that had to have fucked her up, whether or not she was innocent like she claimed, and Negan could see it in her eyes. They were haunted and angry. Blank and also filled with every emotion known to man at the same time, and long after he’d fallen asleep, they were still there in the back of his mind, on the periphery of his thoughts. Very few cases haunted his dreams, but this one was one of them, and it left a stain on his subconscious.

The next morning, he got his wakeup call at six, and he laid there staring at the ceiling for a few minutes, trying to get his body to catch up to his brain. There was a stinging throb in his knee from driving for so long, and he reached down absently, probing the tender area. Somewhere in his bag was the good shit, and once he was upright he chased down a Vicodin with the last of the Coke, now flat and syrupy from sitting out all night.

He left the room pretty much how he found it, save for the messy bed, packing his shit back into Lucille and dropping off the key at the front desk. From there, it took him a while to find the nearest gas station, filling up the car's tank and his own, scarfing down a snack cake and hot coffee as he drove through a whole lot of nothing. Beautiful, but nothing, and it allowed him to crank up the radio, popping in random cassettes from his leather case, jamming to AC/DC and early Black Sabbath. The Vicodin kicked in, keeping Negan from stiffening up as thoughts of Brenda flitted through his head. She’d been a fun fling, and he was going to miss the way she wrapped her legs around him, stroking the back of his neck when they’d screw. She was a fun one to hang with, and when this job was done, he thought that maybe he should give her a call to see if he couldn’t sweet talk her into giving him a little more lovin’.

He wasn’t always a month to month kinda guy. Lucille, his car’s namesake, was his world once. She was the one that could see through his worst flaws, down into his creamy center. He liked to think that if she was still around, they would’ve moved into the suburbs and raised some little versions of themselves. He’d always wanted kids, but she kept putting him off, telling him that they had time.

*Time.*
Lucille didn’t have time. She knew it, and she kept it from him until she couldn’t anymore. He hated thinking about it, so he didn’t let himself dwell on it very often. The way her hair fell out in clumps when she would shower. The nights that she would wake up crying because her bones hurt and her skin was covered in sores, and he would try to hold her as gently as he could. Rubbing her carefully to take the pain away, praying to a God that didn’t exist, or just didn’t give a fuck about a good woman like her. Someone who deserved better than what she got out of life.

But she didn’t, and he walked away from his old life and everything that he knew because he couldn’t do it without her. Negan didn’t want to work with kids anymore or hang out with their old friends as they all got their happy fucking endings. He had no drive to do anything, really. None of it mattered, anymore. He wasn’t going to have the life that he thought he would, so why bother? Six months with his ass forming a dent on a barstool, drinking away his sorrows, and then he met Ajax. Fucking kismet is what it was.

He’d been nursing his fifth glass of Scotch, debating on whether or not to just curl up and pass out in one of the booths when a fight broke out behind him between two of the other regulars, a dipshit named Lance, or Vance or something, and a young alkie whose name he never bothered to learn. It didn’t affect him whatsoever until they started trading blows behind him, and they stumbled into his back. Suddenly, six months of pain, loneliness, and rage manifested in him, and he ended up pinning the two of them at the same time, scaring the ever-lovin’ shit out of them.

A booming laugh filled the suddenly silent tavern, and Negan looked up to see Adam Jackson doubled over, finding the whole situation amusing. When he let the two assholes up, warning them to get the fuck out, he found a fresh drink placed in front of his spot, and a card for Ajax Bail Bonds, with a handwritten note to call him. Once he sobered up, he wondered what the fuck the guy wanted, and it was damned near Casablancan, the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Negan started to learn the business, working with a guy that was affectionately named Pigfucker, and he had no interest in ever learning why. But PF took him under his wing and taught him how to find skippers, how to secure them, and when to bring them in. And it was like Negan was born to do it. He fucking thrived at this job. It was more than a job, it was a life calling. It allowed him to use his brain and his brawn, and his melancholy began to fade to a tolerable level, but the want, the need to feel loved was gone. All that was left in the wake of Lucille’s death were basic human desires. To eat, drink, and fuck.

He knew what to do, instinctively, even at the dawn of his new calling. Start at the beginning. Always the beginning. It was like The Wizard of Oz. Place your toes on the first yellow brick in the road and make your way from there. Go to the jumpers’ house. That’ll get ‘em at least thirty percent of the time. From there, follow it to friends, family. Local hangouts. Eventually, the road widens, and the search is on. But this chick, April, was the furthest he’d gone out for a score in a long time, and as he followed along on the Rio Grande, he scanned the local map he’d copied from the library, making a few wrong turns until the found the Starlight Diner. Joey Calhoun was a contact of Ajax’s, and he hauled product all over the country. When a jumper left town, Ajax would send info to him and a few other guys that he knew would keep an eye out for his investments. Most of the time, it led to bupkiss, but fate had smiled on him and Negan just this once. Joey had been doing a drop off at the Air Force Base, a quick turnaround, and once the delivery was done, he decided to stop and grab a bite before getting back on the road. Joey had a photographic memory, bless the fucker, and the waitress who took his order was none other than April Brower.

As soon as he finished his morning delight combo, he went to a pay phone and notified Ajax that his prized get was set up in New Mexico. Calhoun couldn’t stick around to keep an eye on her, but Negan was only two days behind him, and as he sat in the parking lot, fanning himself with her file, he waited for a glimpse of her, finally spotting her when she came to deal with a customer that was
sitting in front of the plate glass window.

Seventy-five thousand dollars worth of woman was just thirty feet from him, and he bit down on
the urge to just go in and grab her. Common sense was telling him to wait it out, but the lure of
standing up and stretching won out, and he got out of the car, walking into the old diner, spying a
table just before the window, ensuring that April would probably serve him.

This was what he lived for, the chase and the capture. It fed his ego and made him feel like he was
making a difference. He was saving people. The taxpayers for goddamned sure, and even the
skippers themselves. Negan kept them from making even dumber choices than they already had, and
a certain sense of pride flooded his body as she headed towards him with her head down, allowing
him to find out everything he needed to know about her.

April was at the end of her rope. Stretched tighter than a rubber band about to snap, one thing
could set this broad off, and he felt himself sit up straighter. Her hair was a sort of golden brown, but
it was slicked back, so he had no clue how long it was. She wasn’t wearing much makeup, less than
he preferred, and her face was showing a touch of sunburn across the bridge of her nose and along
the top of her cheeks. Funnily enough, it highlighted her hazel eyes, which were wary, going by his
fleeting view of them. She wasn’t ugly, by any means, but April was…so not what he personally
would find attractive.

If he were analyzing himself, he would probably figure out that she was more grounded in misery
and sadness than he was used to. Negan preferred women who were bubbly and fun. Uncomplicated,
emotionally, and this woman wasn’t in the least. She’d lived a shitty life, he assumed, and though he didn’t think she was a serial killer or anything, she’d taken a life, brutally. Not everyone who killed was batshit crazy. Some were driven to it, either through abuse or systematic breakdown of their psyche. Others were on drugs or otherwise altered, reduced to their basest caveman qualities. Some did it because they liked to, sure. But he didn’t think that April Brower enjoyed what she’d done. It had cost her something, a little bit of her soul, maybe.

“Welcome to the Starlight, can I take your order?”

Her voice was low and husky, and Negan waited until she made eye contact with him again before
he smiled, tapping the top of his table with his index finger. “Coffee. Black.”

She nodded once, the remainder of her cheeks pinking up, and she turned and walked unsteadily
back to the counter, reaching over it for the coffee pot. Yeah, he definitely still had it, he thought to
himself. He’d be lying if he didn’t acknowledge that women’s reactions to him didn’t jack him up.
Even killers, apparently, and he kept a smirk on his face as she returned, flipping over the coffee cup
that was already in front of him and pouring him some, her hands trembling slightly. “Anything
else?”

“That’ll be all for now, sweetheart.”

Flicking her eyes over him, April offered him a tight smile, retreating to the counter and setting the
pot down roughly, one hand going to smooth the back of her bun, and she squared her shoulders
before heading down the hall towards the restrooms.

Negan picked up the cup, blowing on the coffee, sending little waves across the surface, and he
took a tentative sip, deeming it still too hot. While he waited for it to cool, he glanced around at the
other patrons, realizing that he was probably the only person in there who was under the age of sixty.
Two elderly couples were off in the corner, staring holes through each other, while another older
guy, wearing a veteran’s cap, sat reading a local paper.
His coffee finally dropped in temperature enough that he could drink it, and the caffeine perked him up, sending a buzz into his blood, giving him some much needed fucking energy so that he could spend the rest of the day watching April from afar until she got off of work. It took him a few minutes to realize that she hadn’t reappeared, and it dawned on him like a lightning bolt that maybe it wasn’t his manly fucking charm that she’d responded to. God, he was so fucking stupid.

Scrambling up from the booth, he stalked behind the counter, ignoring the surprised yelp from the cook, a short, middle-aged guy.

“Hey, you can’t be back here,” he said, waving his spatula towards him while beef patties and slivered onion cooked on the grill top.

“Where’s the waitress?”

The cook gave him a blank look, and he stalked over to the guy, scaring the shit out of him and grabbing his shirt. “The girl. Where is she?”

“I- I’m not telling you anything,” he forced himself to stutter out, and Negan looked skyward in anger, using his other hand to fish around in his pocket as the poor bastard struggled to free himself.

“I’m a bounty hunter, man,” Negan held his card in front of his face, showing him his i.d. as well. “That woman is a murderer and she’s on the run. Where is she?”

“She- she said she wasn’t feeling well and that she had to go. She left.”

Motherfucker. She’d skipped out on him.
Chapter 3

Armed with shaky directions to the Wagon Wheel Motel and Lodge, Negan tore out the front of the diner, throwing himself behind the wheel of his car. He was both pissed at himself and at the girl for taking off. “Motherfucker,” he muttered, gunning the engine as he peeled out of the parking lot, narrowly missing a Lincoln that was pulling in. She had at least ten minutes on him, enough time to pack her shit and flee, and the cook told him that the motel was two blocks down and three streets over.

Praying that there were no cops around, he blew through a light that just turned red, feeling that familiar adrenaline rush when he was on the verge of a big grab. It made his insides churn in a good way, warring with the anger at being shown up, but if he got there in time to catch April, he’d chalk it up to cockiness on his part and he’d wise the fuck up next time.

A sign appeared when he rounded the corner of Sexton and Fourth street, faded brown letters splashed across gaudy yellow wheel spokes, and Negan almost crashed into the front office, braking just inches from the glass door. He snatched the booking photo from under the seat, leaving the engine running as he whipped the door open, startling the old man that was just coming out of the back room. His eyes went from Negan to the car that was almost over the curb, and his mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for water.

“How have you seen this girl?” he leaned over the counter, holding the mug shot up to the manager’s face, adding his identification for good measure. “She’s wanted in Virginia for murder.”

“We don’t want any trouble here,” the man stammered, eyeing the phone as Negan set the paper on the counter, placing his hands on either side of it. Scaring this guy wasn’t going to get him what he wanted, and every second that he wasted was another that April was gaining on him.

“I’m not here to cause trouble…Jose,” he glanced at the nameplate near the register. “I’ve been tasked with bringing her in.” Negan used his most persuasive voice, using his index finger to point to the top of April’s head. “I’m not going to hurt anyone, and I damned sure won’t let her hurt anyone else. But she knows I’m looking for her, so time is running out. I need your help, Jose.”

“We got kids living here,” he said quietly after a moment’s thought, bowing his head. “She’s in room forty-nine, around the side and along the middle of the building.”

“Thank you,” Negan told him sincerely, tucking the picture into the inside pocket of his jacket, well aware that he was starting to sweat profusely in the late afternoon heat, but it was good protection.

He left Lucille in front of the door, taking long strides as he started to the right of the U-shaped building. The outside was shabby, with chipped stucco and threadbare bushes underneath the windows that were spaced evenly apart, but there were a few kids riding bikes in the parking lot, and they seemed happy enough. Between the two legs of the building there was a pool and some lounge chairs scattered around, though no one was swimming right then.

Negan’s eyes took in all of the surroundings, noting which rooms had the shades drawn and which appeared not to be rented. He saw no signs of trouble, so with feather-light steps that should be impossible for a guy his size, he sidled along the left side of the building, laser ing in on room forty-
nine. Like so many others, the curtains were shut, a huge break for him. April was probably cautious, but he wasn’t intending to be in her line of sight, instead backing himself up against door forty-eight, his gun in easy reach in his waistband and his hands free.

There wasn’t any movement in the apartment next to hers, which meant that he wouldn’t be scaring the shit out of her neighbors, so he turned himself into a statue. Waiting. Running through every possible outcome once the girl opened the door.

He’d done this too many times to be thrown off balance, both physically and mentally, and after another five minutes, he could hear some shuffling sounds, prompting him to bend his knees slightly, his fingers wiggling rapidly to get the blood flowing through them. This is what he lived for. There was no rush, no high like catching a skipper. Not even sex could compare, and fuck if he didn’t love sex. The hunt was just a pure thrill, and he used everything that he had at his disposal. His looks, his brains, his charm. It always, always got him what he wanted, and April Brower was going to put him into the stratosphere. Ajax told him all the time that a big score could open up doors across the country, that he could command twenty-five percent on the national market, and he was fucking ready to start cashing in on all of his hard work.

Just as he expected, the door opened slowly, and April stuck her head out cautiously, allowing Negan ample opportunity to swing his arm out in an arc, wrapping it around her neck and pulling her into a bear hug, effectively trapping her. It made her let out a screech, and he pushed her back into the room, nearly tripping over the suitcase that was sitting at her feet, sending the two of them stumbling into the bed. She began to thrash underneath him for a brief period before suddenly going still, and he braced himself above her, twisting the top of her torso upright while keeping her arms locked together at the wrists.

Unfortunately, it left his face vulnerable, and she spit up at him, landing a gob of saliva on his cheek.

“Fucking piece of shit,” she swore at him, looking more angry than scared, but she stopped struggling. “Tell your fucking boss I’ll see him in hell, and I want him to know that I didn’t beg for my life.”

It sure as fuck wasn’t what he expected her to say, but he kept his face impassive, even as she stared up at him with defiance and fear until letting her eyelids drift shut, her body tensing. He had no idea why she was so pissed at Ajax, who was just protecting his investment, but while April was otherwise docile, he took the opportunity to fish his handcuffs out of the front pocket of his jacket, fastening them around her hands. The action made her eyes flip open, like she wasn’t expecting it, and he took the bull by the proverbial horns, backing himself upright and allowing April to completely turn onto her back as he pulled her up by the cuffs.

“My name is Negan, and I’m here to bring you in,” he informed her as her mouth dropped open. “Adam Jackson sent me to procure you since he posted your bond, and you have a court date in nine days. Now, I’m a pretty reasonable guy, April, and as long as you treat me with respect, I’ll do the same for you. But I’m warning you now, sugar,” he got close to her face, jerking her restraints lightly, “if you try to run or fuck me over at all, I’ll make this road trip a living fucking hell for you. Do we understand each other?”

The spot on his cheek where she’d spit at him was still wet, and he wiped it with the back of his wrist, his eyebrows raised slightly as April jerked back slightly, her jaw going slack. “You work for Ajax?”

“Who the fuck else would I work for?”
This chick was a fucking weirdo, he figured when she didn’t answer, shutting down internally as her shoulders slumped, having some sort of mental crisis or something. While she was still pliable, he picked up the large red duffel bag that they’d stumbled over, holding it one-handed with her purse as April seemed to shake herself out of the stupor that she was in, though he noticed that her eyes were watery as she took plodding steps, ending up in front of him.

They marched single file past the pool and out into the parking lot where the kids that were riding their bikes gawked at the duo, one of them cuffed up. He didn’t have any intention of embarrassing her, but when he was doing a pickup, there inevitably ended up being witnesses, and since she was a murderer, well, he wasn’t going to lose much sleep over it.

“We’re gonna get you checked out, sugar, and then we’re on the road back to Virginia.”

“I’m paid up through the week,” she muttered, and he marched her into the manager’s office, the old guy unable to stop staring at her. He noticed that April refused to look at anyone, just focusing at the floor, and Negan told him that they were heading out and that the room was vacated. April had to sign a form, and with a thankful wink to the manager, he steered her out to Lucille, opening the passenger door like the gentleman he was. Of course, he also hooked the cuffs to a bar that he had custom-installed on the dashboard.

Once he was seated behind the wheel, her bag stowed in the trunk for safekeeping, Negan drove slowly out of the motel lot, heading east as April stared out of the window, one solitary tear sliding down her cheek.

“We’re going to drive for a while, and then we’ll stop and get some sleep, okay?”

She didn’t answer, and he shrugged lightly, removing his coat when they stopped at a red light, tossing it in the back seat. Unfortunately, the smell of his sweat mixed with the vague fryer scent of April’s hair and uniform, and for the good of them both, he rolled down his window, letting in fresh air that made the little hairs around her face start to dance. Still, she said nothing. Did nothing but stare out the window as they left the city of Albuquerque behind in shades of orange and red, the sunset chasing them on the interstate.

When they were clear of New Mexico he made another attempt to start a conversation with April after observing her out of the corner of his eye for a while. “Are you hungry?”

She didn’t reply and he let it slide for about five minutes until they passed a sign for Amarillo, and he slowed the car, turning on his signal to exit. “I say we call it a night and get an early start tomorrow. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired as shit. Do you want some food?”

April didn’t move a muscle except for a small involuntary twitch of her eye, and he slammed on the brakes, making the both of them rock forward, though she didn’t have a way to brace herself, and he swerved Lucille onto the gravel of the freeway. It was already purple dark outside and he reached up, flicking the button for the dome light, flooding them both with too much vision at one time, the two of them blinking rapidly as she glared at him.

“Do you want some fucking food, for fuck’s sake?”

She looked him up and down with a disdainful sneer that made him feel like he was about six years old before finally answering in that smoky voice, her eyes still red and her cheeks coloring pink. “Am I legally required to interact with you?”

“Huh?”
“Am I legally required to talk to you while you bring me in?” she repeated, never losing the dirty look.

“No, you don’t have to talk to me, but if—“

“Then go fuck yourself, you sniveling ‘James Dean School of Angst’ reject.”

It honestly left him speechless, a rare event, and she turned her head back towards the window, resuming her statue-like appearance as he gogged at her for a second, not quite sure that he’d heard her correctly. Where the fuck did that come from? He wasn’t the one that put her in this position, and he had half a fucking mind to give her the business before eventually clicking the light off and slowly getting back on the road, taking the first exit near Amarillo.

They were near a town called Bushland, and he found a dinky little motel not far off of the interstate, leaving April still handcuffed in the car while he went in and paid for a room, asking for one that didn’t have any renters on either side. The kid working the desk peered out, seeing her in the front seat, and he gave Negan a knowing wink, figuring the couple wanted to get a little freaky. Negan didn’t say anything, he just tipped the kid ten bucks, twirling the key around his finger as he headed back out, too tired and ticked off to do anything else.

They drove to the end of the row of rooms, and he kept her secured while he took the bags inside, checking the room thoroughly for anything that could be used for a weapon. When he was satisfied that it was all right to bring her in, he went over to Lucille’s passenger door, opening it up and unlocking the cuffs, reattaching them immediately as April waited patiently, refusing to look him in the eye.

Their room was decorated in a pale reddish-brown hue, and he closed and locked the door stretching his arms over his head to loosen up his muscles from spending the last few hours driving without a break.

“So, here’s how this is going to work,” he said around a yawn. “I’ll let you shower first, but the door stays open. Then once you’re done, I’m cuffing you to the bed frame,” he pointed to the wall where there was a secured post, perfect for keeping her in the bed. “Then it’s your choice. You can either sleep with your fucking arms over your head, or you can sleep cuffed to me.”

She held her wrists out, and he took the restraints off, watching her carefully, ready to defend himself if she tried anything, but she just stood up, unzipping the red duffel bag and pulling out a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt. In her other hand, she held a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a comb, and she sauntered into the bathroom like she didn’t have a care in the world, setting everything on the sink. He could hear but not see the shower start, and when she turned her back to him, he couldn’t help staring as she undid her hair from the bun she’d been wearing, pleasantly surprised to see it bounce down to below her shoulders in little waves. There were streaks of gold mixed in with the brown that he hadn’t gotten a good look at, but that detail escaped him when she started to slip off the waitress uniform.

Negan was a fan of the female form, but this wasn’t a fucking date, and it wasn’t consensual, so as the material started to slide down her shoulders, he backed himself onto the mattress, out of the line of sight. She may not be his type, but she was still a woman, and he didn’t need to end up with a fucking boner when she came out. This was strictly business, and he wanted her to know that he wasn’t going to try anything. But fuck if he didn’t get a glimpse of the side of her breasts when she stepped into the shower. As the curtain closed, he took a deep breath, telling himself to get a fucking grip, and to keep his mind occupied, he fished out his long-distance calling card from his wallet, using the phone in the room to dial Ajax’s number.
“Hello?”

The fat fuck picked up after three rings, and Negan leaned his torso against the headboard, using his thumb and forefinger to massage his temple. “You owe me seventy-five thousand dollars, buddy.”

“You got her?”

“You’re goddamned right I got her. She made me as soon as I walked into the diner, and I had to chase her ass down, but we’re on our way back.”

Ajax laughed, and he could hear a rustle over the airwaves as he rubbed absently at his stomach. He forgot to pick up food, and he pulled a few dollars out setting them on the nightstand so that he could get some chips from the vending machine a few doors down. It would have to suffice until the morning.

“How far away are you?”

“We’re somewhere near Amarillo, a town called Bushland, so I figure by tomorrow night or the following morning we’ll be back. Plenty of time for you to get that money for me.”

“Figures you’d stop in a town with ‘bush’ in the title.”

“Fuck you,” he smirked at the wall. He was so tired that he hadn’t even thought of it, and when the water shut off, he wrapped up his call with Ajax, anxious to get clean and get some shut-eye.

April appeared a few minutes later, dressed in the shorts and shirt, and he had another ‘grow the fuck up’ moment, he was sorry to say. Buried underneath that drab, ugly uniform was a nicely shaped body, and he sure as hell hadn’t expected it. Negan was a leg man. No, he was an ass man. Actually, he was an everything man, and as she walked slowly towards the bed, he almost forgot what the fuck they were doing there until she held her wrists out. It made him jerk upright off the mattress, and if he hadn’t been ogling her, he would’ve missed the tiniest smirk on the edges of her lips.

Taking the spot he’d just vacated, April rested herself against the pillow, bending her legs at the knee as he hovered over her, snaking the cuffs around the bedpost and snapping them back around her wrists. She stared through him again, resuming her stoic demeanor, and he opened his bag, shucking his shirt and shoving it into the side pocket, extracting another one and a pair of sweatpants. When he turned to double-check to make sure that she wasn’t trying anything, he caught her staring at him, though she immediately turned away, and he forced himself not to grin like the cocky dickhead he was. It seemed he wasn’t the only one pleasantly surprised by the physicality in this shitty motel room.

The water was lukewarm, but it did the job, and he hummed aimlessly as he washed his sore body, wiping the condensation off the mirror when he was done, brushing his teeth and adding extra deodorant for good measure.

“I’m asking one more time,” he said as he strolled out of the bathroom, his words cutting off when he saw that she was curled up on her side, her head buried in the crook of her elbow, crying. He wasn’t heartless. He’d seen too much pain in his life not to, and it niggled at him, seeing a woman so despondent. Not enough to comfort her, but he let out a sigh, giving her a chance to get herself together, and April peered out at him through wet lashes and he reached out for the money near the phone, using a much softer voice. “Do you want something to eat?”
She shook her head, and he nodded once, slipping out of the room and loading up on pop, chips, and a Snickers bar, dumping it on the bed. Still laying on her side facing away from him, he sat down, opening up the bag of chips and popping a couple in his mouth, his eyes straying to the curve of her ass out of habit. This had to suck balls for her, being trussed up in a hotel room with a strange man, but they could either make the best of it over the next twenty-four hours, or make it the road trip from hell, and it was all up to her.

When he was done stuffing himself with empty calories, he asked her if she wanted to stay the way she was or be cuffed to him, but she didn’t answer, using her legs to try to push the covers down. Frustrated and pissy, he yanked them down himself, covering her up before turning and facing the door, switching off the lamp.

In the darkness as he drifted off into sleep, he could hear her crying softly, and his brain mixed and mingled it with Lucille’s own tears, both from when she was sick, and when she found out while she was sick that he’d had an affair.

It made for a very long, uncomfortable night.

Chapter End Notes

Good God, this took me way longer than normal to get through, but I hope you like it, because I’m really excited about the fun road trip that these two are undertaking. I hope this version of our favorite Savior makes you happy because I love me some perverted, goofy, good-guy Negan.
Lucille was on her side when Negan crawled into bed behind her, pressing himself against her and resting his hand on her waist. He missed her long hair, when he would snuggle and breathe into it, but today had been a good day. She’d been in very little pain and had enough energy to walk with him to the park, where they sat together and watched the kids playing on the swings, couples laid out on blankets together in the sun enjoying a picnic.

But now, she was trembling, her shoulders shaking as he ran his nose along the back of her neck.

“Do you need your pills?”

When Lucille found out about his affair, she’d been in the exact same spot, shaking in the very same way when he climbed in behind her, and without a word, she held up a crinkled piece of paper. A letter she’d received from his side piece, Karen, spilling the dirty secrets after he’d broken it off.

A rage that he’d never seen filled Lucille’s eyes, words that she’d never uttered in her life were thrown at him with the force of a thousand daggers, hitting his heart and his soul as she scratched at his face, telling him to leave. He did, from the bedroom at least, bunking on the couch and staring at the ceiling all that night, hating himself and what he’d done to her.

She may have kicked him out of their bed, but he wasn’t going anywhere, ever again. When she had an appointment with the doctor, he was there. If she needed her medications picked up, he did it, handing them over even if she refused to look at him. Negan made her dinner every evening and cleaned the house, even caring for her damned houseplants that covered every inch of their little downstairs. All the while waiting for her to forgive him because he couldn’t stand the thought of her not doing it before she died.

And then one night, as he stared up at the living room ceiling like he usually did, under the exact same spot that their bed sat, Lucille came shuffling into the room, a pale, ghostly apparition, and his head popped up, his heart beating double-time as she braced her hands on the back of the couch.

“Did you love her?”

“No,” he sat up, afraid to touch her. “You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved, Lucille. It was a mistake, a stupid fucking mistake, and if I could take it all back, I would.”

“You hurt me, Negan,” she said, looking at him with a sadness that he could never comprehend, not until she passed. “I never thought that one person could hurt me so much.”

“I know,” he choked out, hating himself with every breath that he took, but she turned away from him, taking tremulous steps. That night she allowed him to help her back into bed, and she let him sit next to her as she slept. It was never the same between them, after, but she tried.

God knows she tried, and as Negan felt her shaking again, his spine began to burn, waiting for another tongue-lashing, but she didn’t. It wasn’t about him.

"Do you need your pills?"

“ My life was a waste,” she cried softly, fighting him when he tried to gently roll her over.

“Your life was not a waste,” Negan told her with conviction. “You were the best wife any fuckup
like me could ever have. You’re an amazing daughter and friend, and you’re just...good, Lucille. You’re better than this fucking world deserved.”

She looked at him with sad, scared eyes, and it hit him, suddenly. All of it. He was losing her, forever.

“I can’t do this without you, Lucille,” he whispered, his vision blurring as he reached for her. “I can’t live without these hands,” he kissed them. “I can’t be without your lips, your face. Your heart,” he rasped, laying his head on her chest. “Your big, amazing fucking heart.”

Lucille let him cry, stroking his head until he calmed himself down, and she forced him to look at her, to let him come to accept that she wasn’t going to be there much longer, and she said-

“Hey! James Dean!”

She was gone, just like that, and Negan’s eyes opened, seeing a wave of brown hair just centimeters from his face. Where the fuck was he?

He let out some sort of cross between a snore and a snort, feeling a sudden sharp pain when something knocked into his forehead.

“You need to get your morning wood off the back of my fucking thighs.”

Realizing finally where he was and who he was with, he lifted his hand from her waist- Lucille’s waist- and lurched for the other side of the bed, coming around with the handcuff keys to unlock April’s arms. She looked pissed, rightly so, and for once in his fucking life, he was embarrassed. Nothing ever shamed him, other than what he’d done to his wife, but he never touched a woman without her permission, and he loathed the anger that he’d instilled in her.

“I’m really fucking sorry,” he said, crouching down next to her and releasing her right arm first. “I would never do something like that intentionally. I must’ve been dreaming or something.”

April waited patiently for him to free her other arm, and he cringed at how cold her skin was from being exposed all night, easing back to let her sit up. She was back to not talking, and he righted himself as she got to her feet, pawing through her duffel for something to change into.

It threw him for a huge fucking loop when she stripped off her shirt right in front of him, though she did turn around, and he willed his dick to go down, assuming that this was some sort of punishment that she was doling out.

“You can use the fucking bathroom, you know,” he reminded her, sitting on the spot that she’d been laying in. “I know you think I’m an insensitive prick, but I’m not that bad, for Christ’s sake.”

He could see her putting on her bra out of the corner of his eye, followed by a purple tank top. When her shorts dropped to the floor, he’d had enough, and he stalked back into the bathroom, resting his hands on the sink, feeling like his emotions had been put into a blender. Dreaming of Lucille always made him happy and borderline suicidal at the same time. He could still smell her sometimes, that lingering ghost of a scent that was hers and hers alone.

She was there. Always there. And then she wasn’t. It took one breath, one blink of his eye, and the only woman he’d ever loved was gone. A broken, empty shell where there was once a vibrant, beautiful woman. It would stick with him for a while. Negan found it hard to shake off the dreams easily. They always felt foreboding to him, a warning like the ghost of Christmas past.
His toothbrush was still sitting on the edge of the sink, and he brushed his teeth, splashing his face with water while April finished getting dressed. When he was done, they sidestepped past each other so that she could take his spot in front of the mirror and he could get dressed. She came back out with her toiletries in hand, putting them back in the duffel bag, and he put on his jacket, taking a second to look her over in the daylight without that ugly uniform on.

April Brower was attractive, there was no doubt about that. With some makeup on and her hair down, she kind of reminded him of Michelle Pfeiffer, with her patrician nose and pouty lips. Her brown tresses were wavy, falling over her forehead as she came to stand in front of him, her things zipped away in her bag, and she held out her arms, waiting without speaking for the cuffs. He could see indentations from where the metal pressed into her wrists all night, and he tucked them into his jeans, getting no reaction from her.

“As long as you behave, I don’t see any reason to cuff you right now,” he told her, watching as her chest rose and fell slightly faster. “I’ll just secure one arm in the car. But don’t mistake my kindness for stupidity,” she blinked up at him, having heard this all before, her eyes looking a little more golden in the sunlight. “If you fuck with me in any way whatsoever, I’ll hogtie you and toss you in the trunk if need be. Do we understand each other?”

She nodded her head, and Negan opened the door, holding his arm out for her to pass by, and he took both of her bags, trailing behind her as they walked out into the Texas sunshine, even at seven in the morning. April waited by the car as he put their things in the trunk, and he extracted her wallet, setting it in the console when she got in. He left the cuffs loose enough that they wouldn’t bite into her right wrist, but secure enough that she couldn’t slip through the hole, clamping the other ring around the inner door handle. She never thanked him or showed any signs of ever fucking talking to him again, and it was starting to irritate him.

Negan liked to talk. Conversing with someone was the best way to get to know them, because body language could only tell you so much. All he’d gotten from her so far were insults and a closed-off attitude. It was understandable, seeing as he’d found her and was forcefully bringing her back home to face justice, but a perverse part of him wanted to get into her brain and find out what made her tick. To know how she could do what she did, and why she thought that running away was the answer.

With a deep breath, he made his own brain push the memories of Lucille back down inside, something he’d had extensive practice doing over the last several years, instead concentrating on what lay ahead. A very fucking long road trip. But first, they needed to refuel, both their bodies and his car, so he started back towards the interstate, pulling into a little restaurant with a gift shop, cutting the engine and starting around the car to let April free.

“Since this ain’t a date, you can buy your own breakfast,” he told her, earning nothing but an eye roll. She grabbed her wallet, and they made their way inside, choosing a booth in the back left corner, with a full view of the entrance. Negan took the side against the wall, and April sat across from him, setting her wallet on the table. There were already menus on the table, since this was a ‘seat yourself and just hang out’ kind of place, and he scanned the breakfast items, jonesing for a cup of coffee.

When he looked up, he saw that April had already set hers aside and was tapping her nails on the tabletop, staring at the wall behind him.

“So, what looks good?”

She ignored him, and he felt his blood pressure rising. Fortunately, the waitress came over to diffuse the tension, and she poured them each a cup of coffee, taking out her pad and pencil. “What
can I get you folks?"

It was like a switch had been flipped, and April gave her a sunny smile, making his mouth drop open. He’d never actually seen her do it before, and it shocked the shit outta him, the difference that it made in her features. Her eyes lit up and her lips spread open, making the gesture look effortless. It made the apples of her cheeks look even more prominent, with their remnants of sunburn, and he felt…weird.

“Good morning…Debbie,” she said in that warm voice, looking at her nametag. “I’ll have a stack of pancakes, three slices of bacon, two eggs over easy-“

“And a partridge in a pear tree,” Negan joked, earning a deadly look as Debbie snickered.

“I’d also love a big glass of orange juice,” April finished, kicking him in the shin under the table. “Oops, sorry,” she apologized with false sincerity as he winced.

“And how about you, handsome?” Debbie gave him a motherly smile, and he grinned up at her. “Oh, I’ll have the same as the lady, ma’am.”

“Great. I’ll put your orders in,” she was off with a wink, leaving the two of them alone, and he glazed at her, reaching down and rubbing the throbbing circle on his left shin.

“Don’t ever fucking kick me again, lady, or I swear to God…”

It made her actually look him in the eyes, and it was like a dare to continue, but he ground his teeth together. “I was making a fucking joke for fuck’s sake.”

He felt himself slowly going mad as they waited for their food. April not talking to him, even in public was more than annoying. It was insulting, and he could feel himself losing his cool. Everything about this woman pissed him off. She was a fucking murderer, but she was treating him like he was the one who’d done something wrong. And those glares. They weren’t even looks. She just stared through him or around him like he wasn’t even there. Not even twenty-four hours together and she looked like every woman he’d ever spent at least a month with.

Negan was ready to do a touchdown dance when Debbie brought over their food, setting a plate in front of each of them, and they spent the rest of their time eating silently, save for when the waitress came over to check on them, earning a few assuring words from April. She laid down their check, and April reached for her wallet, but he snatched the bill off the table, stalking over to the cashier, briefly hoping the girl would just get up and walk out, seventy-five thousand dollars be damned. But she rose, wandering around the gift shop, paying for something and slipping it inside the pocket of her jeans. Since it clearly wasn’t a weapon, he didn’t bother patting her down, instead escorting her to the car and cuffing her back to the door.

Their last stop before getting on the road was the gas station, and she leaned her head against the window as he filled the tank, allowing him a chance to really look at her. He wanted to crack her. Negan needed to break her down, though not in a bad way. He just had to win this. He had to get her to thaw enough to tell him what he wanted to know. No one could resist him. That or they finally just gave in just to shut him up. He didn’t give a fuck either way, as long as he got what he wanted, and right now, what he wanted was for April Brower to interact with him.

While she rested, he went into the station and paid, grabbing them each a drink and a candy bar for the road, stowing his jacket in the back seat.

He could see her in the window’s reflection, sound asleep. There was probably no rest for her the
night before, being shackled to the bed frame, and Negan felt the tell-tale stirrings of empathy, so he shut the door as quietly as he could, holding his breath when she stirred lightly. Her being out would give him some time to think of how he could try to breach her intellectual walls, and as they pulled out onto the road, she let out a sleepy sigh.

Everyone and their fucking brother were driving on I-40, a marked change from when he’d passed through two days before, and the road went right through Amarillo, making for some hairy close calls. He’d almost lost his shit when a station wagon nearly ran him off the road, crossing three lanes to get to its exit, and April jerked in her sleep, letting out a whine. It was the only reason he didn’t roll down the window and scream at the vehicle, or just fucking follow the guy to deliver a beat down.

When they finally got east of Amarillo, the traffic thinned out, leaving them with mostly trucks as their companions on the asphalt, along with a lot of wide open spaces, and he let the speed tick upward slightly, going only about five miles over the limit. The last thing he needed was to get bogged down with a speeding ticket, plus have to explain why he had a woman handcuffed to the door. Some cops were cool with his job, but others thought that he was stepping on their toes for some reason, and it more often than not devolved into a dick measuring contest. He had enough on his plate at the moment.

Belatedly, he became aware that there was a distinct possibility that they were being followed.

Ever since they passed the center of Amarillo, they’d been riding with a convoy of trucks and a few other cars, one of them being a black Cadillac. Some of the group would speed up, some would slow down, but the Caddy always seemed to keep pace with Lucille. Had he not been so tired from the last two days of driving almost non-stop, Negan probably would’ve noticed it already, but now he was cursing himself silently for not picking up on the anomaly earlier.

There was nothing he could do in the middle of nowhere, so he kept one eye on the road and the other on the black car three lengths behind him. April was still asleep, and he lowered the volume of the radio so that he could concentrate, smiling grimly when he noticed a sign for a rest stop a few miles ahead. It was time to see if his suspicions were dead on or not, and he got into the right lane, turning his signal on that they were getting off. The Caddy did the same, and Negan got ready, nudging April, who sat up with a start, looking around wildly.

“I need you to brace yourself, sugar,” he warned her as she struggled to keep her eyes open. They were on the exit ramp with the Cadillac right behind him when he swerved at the last possible second, swinging left back onto the interstate. The black car screeched and weaved, trying to pull the same maneuver, but they didn’t have what he had. The followers didn’t have Lucille. April let out a weak cry, turning and staring out the back window at the vehicle that was now halfway into the low ditch that separated the rest stop from the freeway.

“What the fuck was that?” she snapped, her head pivoting back and forth between the scene behind them and Negan, who was picking up speed to put some distance from whoever the fuck was just fucked over back there. They wouldn’t be for long, and he had no clue how long it would take them to maybe catch up. In fact, he reached into the glove box, tossing the map that he had into April’s lap, waving at her to unfold it.

“You tell me,” he bit back, snapping the radio off. “We’re fucking being tailed, and they’re gonna try to catch up to us. You need to look at the map and find out where we can it off the interstate, and then you need to tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Color him fucking surprised when she opened her mouth and spoke to him, the word said in a soft tone of her own volition.
“Okay.”
“Well, I can cross Nebraska off my bucket list.”

Negan rolled his neck from side to side as they approached the Lincoln city limits, and April let out a huff. It wasn’t quite a laugh and it wasn’t a snort, just an exhale, and he wasn’t sure if she was ever going to fucking talk, even though she promised to tell him who was following them. He was reasonably sure it had nothing to do with him, so that left her fucking mess that he needed to avoid.

The only time she’d spoken was to give him directions, and what should have been about a nine-hour trip from Texas to Lincoln ended up taking sixteen hours since they’d zigged and fucking zagged every hundred miles. It was almost dark, and he was tired as shit, burnt out from driving all day with the added stress of keeping an eye out for anyone else that could be trailing them. He hadn’t seen the Caddy after losing it at the rest stop, but that didn’t mean that others couldn’t be far behind them.

“There’s a hotel at the next exit,” April said, breaking him out of his tired funk. His ass was going numb, and he made a promise to himself to get a seat cushion or something once he finished this case.

“You owe me a lot more words than that, sugar, when we get checked in,” he warned her, and she folded up the map, stowing it back in the glove compartment. There were just a few sips left in one of the Pepsi bottles, and April emptied it into her mouth, nodding that she heard him.

They bypassed a Holiday Inn for a more…reasonably priced motel about five miles down the road, and she sat expectantly in the car as he asked for a room with two double beds that was off to the side, where his car would be out of sight. But they only had one empty one that had a queen-sized bed, and he thanked the woman behind the desk.

“I know I told you I’d get you your own bed, but they don’t have a double in a safe spot, so we have to bunk up again tonight,” Negan told her, reversing Lucille, and making a slow crawl around the side of the two-story building. Their room was on the first level, and they parked in front of the door, dodging moths that were dancing around the lights that were buzzing near each room.

April took the opportunity to stretch out her arms and legs, and Negan set both of their bags on the bed, staring longingly at the shower, even as she bent over, giving him a full view of her ass. He didn’t even have the energy to think sexual things right then, but April put it to the test, stripping down to her bra and panties, rifling around in her bag before pulling out a lightly wrinkled white shirt and a red skirt.

“You know, I am a fucking man and all, even though I said I’d never touch you again,” he grumbled, getting a level look as she stepped into the skirt. “Cut me a fucking break, honey.”

“There’s a steakhouse halfway between here and the Holiday Inn. We could eat there.”

“I’m tired, sugar,” he sighed, tossing his jacket on the chair and falling face first onto the side of the bed, not even bothering to cuff her. “I’ve been driving for the entire goddamned day. I just want to clean up, shove some junk food down my throat, and sleep for about twelve hours.”

“If you want to know what happened with Johnny, you’d better get your fat ass in gear. I’m hungry, and it could be my last meal,” she said over her shoulder as she walked into the bathroom, brushing her teeth and putting her hair up into a ponytail.
“Fat ass?”

It was the most she’d said to him since he met her, and it was to call him a fat ass. He ripped his shirt off angrily, finding a fresh white one and sliding it over his head, reaching underneath to reapply his deodorant. When she wasn’t looking, he ran his hands over his ass cheeks, satisfied that she didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. His body was a work of art, and there were lots of satisfied customers in the greater Alexandria area.

“Let’s fucking go, then,” he said, backing her towards the shower as he cleaned his teeth and his face, keeping her in sight.

Suppressing a groan when he got back behind the wheel, they made their way to the Red Fox Steakhouse, a joint that screamed ‘country’. The inside was made entirely of dark wood, with dim lights and peanut shells on the floor. The air was thick with beer and food, and Negan’s stomach jumped to attention as a waitress with tits and ass on display showed them to a table in the back with red leather chairs. She was a perky little thing, with bleached blonde hair and glossy lips. Her skin was a honeyed color, and he gave her an appraising smile, forgetting to hold April’s chair out for her like the gentleman he normally was.

“You make a cute couple,” she said in a chirpy voice, setting the menus down in front of them.

“Oh, we’re-“

“Thank you,” April interrupted, resting her hand on top of his, batting her eyes at the woman. “I’ll have a draft, whatever you recommend. And you, honey?”

“I’ll just have a water with lemon,” he told the waitress, Heather, with far less enthusiasm. When she left to get the drinks, he pulled his hand free, scowling at her in irritation.

“What the fuck?”

“You seem like the kinda guy that thinks with your dick, a lot,” April said, retracting her hand and setting it on her lap. “And you wanted to know my situation, so I’m going to need your attention, and if that waitress is sniffing around you, your blood flow is gonna be elsewhere. Now, I don’t care what you do once I’m back at the hotel. If you want to come back here and fuck her in the bathroom, it’s none of my business.”

Negan couldn’t even argue, since he’d done that more times than he could recall, staring her down as Heather returned with their drinks. Making a point not to look at the girl, he locked gazes with April, who let the corner of one side of her mouth rise. “Thank you,” he replied, picking up the menu and studying it until the waitress walked away.

“You don’t know shit about me, sugar,” Negan told her as he picked up his glass, dunking the lemon in the water before sipping at it. April took a swig of the beer, closing up the menu and setting it on the corner of the table. “You think you’ve got me pegged?”

“All I know is what you’ve shown me so far.”

“You need to start talking. I’m tired as shit and I’m tired of flying blind with you. I want to know what I got myself into with this job.”

“After we order.”

Heather came back a few minutes later, bringing a fresh beer with her and ready to take their orders. April requested a strip steak done medium, and Negan ordered the prime rib, figuring that a hearty fucking meal would put him asleep as soon as they got back to the motel. The only thing
really keeping him vertical was the promise of knowing what really happened with Johnny Durring. That and Heather’s ass in those tight jeans. But he forced himself to focus on April, and she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the edge of the table.

“I met Johnny about two years ago,” she wasn’t cocky anymore or closed off like she’d been for the last day or so. She was pensive, more like the scared little doe that he’d seen at the diner. “I tended bar at this little hole in the wall in Alexandria, and I went to college during the day.”

“You seem a little old to be in school.”

“I didn’t exactly grow up with the Huxtables,” she replied, giving him a cold glance before moving the beer glass directly in front of her like a talisman. “I’ve been on my own since I was sixteen, and I worked my ass off to save up the money to go.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Anyway,” April swallowed, squaring her shoulders. “Johnny came in one night, and he…wasn’t like the other degenerates that used to hang out there. Most of the regulars were alcoholics. It was a real hole in the wall.”

“Which bar?” Negan fished for more information, wanting a clear picture of everything so he could poke holes in her story if he had to.

“The Clairmont.”

Oh yeah, that spot was a dive, even for him. It was located in a shitty part of town, and it was known for the fights that broke out almost nightly. He nodded his head and April smiled, seeming almost fond of the place.

Heather came back to check on them, and he almost waved her away in annoyance, but April politely told her that they were fine, wanting to get into the meat of the story. Once she was out of earshot, he leaned forward, giving her his full scrutiny. “So you started dating him?”

“He was charming and handsome, and he had a real job,” she seemed defensive, but he wasn’t judging. He was just clarifying, and she shrugged slowly. “He waited until closing that first night and walked me to my car. Johnny was…he wasn’t like the guys I was used to. I’d spent the majority of my adult life fending off advances from creeps twice my age, or frat boys that decided they wanted to go slumming. We didn’t see a lot of each other when we started getting serious, because I was in school and working full-time, and he worked for himself, which meant that he could get called out at all hours.”

“What did he do? I didn’t see it in your file,” Negan watched her drain her second beer, and he almost told her to slow down, but for all he knew, this could be a typical Thursday night for her. It’s not like he knew anything about her other than what was in Ajax’s crappy little file. But she wiped her mouth, sitting back against the chair, her eyes gazing through him, a look he’d seen more times than he could count since he’d collared her.

“Johnny was an accountant, he told me. He ran his own little company, and he said he only had a few clients, but they were very eccentric. Rich, but eccentric, so it wasn’t uncommon for them to call late at night or on the weekends. We’d be sitting on the couch watching a movie, and the phone would ring.” April paused when Heather set down another draft, dipping her finger in the beer and sticking it in her mouth, and Negan found it strangely erotic, the way she pulled it out slowly, his eyes tracking its path back to the foamy head. Fuck, he needed to get some sleep.
“Have you ever heard of Cosa Nostra?” she asked, jolting him from his mindless staring, meeting his eyes as he shook his head. It sounded familiar, but he wasn’t sure where he’d heard the name before. “How about Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano?”

“The mobster from the twenties? What does he have to do with this?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, it dawned on him, it dawned on him, and he let out a deep breath right as the waitress brought over their dinner, urging them to be careful, that the plates were hot. “Enjoy,” she chirped, bustling off with a swing of her hips. Negan wasn’t one to waste a good meal, but his appetite had taken a serious fucking hit, and he busied himself with his prime rib, cutting it into bite-sized pieces as April did the same with her steak. The conversation ground to a halt as they ate, each chewing mechanically as other couples and families came and went, eventually leaving the two of them by themselves, the surrounding tables emptied and cleared away.

“The night he…died,” April washed down her last bite, wiping her mouth and setting the napkin on top of the plate, “Johnny came home in a panic. He lived in this really nice bungalow and I would stay there a few nights a week. I was washing the dishes when he came in. He was really pale and sweaty, and he pulled me away from the sink, dragging me upstairs.”

Her voice started to get softer, and Negan could see that reliving this was hard for her, but he had to know. All the gory details. He was usually able to suss out the truth tellers from the liars, and there was nothing in her physical set that said she was lying. At least, she believed it, and he could see her skin getting chalky as she continued, making his own heart start to pound.

“He said that we have to leave, that night. He wasn’t making any sense, at first. He just said that he’d fucked up and he was dead if he stayed. I was…confused and unnerved,” she said, starting on her fourth beer of the night, bringing back some of the flush in her cheeks. “I didn’t know Johnny like I thought I did. I was stupid, or just ignorant as to what was really going on. Or maybe I was just blinded by someone that was so not what I was used to.”

“He stole from them, didn’t he? He stole from the mob.”

“They were his only clients,” she sniffed, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “I knew that he was Italian, but I didn’t know much else about his parents. They were from the Old Country, as it turned out, and he was born Giovanni Dorrino. He changed it when he turned eighteen, and he said that it was because he wanted to make his own way. His father was ‘involved’ with Cosa Nostra back in Sicily.”

“So, why didn’t you walk away right then?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, spacing out a little bit. “I didn’t really get it, okay? He wasn’t just their bookkeeper. He knew everything. Bank accounts, where they operated. Who was on the payroll. He was the one that scrubbed the money and dispersed it. Johnny was stupid. He let himself get taken in by Mickey.”

“Mickey?”

“Mickey Tisone, the boss. The boss of all bosses. He was Luciano’s great nephew or something. He came over from Sicily about five years ago to run Washington after the last boss got killed. Bustamante or something.”

Negan definitely knew that name. It was one of his proudest fucking collars, nabbing the guy that did it. Gorgio Mattanzo had broken his nose, but Negan still won. He was pretty sure the guy was on death row, still.
“I told Johnny that he needed to go to the cops in the morning and try to get protection or something. Maybe witness protection? And we just went round and round until the middle of the night. I was tired, and he was, too. So we went to bed. I…woke up to something covering my mouth, and then I was out again. It was just total blackness.”

“They chloroformed you or something,” Negan could feel the disgust in his gut, turning and making him sick, and April started to shake. “You don’t have-“

“When I came to, he was dead. He was butchered,” her voice choked off, and she covered her face with her hands. “The blood…”

“Sugar, let’s just go back to the hotel. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“It’s metallic, that smell,” she whispered, and the waitress edged over, looking concerned as she asked if they needed anything else. Negan went to tell her no, but April pointed haphazardly towards her almost empty beer, and the blonde backed away, returning with another before flashing wide eyes at him, and he sent her away with a look. “I’d never smelled blood before. I mean, who has? But it was like licking iron or something, and it was mixed in with the smell of urine and shit. They left his fucking eyes open, just staring up.”

“Jesus.” He thought he was going to throw up, not only because it sounded horrific, but because Lucille’s eyes were open when she died. He knew that stare. It’s something that never leaves your mind when you’ve seen it. “I’m fucking sorry.”

“I don’t remember much right after that, but the cops found the knife under our bed, and surprise, surprise, my prints were on it.”

“They put it in your hand when you were out,” he guessed, and her eyebrows rose up as she sucked down half of the beer. “So the cops think it’s an open and shut case. What did your attorney say?”

“My court-appointed attorney, that has about five other cases?” April sounded like she was nearly catatonic. “He told me to plead guilty.”

“Well, how in the fuck did you end up getting bail?” That was the real question that needed to be answered, and it made her slam the glass down, her eyes so glassy that he could almost see himself reflected.

“Don’t you get it? It’s a fucking ‘win-win’ for Tisone no matter what happens. The house was trashed because they were looking for the ledgers and the money he stole. I take the fall, and their hands are clean. I mean, I’m a fucking nobody. No one gives a shit if I go down for this. And if I end up in jail, I’m dead, ’cause they’ll have someone on the inside. If they find me, I’m dead.”

“There’s gotta be someone that believes you.”

“Mickey fucking Tisone runs Washington, not the politicians. He has his hands in everyone’s pie,” she shut her eyes, her head moving back and forth. “The cops, the prosecutors, the senators. They answer to him. And he thinks I know where Johnny hid his shit.”

“No you?”

April looked away, and he saw her jaw flex before she muttered ‘no’. She was lying, but he didn’t press the issue. His head was swimming, and his body was tired, so he raised his hand, signaling for the check. If she was telling him the truth, she was in more danger than she knew, and him, too, by default. He needed to think about what to do next, and as they walked out into the night, April
stumbled, the alcohol catching up to her. Negan caught her, holding her by the arm as he put her in
the car, and they drove back to the motel in silence.

When they entered the room, she swayed lightly, trying to kick off her sandals, but they weren’t
the type that just came off. He sighed loudly as he turned her around, getting down on the ground
and lifting her right foot, setting it on his thigh as he undid the buckle. When he looked up, she was
smiling drunkenly down at him, and he felt that weird stirring in his chest. Out of nowhere, he felt
the insane desire to scoop her up and take her away, to make sure that she stayed safe so that he
could see that smile all of the time. It shook him down to his core, and he quickly looked down,
setting her foot on the ground and unbuckling the other sandal.

“Thanks,” she hiccupped, crawling onto the bed and flopping onto her back. Before he was back
on his feet, she removed her skirt and held out her arms for the cuffs, making a full flush of heat take
root in his dick.

“I trust you for tonight,” he cleared his throat, avoiding her gaze, and he tossed his jeans into his
bag as she snuggled under the covers. “But I’m a light sleeper, sugar, so don’t even think about
running, okay?”

“Where am I going to go?” April laughed, pulling the covers down awkwardly as he opened his
wallet, flattening it and shoving it under the mattress along with his keys. It made a crappy lump
under his side, but they were safe, and when he laid down next to her, he took a deep, cleansing
breath. This situation was fucked three ways from Sunday, but he believed her.

Twenty minutes later, April was deeply asleep, and he sat up, dialing Ajax’s number to check in.
He answered after just one ring, and Negan could hear several people laughing and talking in the
background.

“Negan?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“I thought you were bringing the girl in today?”

“Change of plans, man,” he said, running his hand through his hair. “There’s some shit going on,
and I’m not feeling real trusting right now, so I’m keeping her with me until next Thursday.”

“Hold the fuck on,” Ajax said, and he heard him tell everyone to clear out. Less than a minute
later, there was complete silence in the background. “Okay, lay it on me. What’s the situation?”

“The chick is in trouble, and now my ass is on the chopping block,” Negan sighed, glancing over
at her to make sure she was still out. “We got tailed coming out of Amarillo, and if they find us, it’ll
be bad, Ajax. Real fucking bad.”

“You want me to send Pigfucker out to assist?”

“No. I’m doing this alone.”

“Listen, that chick is worth big money~“

“I know,” he hissed, and April let out a mumble, making him lower his voice. “But I’m not putting
my trust in anyone right now. Either Joey Calhoun ran his mouth about where she was~“

“To who?” Ajax yelled, making him hold the phone out before it ruptured his eardrum. “Tell me
what the fuck is happening?”
“I’m heading to Chicago for now. That’s all I can say. I’ll check in a few days from now.”

“Don’t you fucking hang up on me, Negan–“

He set the phone back in the cradle, feeling a headache come on, and after shutting out the light, he slid down in the bed, resting his hands behind his head. He had a lot to unpack, and the first thing he needed to do was come up with a plan. There were a couple of different places in Chicago that were safe, and when they got there tomorrow, he wanted to plot out where to go next.

April said that the cops were on the payroll, but there were a few guys that he knew on the force that were probably trustworthy. He was still bringing her in, but if they had something set up beforehand, maybe Tisone wouldn’t know that she was back, and she could tell the feds where Johnny’s ledgers and money were. He had a week to get her to trust him, and he had a feeling that if he did this right, she could walk away a free woman.

She rolled over, and he froze when she draped her arm across his chest, her breath tickling his shoulder.

“Thank you, James Dean.”

Negan got a chill up his spine, and he knew he was in trouble, and not just because of Tisone.
Chapter 6

Negan could hear Lucille vocalizing in the shower as he slowly returned to consciousness, not really forming words, just humming and tossing in a few vowels and consonants. Rolling to the side, he reveled in it, a smile forming on his face as he pictured her in his mind, her dark hair in a soapy pile on the top of her head, using her pink washcloth to caress her shoulders. It took him a lot longer than it should’ve to remember that his wife was gone, and his eyes fluttered open, finding himself in a shitty motel bed, looking at an open bathroom door.

April was the one singing in the shower, not Lucille. His desire to see his wife even just once more was just that. A desire. Her voice had faded into time, and he started slightly at the snapping sound of the shower curtain as it opened, the water shutting off and the music ceasing. Negan could see parts of her naked, wet body through the crack in the door, and he froze in his spot, wanting to shut his eyes to give her privacy, but unable to do so. April’s skin was pink from the hot water, and he felt like a teenage pervert, spying on the hot, older neighbor across the street. How long had it been since he’d jacked off? He really needed ten minutes alone to get his shit in order, and when she came walking out with the towel around herself, he turned his eyes to the wall, holding his breath.

She never once acknowledged that he was awake, going to the foot of the bed and setting her duffel by his feet. When she found a clean pair of undergarments, she opened up the towel, and Negan lost his mind, shoot up onto his feet.

“Jesus H. Christ,” he snarled, not getting any reaction whatsoever. “I am a red-blooded fucking male with a dick and balls and a healthy libido. Stop fucking stripping in front of me like I’m a fucking eunuch. You don’t know me at all, lady. I could fucking force myself on you if I wanted to.”

“If you were going to attack me, you would’ve done it already,” she replied, stepping into the panties and turning so that her ass was all he could see. “And I’m running on the assumption that you’ve seen so many naked women that you may or may not have paid to leer at that I’m reasonably safe. I’ve been around enough creeps to know.”

“You’re a real piece of work,” he muttered, watching as her ass cheeks bounced up and down when she wiggled into a pair of jeans, swallowing hard.

“I think you should let me drive for a while today.”

Negan laughed, passing by her to grab his keys and wallet, carrying them with him into the bathroom, leaving the door open. “No one drives my car but me.”

He relieved himself, the back of his neck prickling as she felt her move into the doorway. This fucking chick left him no personal space, and he flushed the toilet, moving to the sink to wash his hands and face. “You’re going to end up with a blood clot, moron. I’m bored as hell sitting there, and you play the same music over and over.”

“So?”

“So, everyone knows the driver picks the music,” April shrugged, rubbing her head with the towel, and he brushed his teeth, watching her in the mirror. “I’m sick of hearing Black Sabbath.”

“Then you shouldn’t have killed your boyfriend, sugar, and you wouldn’t be stuck in my car.”
Her face went pale, and he immediately felt like a dickhead. It was a shitty thing to say because it might not be true, and his stomach dropped as her eyes welled up. Before he could apologize, she threw the towel at his head, and Negan cursed himself internally as he hung the towel back up. He never liked to make a woman cry, even though he did it a lot, and when he joined her in the room, she was sitting on the bed, hunched over her knees.

“I’m sorry,” he told her, but she didn’t move a muscle. “I say shit and I think it’s funny, but I don’t mean to upset people.”

April ignored his apology, something she was really fucking good at, and Negan shoved his things into his bag after getting dressed. He didn’t mean to be an asshole. He knew she was having a shit time of it, especially since he’d made her relive Johnny’s murder, and he didn’t want the next several days to be so fucking miserable for either of them. When his bag was zipped, she got to her feet, heading back into the bathroom and slamming the door so loudly that the picture on the wall teetered, nearly falling to the floor.

Men understood him. He could joke with guys and bullshit, and it was all good. But women? If it wasn’t flirting or casual conversation, they were over him in short order. Hell, Lucille was the only one that put up with him for any length of time, and even then, she’d hit a breaking point, telling him to shut up and give her just one night of peace. And April was a fucking enigma. He didn’t know her, but they’d spent two solid days and nights together. It was a lot of Negan time, he knew, and when she emerged, her face was inscrutable.

“Listen,” he said, taking both of their bags when she’d put all her girly stuff away. “I’ll make you a deal. We’ll alternate control of the radio, and I promise that you can listen to whatever you want, okay?”

“Anything? You promise? From start to finish?” One eyebrow rose, and he nodded, thinking that he’d broken down the wall that he’d just built, unintentionally.

He was wrong.

Ten seconds after she pulled a white cassette from her jeans pocket and popped it in, he knew he was being punished. Some crappy synth beat kicked in along with a chorus of teenaged boys that were barely in sync, playing at being badasses. Grinding his teeth together, he pulled out of the parking lot, his ears assaulted with teenybopper posturing.

“...Hangin’ tough...”
“...Hangin’ tough...”
“We’re rough”

By the time they’d merged onto the freeway towards Chicago, his ass cheeks were clenched together, all while April sat in the passenger’s seat with a serene look on her face and her hands placed casually in her lap. He kept his mouth shut, because he told her she could listen to whatever she wanted, but when some fucking falsetto child starting singing “Please don’t go, girl,” he lost it.

“Are you fucking kidding me with this shit?” he snapped, reaching to eject the tape, but April used her right hand to hit him between his wrist and hand, sending a numb shock up his arm, looking at him angrily. “This is the kinda crap you like to listen to?”

“I fucking hate this shit,” she hissed at him, turning it up. “But I guarantee you hate it a lot more than I do, so we’re listening to the whole fucking album.”

“What in the everloving, goddamned fuck is wrong with you?” he was thoroughly confused, but
she smiled, and it was disconcerting.

“Fuck you, James Dean.”

Bewildered, angry, and bizarrely impressed at her ability to exact revenge, he drove, trying to tune out the music, but failing. This woman was weird and fascinating, and when the last song finally ended, he said a prayer of thanks. She stuck it back into her pocket, and he put Black Sabbath in, just to tick her off. Her left eye twitched, and he sat back in his seat, speeding up as they went through a stretch with no signs of civilization.

By the time they saw a sign for food and gas, he was starving, and he guessed that she was, too, so he took the exit, finding a restaurant just feet from the entrance ramp, shutting Lucille down. April was out of the car before he was, stretching her arms above her head, and he followed behind her, the two of them taking a seat at the counter.

They were still in Iowa somewhere, and it would be another five or so hours before they got to Chicago, so he figured they could take their time.

Sitting with her elbows on the counter, April read the board above them, twisting her hips back and forth on the stool, humming softly to herself. The waitress came over, asking them if they needed a minute, but she was ready, ordering the same meal she had the previous morning. Eggs, pancakes, bacon and orange juice. Negan asked for an omelet and coffee, cracking his neck and back, both of them aching. He wasn’t old, but he wasn’t getting any younger, either, and the constant driving was taking a toll on his spine. April gave him a knowing look, but he shook his head, refusing to even entertain the idea.

While they ate, she chatted amiably with the guy sitting next to her, making jokes and basically treating Negan like he was invisible, and he hated feeling invisible. He was the person that commanded attention when he walked into a room, both because of his physical size and because of his dominant personality. Everything about this woman was a direct conflict to what he was used to, and he was struggling to overcome it.

She fished some money out of her purse when they were done, paying the bill and leaving a hefty tip for the waitress. “Take care, Paul,” she said to the older man, giving him a wave, and Negan marched her back to the car. Before they got back on the interstate, he gassed up Lucille, grabbing some pop and a pack of gum. They had no sooner started the car when April reached for the stupid boy band cassette, and he lost it.

“No. No fucking way are we listening to that audio torture again.”

“You promised that every other-“

Fuck this. Fuck everything about it. Negan opened the car door, storming over to the edge of the gas station, cussing at the top of his lungs. She was his goddamned prisoner, for all intents and purposes. Why in the hell was he trying to do whatever the fuck he was trying to do? He didn’t owe her shit. If he wanted to toss her into the trunk, he could, and no one would care. For a split second, he almost considered it.

Instead, he calmed himself down, going to the passenger’s side and opening the door. April sat there, looking up at him, waiting for him to cuff her or punch her, but he waved his hand towards the driver’s side. “Drive. Just fucking drive. But you’re tossing that shit in the garbage.”

She got out, and in a fluid motion, she threw the cassette towards the open field, where it disappeared into the tall grass. She didn’t smile or smirk, but he refused to make eye contact with her,
sitting down in her vacated spot and putting on the seatbelt. When she got in, he cleared his throat, and she tilted her head to face him.

“If you so much as breathe wrong on her, I’ll-“

It was her turn to cut him off, and she rolled her eyes. “I had a car exactly like this when I was twenty-one, James Dean. I know how to treat this girl.”

Before he could say anything, she turned Lucille in a smooth arc, handling her like she’d been driving her for years, getting them on the exit ramp and back on track for Chicago, all while he watched her like a hawk. Contrary to the preceding hours, April appeared genuinely at ease and almost happy, rolling down the window as she patted the steering wheel. Lucille rumbled as they picked up speed, and Negan allowed himself to relax slightly.

Studying her profile, he reclined the seat, taking some of the pressure off of his back, deciding to chance being shut down.

“What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“Well, if Tisone was the one that killed your boyfriend, and you ran, do they know? Did they help you get away?”

April laughed humorlessly, turning down the radio. “The druggie assholes that thought it was hilarious to name me April May Brower?”

It took him a second to get it, and he winced. His own parents were dicks, and they didn’t help matters by naming him Negan, but at least it wasn’t a stupid pun.

“I haven’t seen them since I walked out of their drug den at sixteen. They were useless, and if Tisone tries to lean on them for my whereabouts, he’s going to be wasting his time. Stephen and Vicki Brower would sell me out for a dime bag.”

“I’m sorry, sugar,” he said, and he was. That had to be a shitty way to grow up. His folks might’ve sucked, but at least they performed basic parental functions.

“Don’t apologize for people you don’t know. I don’t need it and I don’t want it. Negan. I know what I was, I know what I am, and I know how I grew up. Everyone thinks of me as trash, and I’ve owned it all my life. I busted my ass to put myself through school, and I wanted to be… I was going to do something with my life.”

“Your life isn’t over yet.”

“I’m voluntarily helping you drive me back to Alexandria, where I’ll either die in prison or get murdered before I even walk through the door. Trust me, it’s over.”

The thought made his stomach clench in disgust. He didn’t want her to die, and he didn’t want to be the reason that she died. But he didn’t say anything else, and April took a sip of Pepsi. As they drove, he felt himself growing relaxed, the gentle hum of Lucille’s engine mixed with the warm rays of the sun helping his body get soft as it melded into the seat. He drifted off the way he woke just hours before, listening to April hum.
Like almost any other rational human, April feared death. She didn’t want to die. She had plans for her life and she had hopes and dreams. But loving the wrong guy came at a price she didn’t know she had to pay, and as she drove along the green roads of Illinois, she contemplated the man sleeping in the seat next to her.

The moment he appeared in the diner, she thought that was it. That he was one of Tisone’s men, and she was going to get a bullet to the brain. The survival instinct, one that had driven her for the last several months kicked in, and she walked out of the diner, hauling ass back to her motel room to grab the last of her clothes and her money, carefully hidden in a hole at the bottom of her duffel bag.

When she’d decided to hide out in Albuquerque, April thought that no one would ever find her there. It’s not like she thought that it would be a hotbed of Mafia activity. Still, she spent every waking moment looking over her shoulder, waiting for someone to show up. If she was lucky, she’d be killed while she was asleep, though her darkest fears made her picture any number of terrifying scenarios. Strapped to a chair, being questioned and beaten. Cement bricks tied to her feet, being dangled over a bridge.

Johnny had told her more than she ever wanted to know the night he was murdered. What she’d assumed was a safe, boring accountant’s job was actually a life sentence that he’d never be able to serve. Mickey Tisone was the granddaddy of all bosses, and his interests were vast, Johnny had told her. Drugs, guns, stolen jewels. They ransacked businesses and offered protection after. No major crimes happened in and around D.C. unless Tisone was a part of it. April wasn’t a moron. She’d grown up in the seedier parts of Alexandria, so she was well aware of the crime scene and who ran it. But, when your boyfriend walked in and announced that he knew every dirty little secret of Tisone’s operation…

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she whispered, steadying herself against the dresser as he packed their clothes, edging her out of the way. “How could you lie to me for two years?”

Johnny dropped the pair of pants he was holding, taking her by the shoulders, and she could see the fear in his eyes. “Would you have stayed, if I told you who I really was? What I really did?”

She wouldn’t have, and they both knew it. Unlike him, April had been open about her life growing up, the desire to get as far away from that kind of existence as she could. Her parents were more concerned with getting high than making sure their daughter was fed and clothed, and she grew up much earlier than she should have because she had to. If she didn’t, she would’ve starved, or ended up a prostitute.

“I fucked up, April. I got bitter, and I got greedy,” Johnny said, pulling her to the bed and sitting her down. “Day in and day out, they handed me stacks of money, all to track and send out of the country. None of those assholes even knew what they were giving me. I-“

“So, you stole from the mob?”

“You don’t understand what I know,” he said, swallowing hard. “It didn’t hit me for a long time how deep I’d gotten in. The shit I kept track of? They’d kill me before letting me go. What I took, I figured I earned it since I gave my life over to Tisone. And the records I kept? It’s my insurance, April. It’s our insurance. But we have to leave tonight.”

He expected her to just drop everything and take off, like a criminal. Like every nightmare she’d
ever had, the fear of staying on the shitty side of the street for the rest of her life. They went around and around for hours, Johnny peering out the windows the entire time, and after endless words, tears, and pleas, she agreed to leave in the morning, if only for her safety. She loved him, but she didn’t want this.

She worked hard to block out the rest of that night, and April knew that she was in shock as she was driven to the hospital to get checked out before being arrested. The back of the police car was cold, and she was still in her nightgown, still covered in Johnny’s blood. She was staring down at her hands when they turned off onto a side street, bringing the car to a stop. When she looked up, the officer that was driving was watching her in the rearview mirror, and she felt ice water in her veins.

“Where’s the money?”

“I…what?”

“Where’s the money?” the other cop turned around, giving her a warning look. “We want the money he stole, and the books.”

She was going to take the fall for this, and everyone was in on it. When it was clear she wasn’t going to say anything, they drove her to the hospital, and then to the station. As they transferred custody, Officer Berardino leaned in, speaking so lowly that she thought she misheard him. “We’ll be seeing you soon, April.”

The second her bail was approved, she knew she was going to be murdered. She’d never requested it, yet she was being released, and her heart beat triple time as she opened the door to her apartment, finding it ransacked. She had one chance to get away, and she took it, packing up everything she owned and fleeing in the early morning hours of May third.

Now, she was going back, and she doubted that she’d be alive twenty-four hours after she was sighted in the city. Negan, the man who found her, wasn’t to blame. Johnny was, and she hated him as much as she missed him. If Negan hadn’t located her, someone else would.

Glancing at him briefly, she thought it entirely reasonable that she assumed he was one of Tisone’s men. Enormous, with muscles upon even more muscles, he had a gleaming smile and a wicked look in his eye. Besides being one of the most striking physical specimens that she’d ever seen, there was a confidence and danger emanating from him. Mostly. Right now, though, he was snoring, his mouth hanging open, and she shook her head.

Negan was scary, but he was also reasonably trustworthy, so she figured it was best to stay with him, rather than try to run. His own safety was number one on his list, so if she was adjacent to him, April would have a few more days to live. Her impression of him so far was that he was obnoxious, rude, perpetually horny, and he had a good heart. Plus, it was fun to fuck with him.

When they were about a half-hour outside of Chicago, she stopped at a gas station, Negan sitting up with a start, smacking his head on the ceiling of the car. “The fuck?” he muttered in a rough voice, and she tossed him the keys.

“Figured you’d want to drive once we got to the city,” she said, stepping out into the balmy air. They both used the restroom, and when she came out, he was hanging up the pay phone with a smile on his face. She immediately started to panic internally, thinking that he’d called someone else in, but he told her once they started driving again that he had a place set up for them to go to.

“How do you know they won’t turn me in?”
“Simon’s my buddy, and he’s a cop in Chicago. He doesn’t know shit about D.C. politics, sugar. I trust this guy with my life.”

“And mine?” she challenged, getting a stony look.

“I told you I’d keep you safe, and I meant it. I always keep my promises,” he said, but a shadow crossed his face. It may have not always been the case, she assumed, but she shrugged, turning back to the window. Being around Negan constantly for the past few days was overwhelming, since she’d hidden away from just about everyone for so long. He liked to talk, so she let him, and she knew it pissed him off when she didn’t answer back, but honestly, she enjoyed it, after the initial shock of being taken by him. He would get the same look on his face each time, and it amused her. His eyebrows would crinkle, and she liked the way his jaw would harden. It made the apples of his cheeks go slightly ruddy, and his dimples would deepen.

She made herself face the window, letting her thoughts drift back to the early morning when she woke up with her head on his chest. It warmed her stomach and her spine, the memory, Negan hadn’t seemed to mind, at least in slumber, as his arms had been wrapped around her torso, and his chin rested on the top of her head. Shame at what she’d done prompted her to ease out of the bed, holding her breath when he mumbled something unintelligible, flopping onto her side of the mattress and burying his face in her pillow. Best not to think about it, she told herself.

Negan’s friend Simon lived in Chicago proper, a two-story brownstone that looked well-maintained, even if it wasn’t in the best area. There were no parking spots available in front of the house, so the car was parked at the end of the block, catty-corner to a bar called Murray’s Pub and Grille. After unloading their bags, she and Negan walked side by side back down the street towards Simon’s building, and Negan ushered her through the wrought-iron gates that separated the front stoop from the sidewalk.

He set their things down, jumping down into the flower bed and coming up with a fake rock, sliding the bottom open to retrieve the key to the front door. Inside, the house was spartan, but it held a television in the front room, two couches and a recliner, and a smattering of pictures above the fireplace. April didn’t get to see much more than that, as she was marched up the steps to the second floor, and Negan pointed her to the first room on the left. It looked like an old lady’s room, with a crocheted bedspread, antique furniture, and the faint smell of powder and rose.

“Can I trust you to keep your ass planted here while I take a shower?” Negan set her bag down, eyeballing her, and she eased herself back onto her elbows, giving him no answer. Sure enough, the dimples came out, and she fought a smile, trying to maintain an icy façade. “I haven’t locked you up for a while, but I will if I have to, sugar.”

“You can trust me, James Dean,” she said, feeling a tingle of desire when his chest swelled with air. “I haven’t done anything to you yet, have I?”

God, she missed sex.

“I’ll be right over there,” he pointed across the hall to the bathroom. “Don’t fuck with me, April.”

“Sure, Negan.”

As soon as the door shut, she shot off the bed, grabbing the pen and paper that were sitting on the nightstand, scribbling a note and a drawing, setting it in the middle of the bed. She had a chance to stretch her legs and get her bearings, and she was taking it, well aware that it might send him into a rage. When she heard the water start up, she opened her bag, slapping on some more deodorant and changing her shirt, and as the sound is the shower curtain opening and closing reached her ears, she
crept down the stairs, keeping to the edges in case they were creaky, and when she made it outside, April headed towards Murray’s Pub, a handful of money in her pocket and a lighter step than she’d had in days.

“What can I get ya?” the bartender asked when she planted herself on a stool. He was an older guy, maybe in his sixties, with a hardened face but a polite voice, and she tossed a twenty on the counter. “A draft and a shot of Jack, please.”

He set both in front of her, generous sizes, and she sipped at the beer, running the top of her finger around the shot glass. The bar was occupied by only men, some young and some old, but all were staring at her, the lone female in sight. April was resigned to being leered at, especially since she used to tend bar, and she tossed back the whiskey, wiping her mouth and setting the glass back on the edge.

A flickering light caught her eye, and she wandered over to the jukebox, studying the CDs that were available. Her attention was on it instead of the drunk that sidled up behind her, and she jumped when she felt a hand on her ass, whipping around to see a guy not much older than her grinning like a fool.

“Did it hurt?”

“What?” she muttered, pressing her back against the machine as her hand automatically formed into a fist. It wasn’t the first time she’d been groped, but it never happened twice by the same guy.

“When you fell from Heaven,” he snorted, thinking that he was original. “Did it hurt?”

Out of nowhere, a fist connected with the guy’s face, and he dropped like a sack of potatoes. Another man, with white-blond, spiky hair, ripped jeans, and a black Guns ‘n Roses t-shirt stood over him, shaking his hand lightly. How she didn’t notice him in the bar, she had no clue, but he gave her an apologetic glance as two of the unconscious guy’s friends came over, swearing and stumbling. The bartender reached behind the counter, producing a baseball bat, and he ordered the drunk assholes out of his bar.

‘Billy Idol’ guy took a defensive stance in front of her, keeping an eye on the guys as they dragged their still unconscious buddy out the door, leaving a room full of customers gawking at the two of them.

“Sorry about that,” the blonde said, turning and giving her an easy smile. “I fucking hate guys like that. They give the rest of us a bad name.”

He was friendly, with a charming smile and blue eyes, despite the punkish appearance.

“Thanks for your help,” she said, straightening up. “I could’ve handled it, though.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt for a second that you can handle yourself,” he laughed, holding his hands up in a peaceful gesture, “but my mom raised me to always step in if I see someone in trouble.”

April nodded once, starting around him back towards the bar where the owner, Murray, apparently, was still holding the bat, waiting to make sure she was all right. She gave him an inconspicuous wink, and he set another shot of Jack in front of her, telling her it was on the house. When her knight in spiked armor sat down next to her, he offered her a handshake, and she obliged.

“I’m April,” she said, and he grinned happily, gripping her hand tightly.

“My name is Caleb,” he told her, reaching for his beer once he let go and tipped it towards her.
“Caleb Cage.”

Chapter End Notes

So, we finally get a little of April's perspective, and I have to say, I'm really excited for some more adventures with these two. I hope you are, as well!
Chapter 7

Simon was a bachelor, and probably would be for the rest of his life. His mother, Miriam, had been an absolute gem of a woman, but she’d spoiled and doted on him to the point that he was never going to be suitable for marriage, not that Negan had been much better at being a husband. But freshly cooked meals every night, laundry done daily, folded and set on his bed. Simon had never done anything for himself, and when Miriam died, the townhouse had become almost a shrine to her.

Even the bathroom, where he was currently standing, naked and sporting a huge woody, was filled with Aqua Net hairspray, bath beads, and cold cream. It had a vaguely ‘old woman’ smell, and he fondled his dick as he turned both knobs on in the shower, waiting for it to heat up. By all rights, he should move as fast as possible to get cleaned up so that he could keep April under watch, but the frustration of days without sex or even jacking off was making it far-fetched.

Instead, he stepped into the hot water, shutting the flowered curtain and letting his body relax for the first time in days. He let the water lubricate his shaft, his eyes closing as he wrapped his fingers securely around it, thumbing the head, sending a little jolt of pleasure up his spine.

There were a variety of breasts crossing through his mind, past flings and famous tits, various sizes, and he began to move his hand back and forth, groaning under his breath. He’d give his left nut to have someone to fuck right now, and he brought Brenda to the forefront of his fantasies, imagining the last time he screwed her. She had long legs and pretty nipples, and she loved to be fucked from behind, bent down on her elbows as he pumped his hips. Her breasts would sway from side to side with each thrust, like an obscene pendulum, and he sped up his hand, trying to pretend that it was her cunt.

Then, out of nowhere, another woman popped into his mind, the one that was currently making his life a living hell, and he nearly came. He’d seen almost all of her body, with that pink, sunburned skin and he found himself wanting to know what she felt like. Would her skin be salty if he licked at it, or sweet? Did she moan in that husky voice, or was it higher pitched? He felt positive that she was the kind of partner that would run her nails down his back, squeezing his ass to get him to move faster, and Negan bit back a moan when his balls tightened, shooting out a load into the tub, his knees nearly buckling underneath him. He’d needed that like a fat kid needs cake, and he felt his mind clearing, even if there was a pang of underlying guilt about fantasizing about a woman that was two doors away.

The rest of his shower was uneventful, and he cleaned his hair and body, shutting off the water with a tired sigh. Simon’s place was safe, and he figured they could spend at least two days here before moving on. The fact that he had a full bar on the first floor was fucking awesome, and Negan planned to get shitfaced before sleeping in a bed by himself for the night. He planned on taking the room next to April’s, the walls thin enough that he’d be able to hear her if she tried to sneak out. Since the townhouse was old and had hardwood floors, it would make it all the easier.

It took him a few tugs to get a fresh pair of jeans over his damp legs, and he combed his hair after getting a fresh t-shirt out of his bag and putting it on. He eyed his toothbrush, deciding to wait until after he checked on her and ran out to get them something to eat.

“Hey,” he called out as he opened the door. “I’m gonna go get us some food. Anything in particular that you want?”

He was still studying his reflection in the mirror, admiring the stubble on his jaw, and it took him a few seconds to realize that April hadn’t answered him. “Hey. What do you want?”
Poking his head out into the hall, he saw that her door was open, and he marched over to see if she was asleep, but he was greeted with an empty room and a piece of paper sitting on the bed.

“Fucking son of a bitch,” he swore, charging forward to read her bullshit excuse for running off.

*Stay calm, James Dean. I’m down the street at Murray’s Bar.*

Underneath the words was a suspiciously good caricature of him, crying tears with a wide-open mouth, and he crumpled it in his fist, seeing red. Twenty goddamned minutes in Chicago, and she was running wild like a fucking idiot. He was more pissed at the fact that she up and left to go to a bar rather than disappear on his ass, and he wasn’t sure why.

It took him three tries to shove his feet back into his boots, nearly forgetting to grab his wallet from the counter, and he took off down the steps, working himself into an even more agitated state. All he wanted was one day, just one, where he felt like he was in control of this shit, and she couldn’t even give him that. It was still warm outside, just about dinnertime, and he turned down the street towards the neighborhood bar, unclenching his fist so that he didn’t feel the urge to use it.

April

“So, I’m running around with my pants down by my ankles,” Caleb was doubled over the bar, tears streaming out of his eyes as April smiled at him, sipping at a fresh glass of Jack. “and this tiny little old Italian lady is chasing me through the yard, yelling at me and swinging a shotgun. I couldn’t get away fast enough, and when I made it to the end of the street, I ran smack into a police car.”

“What did you think was going to happen, sneaking into her house at three in the morning to screw her granddaughter?”

“She was damned near deaf,” he said, propping his head on his palm, looking off into the distance with unfocused eyes. “I’d done it for over a month without her finding out, and AnnaMarie was so worth spending the night in jail.”

They’d been sitting together for about fifteen minutes, the bar clearing out as the afternoon drunks made way for the evening ones, and his mouth hadn’t stopped since he’d parked himself next to her, appointing himself her guardian for the time being. Something about him reminded her of Negan, but that was probably since neither of them knew how to shut the fuck up. It was pleasant enough, and he’d told her more about himself than she’d planned on knowing, telling her about his childhood in Boston and his love of all thing Chitown.

“What about you?” he asked, jerking his head towards her as she fingered the nearly empty bottle of beer that was sitting next to her whiskey.
“What about me?”

“What crazy shit have you done for love?”

She glanced at him, seeing that he was looking at her expectantly, and she shrugged. “I’ve certainly never climbed into anyone’s window in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, come on,” he prodded. “I told you tons of shit about myself. Really embarrassing stuff, and we just met. You have to have done something.”

“Uh, I made a sex tape, once.”

Caleb’s mouth dropped open, and she saw his eyes flicker down to her chest just for a split second before snapping back up to hers. “You did porn?”

“No, I didn’t fucking do porn. I made a video with a boyfriend, just for us. But the fucker took it with him when we broke up. I’ve been waiting to see it in some seedy store,” she grimaced, thinking about Troy Donnell and wanting to clock him in the face. She’d never told anyone about the tape before, not even Johnny. “So, if you ever see some homemade shit with a Washington Redskins poster in the background and poor lighting, it’s probably me.”

Caleb let out a roar of laughter, clinking his glass with hers, and she downed it, feeling slightly buzzed. Places like this were where April thrived. Working-class people and everyday shit were her bread and butter, even as she went to school and busted her ass to make something of herself. Being a bartender made her a good listener, and she’d hoped to become a therapist. But now…she couldn’t even solve her own problems.

“Well, I think you definitely have me beat,” he acknowledged, sitting up straighter as he glanced over her shoulder, and his eyes lit up as he focused back on her. “Nice. Your boyfriend’s here.”

April turned in her seat with a smirk, but it faded away when she saw the look on Negan’s face, not even connecting the dots that Caleb knew he was there for her, not until she felt something cool against her neck.

“Negan,” he said with a chuckle, locking his arm around her neck, and she felt herself getting lightheaded. “Took you fucking long enough.”

Negan was strangely calm, even as her adrenaline kicked up, sending a wave of fear through her body, the sensation nudging at her to flee. Murray was nowhere to be found, having gone into the back, leaving just the two of them and a few drunken stragglers. God, she was fucking stupid. She knew nothing. She was nothing.


“That fat fuck? No,” he purred, yanking her to the left, and felt the dizzying sensation of falling, Caleb jerking her at the last second to her feet. “Do you really think I give a shit about a measly seventy-five grand? He was just dumb enough to mention where you were headed. After that, it was easy to figure out your next move.”

There was no reaction from Negan, just a careful step forward towards them, his hands casually at his sides as April stood helplessly, feeling the barrel of a gun against her jugular. She should just give up. What choice did she have? They were always going to find her, and it was inevitable. She was going to take the fall for Johnny’s misdeeds, and she was never going to be free to live.
“This piece of gutter trash is worth a lot more than that little fee,” Caleb taunted her, his voice no longer friendly. “She’s got a bounty on her fucking head, and I’m cashing in.”

“How long have you been working for Tisone, you little rat fuck?”

“Careful,” the gun was pressed harder into her neck. “You wouldn’t want her to go back with a hole in her neck, would you?”

“You’re not going to hurt her,” Negan scoffed, taking another step forward so that he was just next to the edge of the bar. Murray’s bat was sitting on top, and his fingers ran over it softly. “Not if she’s worth any money to your sorry ass. In fact, how much is enough to make you a little stooge?”

Clearly unbothered, Caleb rested his cheek against hers, pulling her back a step. “This little porn whore had about six million reasons to take off after her boyfriend’s untimely death, and Mr. Tisone would like it back. Now, I personally don’t care what she did with it, but when I deliver her to the boss, he’s doing to do things to her that you can only picture in your worst nightmare. But I’ll get my money.”

“And you stuck around to tell me, why? That was pretty fucking stupid, even for you.”

“Because I wanted you to know it was me that fucked you over, you ugly douchebag. You strut around Alexandria thinking your King Shit, and you’re not. You’re a fucking joke, with your stupid little car, and your beat up leather jacket. You always assume you’re the smartest fucker around, and you never got the big picture. It ain’t about the jumpers. It’s about the money.”

Negan smiled, looking entertained, and it sent a chill down her spine. He looked terrifying to her, like he was on the verge of committing some unholy act, and it sent the situation into a Level One clusterfuck.

Caleb let the gun edge away from her neck, too busy feeling superior to everyone else, and it kickstarted her survival instinct, allowing her to stomp down on his instep, slamming the side of her face into his. Shards of pain exploded in her head as she dropped like a sack of potatoes, just trying to get some distance from the gun. She heard Negan let out a roar, and April covered her head with her arms to protect herself, wanting to cry, to scream as she hated everything about her life.

She couldn’t see anything as she hunched into a ball, waiting for a bullet to enter her brain. But there was no gunshot, only the sounds of flesh striking flesh, the skitter of metal on the wood floor, and grunts of rage and pain. It took her several seconds to register that the fight was over, and it was only when a gnarled hand gripped her shoulder that she lowered her arms, looking up with watery eyes to see that it was Murray, who didn’t appear rattled at all.

“You all right, girl?”

“Where’s your dumpster?” Negan said, appearing from around the corner of the bar with Caleb thrown over his shoulder.

“He dead? Ya can’t dump his body in my dumpster,” Murray sighed, waving Negan away when he tried to hand him the bat, drops of blood scattered over the end of it.

“This asshole isn’t dead, he’s just unconscious. It won’t be a problem for you. Trust me.”

“Back of the building,” he shook his head, like this was a regular occurrence, and Negan retreated to the interior of the bar. April took Murray’s hand, getting to her feet unsteadily. There were glasses scattered along the floor, some broken and others just laying on their sides, so she bent down to pick them up, even as the remaining drinkers streamed out the front entrance. “Leave it,” he told her, but
she shook her head, needing something to do because her brain wasn’t working right.

“I’m sorry, Murray,” she choked out, picking at shards of glass and dropping them into the unbroken glasses. “I’m-

“Pshaw,” he muttered, stalking behind the bar and handing her a dustpan and broom, dragging out a wastebasket. “That wasn’t the first fight in here, an’ that little blonde was a shit to you. You stick with the big guy, ya hear?”

Her chin trembled as she cleaned up the mess, and by the time the bar was put to rights, Negan came stalking back, giving her a serious staredown as he pulled out his wallet, setting two fifty dollar bills on the top of the bar. He snapped his fingers at her as he headed for the door, and she gave Murray a kiss on the cheek before following behind him, feeling like she was going to faint.

They made it back to the townhouse before he lost his shit, slamming the door with enough force to almost shatter the glass as he tossed the baseball bat on the floor, and she shrank back on herself as he rounded on her, backing her to the steps, where she promptly landed on her ass, staring up at him.

“Are you fucking stupid?” he roared, towering over her with clenched fists and a very red face. “Do I look fucking stupid to you?”

“No,” she managed to whisper, barely keeping it together as he seemed to grow six inches in height. April wasn’t sure if she should be frightened or reassured by the absolute power and authority wafting off of him.

“When I fucking tell you to sit your ass in your room, do you think I’m doing it for shits and fucking giggles, April? Or do you now understand that I know what the fuck I’m doing? Do you even fucking want to live?”

She stared at his stomach, unable to answer, and he squatted down, forcing her to look at him, making spots form in her vision as reality smacked her in the face, and she swallowed down the bile that was rising in her throat.

“Take me home.”

“I’m not-“

“Take me home,” she screamed, launching herself at him with fists and kicks, knocking him back onto his ass. “Just let me die, you asshole. You can’t protect me.”

Negan wrapped his hands around her torso, rolling her onto her back and pinning her underneath him as she finally broke down, sobbing as she tried to clutch at his shirt.

“You can’t save me, and you’ll die. You don’t have to die for me.”

The only sounds in the house were her soft whimpers as she shut her eyes, accepting that it was hopeless. Tisone would send an army after her, wherever they went, because he wanted his money. Money that she didn’t have and had no clue where it was. No matter what she did, she’d end up dead, and she didn’t want him to go down with her.

Strong fingers caressed her jaw, prompting her to open her eyes, and she saw sorrow and softness in his eyes. It made her insides turn to lava, and her breath hitched in her throat. He wanted to protect her, she knew that, and at this point, it was probably fifty percent about the money, and fifty percent the desire to be right, to be victorious.
“You’re not going to die, sugar, I promise you. But you’ll do everything I say from now fucking on, you understand? You have to trust that I know what the fuck to do, but I can’t do my goddamned job if you’re running the fuck off and thinking you’re invincible. Right?”

April nodded after a second, pushing against his hold, and she offered up a hushed apology, scooting a few feet away from him. “Now,” he said, getting to his feet and hoisting her up like she weighed nothing. “Go upstairs and grab our shit while I call a cab. Thanks to that little stunt, we have to haul fucking ass outta this town.”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered again, starting up the steps as she wiped her eyes, and he called out to her when she reached the spot. When she turned around, he was scratching his ear with a confused expression, and she raised her arms as if to ask, ‘what did I do now?’.

“Why did Caleb call you a porn whore?”

April stomped off down the hallway without answering.
Chapter 8

A Corolla. A Toyota fuckin’ Corolla.

If he wasn’t already on the edge of insanity, the fact that he was driving a fucking Corolla through Tennessee was enough to push him over it. After April’s asinine trip to the bar, getting herself cornered by that little weasel Caleb, Negan was forced to leave his baby, his Lucille, at Simon’s place since everyone would be on the lookout for his girl.

He’d left a note and the keys at Simon’s, asking him to please have it sent back to Alexandria, and with a grim expression, he’d parked April’s disrespectful ass in a cab, ordering it to drive them to the airport, the only goddamned place that he’d be able to rent a car. Like every other thing that had gone wrong on this fucking job, they only had a few cars left available, hence the fucking Corolla.

Every time they went over a pothole, the top of his head bounced into the roof, and it was enough to make him cuss throughout the whole experience. Since he was in such a foul fucking mood, April hadn’t said a word since they’d had it out at the base of the steps in Simon’s house. Her outburst, when he’d ended up on top of her had gnawed at him.

In his opinion, he had every right to be pissed, but when she looked up at him with those weepy eyes, truly scared, begging him to let her die, he saw…her. The one he couldn’t save. The one that died. And Negan was damned sure not going to let Caleb or any other asshole take April out. But they needed to find the money and ledgers. Only April kept saying she had no clue where they were, and once they got a decent night’s sleep, he needed to press her, and Negan thought that maybe stashing her in a safe house while he tried to find the goods just might get her neck off the chopping block.

As it was, they were nearing Nashville, and he found another Howard Johnson’s at just after three in the morning, pulling up under the awning as April opened the door, taking her wallet with her. He almost told her to stay behind, but there was something so fucking depressing about the way she was moving, with her shoulders slumped and the lackadaisical gait of her steps that he just sighed, leaning his head back as she booked them a room.

The parking lot was nearly deserted, and he shut his eyes for a few seconds, nearly falling asleep until a blast of cool air hit him when she returned with a key, pointing him to the other side of the building. Feeling like a clown, he drove the crappy car to the end of the lot, climbing out with a groan. His ass was on fire, and he let April go to the door, room thirty-six as he popped the trunk, taking out both of their bags. By the time he made it inside, she was in the bathroom with the door shut, and he kicked off his boots, crawling onto the bed closest to the door.

They had two of them for once, and Negan felt the tension leaving his body as he reached underneath himself, unbuttoning his jeans and taking a deep breath.

Fucking Caleb. He showed some real ass, calling him a loser, after everything Negan had done to take him and show him the ropes. That skinny fuck was a nothing, a no one when he first hit the scene, and he damned near pissed his himself when they cornered Reggie Berger, wanted for armed robbery. There had been a hell of a struggle, and Caleb ended up in a chokehold, whimpering like a little bitch until Negan clocked Reggie in the head, knocking him out.

The smell of vomit filled the air as he dropped to his knees, and Negan, being the swell fucking guy he was, tossed him a handkerchief as he hefted up Reggie’s unconscious form, securing him in Lucille’s backseat. After they got him booked, he took the kid out for a beer to try to cheer him up.
Once he got his first real collar, though, something changed in him, and Negan saw the confidence rotting him from the inside out.

Unlike Negan, Caleb liked being a hunter only for the glory, to lord it over their collars that he was better than they were. That he was smarter and free. It chapped his ass, and he’d told Ajax that the kid was on his own. Negan didn’t need his reputation dragged through the mud, as he had a good working relationship with the general populace of Alexandria. He treated everyone like they were his friends, unless they crossed him. And most people didn’t. They thought he was a fucking gem, keeping them safe and putting the people behind bars that needed to be there. Now that Caleb was involved with the mob, he was fucking marked for life, and if he thought it was going to end up in anything other than death, he was an even bigger idiot than Negan thought.

The bathroom door opened and April came out, covering her face with both hands, but he’d heard her crying in there, and it made him scuttle off of the bed to stride in after her, not quite ready to get into the deep shit.

When he did come back out, jeans in hand and with a clean face, she was laying on her side, facing away from him with the covers all the way up to her ears. He tossed his pants on top of his bag, sitting down heavily across from her. Her eyes were open, and she stared up at him, taking in a sucking breath, though she didn’t speak, and he rubbed his face for a few seconds.

“I told you from the moment I found you that I wasn’t going to hurt you,” he bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You’ve been off the handcuffs for two days, so I thought we’d reached an understanding. But the second we get somewhere that we can stay fucking put and lie low, you run off and bring a rash of shit right back on us, sugar.”

April averted her gaze, and he waited tiredly for her to give him her attention again before continuing.

“I’ve been doing this long enough to know that we’re not the fucking Grizballs. This isn’t a leisurely trip we’re taking.”

“Who?” She lowered the sheet, exposing her mouth as she blinked several times.

“The Griz-” he stuttered, trying to remember their names. “The fucking Grizballs from that Vacation movie.”

“The Griswolds,” April muttered, and he could see her trying not to smile. Clearly, she thought he was a fucking idiot, but it was better than watching her continue to cry.

“Whatever,” he huffed. “My point still stands. I have to know that I can trust you. It’s my job to keep you safe and get you to Alexandria. And I’d like to help you with your case. But I can’t do that if every time I turn around, I have to wonder what the fuck you’re up to.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her eyes filling up again, and he bit his upper lip, running his tongue across the loose skin. “I’ve spent the last three months alone, not making friends and not getting close to anyone because I knew I’d have to split sooner or later. And I’ve lived with the…the fucking nightmare of waking up and seeing the man I loved butchered.”

April wiped at her eyes, resting her arm on top of the blanket. “And then you show up, all in my face. We’ve been attached at the hip ever since, and I just wanted a little time to not be reminded of the waste that’s my life.”

The words gave him a jolt, a lingering helplessness that came rushing back from the past. Lucille
had told him the same fucking thing, and he’d been unable to save her.

“Besides,” she sniffled, giving him a brittle smile. “There’s no reason you shouldn’t get your money. Hell, you could probably get a better deal with Tisone.”

“It’s not about the money,” Negan flopped onto his side, ignoring the ache in his heart. “If I wanted to just get paid, I could haul your ass to Alexandria now. But don’t ever think I’d turn you into that sick fuck for blood money. That’s not the type of guy I am.”

“How am I supposed to know? All I know about you is your first name, and that you have a hard-on for your car.”

“A hard-on for my car?”

“Lucille? You told me that was what you called her, and then you rubbed your dick on my legs that first morning, moaning her name.”

He narrowed his eyes as he searched her face, but she was completely serious. She thought he was some sort of auto pervert or something, and he opened his mouth, grudgingly. “The car is named after my wife.”

“You’re married?” April sounded shocked, like it was unbelievable that he’d have a wife.

“I was. She died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” her head dipped as she stared down at the floor, and he reached out to turn off the lamp, suddenly aware of how late it was and how exhausted he’d gotten.

“We’re done talking for now. It’s late. Get some sleep, sugar. We’ll discuss it more in the morning.”

Negan heard the rustle as she rolled over after he put an abrupt end to their conversation. It wasn’t just the fact that he was tired that ended it so quickly. It was also because he didn’t talk about Lucille. With anyone. Not even Ajax knew that he had been married before. Obviously, he knew that Negan had gone through something traumatizing, since he’d been a drunken barfly when they met, but he didn’t know why.

But his pain was his own, his cross to bear. No one else could pity him or use it to try to figure him out. Certainly not the women that he fucked. So, to actually admit it to someone that was carrying around more pain than he was heralded a big step in his life, one he wasn’t quite ready to face at four in the morning.

Even after the upheaval of Chicago, Negan managed to fall asleep in minutes, dreaming of beer, breasts, and the sun. For once, Lucille didn’t haunt him, and when he woke up around nine, he was covered in sweat. He’d forgotten to turn the air on when they came in, and he sat up, wiping the sheen off of his face and neck. April was still asleep, but she’d removed her shirt, and his stomach dropped as he looked her over.

Lying face down, she’d pushed the sheet and blanket down to her waist, exposing a bare back and the side of her left breast, and he was transfixed for a second, studying the way it curved out from her torso. Her face was turned the other direction, partially covered by hair, and he flashed back to that feeling in the shower when he’d thought of her, that insane desire to taste her skin.

Guilt pushed him out of the bed, along with resentment that this pain in the ass of a woman was making him feel things that he didn’t want to associate with anymore. The air clicked on when he turned the knob, and he grabbed his last clean pair of pants and shirt, getting dressed as quietly as possible. April hadn’t so much as stirred, and he almost went over and covered her up, but he forced
himself to grab his wallet and keys, closing the door behind him as softly as he could.

It took him a minute of panicked silence for him to remember that his car was probably on its way home, and he slouched over to the Toyota, squinting in the bright sun as he left the HoJo’s to find them some sustenance.

There was a mom and pop restaurant down the road a ways, and he stopped in there, getting more food than was probably necessary before stopping at the bank and taking out even more money, watching his savings balance drop again in consternation. It wasn’t drained or anything, but with every dollar that disappeared, so did his dream to retire soon. Of course, that was the least of his problems, and when he got back to the room, April was still asleep, but at least she’d pulled the covers back up.

He set out the food on the little table, and when he took the cover off of the coffee cups, she started to stir, one hand reaching out for the shirt that was laying on the floor. He averted his eyes as she sat up, keeping herself underneath the sheet as she slid the material back over her head, and he held out one of the coffee cups, which she took with a grunt, finally offering him a subdued ‘good morning’.

When she finally stumbled out of the bed, he nearly poked a hole through his Styrofoam container of pancakes with his fork when he saw that she wasn’t wearing any shorts.

Just a pair of pink panties that kept getting exposed every time the shirt would rise up. Thankfully, she didn’t comment or say anything, she just sat down opposite him and ate her eggs, occasionally brushing her wild hair back out of her face, and when they were almost done she stretched her arms over her head, bringing up one knee to her chest as he took their containers and tossed them in the trash.

“Where are we headed now?”

“I thought we’d spend the day here, resting,” he told her as her eyes brightened a little. “I want to touch base with a few people and figure out the safest place for us to go next.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” she muttered, taking a swig of coffee. “There’s a laundromat not too far from here. Maybe we could go wash our clothes.”

Negan cocked his head at her, but she gave him a knowing shrug. “The combined funk of our dirty clothes is reaching critical proportions.”

“Get some fucking pants on and we’ll go now,” he told her as she gave him an easy smile, finding a pair of jean shorts in her bag along with a white t-shirt. Once her hair was brushed along with her teeth, they took their bags and put them back in the clown car, driving even though they easily could’ve walked to the Sudsy Laundromat, mixing in with the other fucking flotsam that were cleaning their clothes. Not a fucking one of them was a looker, and he dropped the bags in front of two empty washers that were side by side, and April put a five dollar bill in the change machine, buying them detergent and dryer sheets before she came over, setting them on top of her washer.

In silence, they loaded up their dirty laundry, and she handed him the Tide box after adding some to her pile, placing the quarters in the slide for them both. When the machine started to move, they went over to the only empty chairs, right by the door, and April crossed her legs, setting her elbows on her knee, and she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as he leaned his head against the window.

“Cancer,” he murmured before she could ask, and she nodded her head once, telling him that she was sorry after a pause. “She was a good woman.”
“I’m sure she was.”

Around them, people bustled about, and April got up as he shut his eyes, returning with a cold soda, brushing it against his arm.

“Tell me something else about you.”

“Like what?” he opened one eye, giving her a suspicious look as she shrugged, seeming unbothered.

“Anything. I don’t know shit about you other than your name and what kind of car you drive.”

“I was born in Alexandria. I grew up there,” he said, but she rolled her eyes.

“Boring. Have you always been a bounty hunter?”

“No, I was a teacher while I was married.”

That seemed to surprise her, and her brow furrowed as she tried to put together how he ended up where he was. “I taught Phys Ed.”

“Have you ever thought about going back?” she asked but he told her no.

“I never even considered it after Lucille died. That part of my life is over,” he told her, opening the bottle and taking a long sip. “Fucking potluck dinners and game nights. It was never my thing, anyway, but I did it because I loved her. It’s about the only thing I did right for her.”

“But you enjoyed it? Teaching?”

“I did,” he said fondly, thinking about the boys and girls that moved through his classes. “I coached the baseball team, and one of my guys ended up playing in the minors.”

April smiled, taking a drink of orange pop, and she asked him some more innocuous questions, like what sports he followed and general ‘getting’ to know you’ chitchat. When the washer finished, she stepped up, taking their wet clothes out of the washer and putting them into the dryer. She dropped a sock, and when she bent over with her ass facing him, he shifted in his seat, trying to will his dick to go down. It always fucking popped up at inopportune times, and an old crone came wandering over, using a cane, so he stood up with his hands in front of his cock, stepping aside so that she could sit down, and the woman gave him a passing glare. So much for fuckin' chivalry.

To pass the time, he stepped out into the late morning sun, walking out to the road and studying the area. They weren’t too far out of Memphis, and he’d never been to this part of the state before. That probably worked to their advantage, since Ajax knew that, but with Caleb backed by Tisone, that little shit would probably try to reach out to all of their common acquaintances to see if they had any ideas where he might try to go.

Frankly, they had six more days to kill until she absolutely had to be back, and he was really fucking sick of driving for twelve to fourteen hours a day just to get up and do it all over again. He wanted to rest and try to delve into April’s story, to reach out to some friends at the police department to see what other info they could give him about her case. One in particular, Rick Grimes, was as by the book as they came, and Negan thought that he operated with a stick up his ass on the best of days. Not to say he didn’t like the guy, but if there was a list of people he’d want to be stranded on a deserted island with, Grimes wouldn’t be one of them. He’d fucking bore them both to death. Still, if anyone wasn’t on the take with Tisone, it would be him.
He was still staring off into space when he heard someone clear their throat over the hum of traffic, and he turned to see April struggling with their bags. “Sorry,” he muttered, taking them easily and stowing them in the back seat. It was still not even noon, and Negan took them back to the motel, tossing the now clean clothes on each of their beds.

As he turned around to ask her if she wanted to get more rest, April grabbed him by the shirt with one hand, and placed her hand on his dick with the other, looking up at him innocently as his heart and his pelvis both caught fire.

“I think we should take his fucked up twosome to the next level. Wanna fuck?”
Chapter 9

Negan glared down at her as she kept a firm grip on his dick, her shirt bunched up in her fingers. “What the fuck are you doing?”

April ran her tongue over her bottom lip to wet it, raising onto her tiptoes so that their faces were close together, and she took a deep breath as the air around them started to swelter even though the air conditioner was running full blast.

“Are you not attracted to me? Because your dick has been semi-hard pretty regularly for the past few days.”

He grabbed her arms, holding them out to the side so he could fucking think. This fucking woman had dick-teased him for three days, whether intentional or not, and now she was smirking up at him like she had him on the fucking ropes or something, and he needed to overpower her emotionally and intellectually. This wasn’t how he normally got laid. A few come-ons in a bar with a little bit of a buzz, and he was good to go. But this? Taunting him? No. Hell fucking no.

“Any decent pair of tits could give me a stiffy, sugar,” he said, straightening up so that he was at full height, spreading her arms even further out. “And since when do you fucking care? You’ve barely treated me like a fucking human being. So, why the hell would you want me to put my sausage in your bun?”

She laughed, even as she tried to pull her arms free, and she tossed her head back, her hair flicking behind her shoulders, though he could see some anger in her eyes. “You don’t do serious relationships, do you? I mean, nothing more than a month. Six weeks, tops, is my estimate. So, what’s stopping you, here? I mean, this is the perfect answer for you. Fuck a girl that’s gonna be gone in six days. No muss, no fuss. I’ll be d-”

He spun her around, and her voice cut off as he lightly slammed her into the door, pinning her arms above her head. April’s face was turned to the right, and he held her wrists together with one hand, constricting her movement as he pushed his chest against her back. “I fucking told you, you’re not going to die, so don’t ever say that fucking shit again, you got me?”

April was breathing heavily, and she shut her eyes, her cheeks taking on a bright pink hue, inflaming Negan’s anger and excitement. With just the barest movement of his hips, he dug his erection into the crack of her ass. “You got me, sugar?”

A little whimper escaped her throat as she rocked back lightly, sending a spark of fire up his spine, the sensation far beyond mere sexual attraction. “Say that you understand,” he prompted her, blowing air across her ear.

“I understand.”

“Who’s going to protect you, huh? Who’s protected you so far?”

With a subtle adjustment of his pelvis, he continued to move at a slow pace, doing as much for himself as he was to her, and she let out a throaty purr that was the best fucking sound he’d ever heard in his life. Her voice, so rich and husky, made him want to bury his dick inside her so hard that it would break right through her.
“You,” she breathed.

“That’s right, April,” he praised her, using his free hand to trail his fingers down her arm, curling them along her shoulder blade, down to her waist, her skin warm and slightly damp. A quick whiff of her neck, and he was in fucking heaven, loosening his hold on her wrists. “So, tell me nicely that you want me to fuck you. Maybe you should beg me.”

He severely underestimated how far gone she was, and as he leaned in to kiss the side of her neck, she swung around like an acrobat or something, and she wrapped one leg around his waist, making his face almost hit the door. With a monkey-like ability, she used the solid surface as leverage, and she was eye-to-eye with him as she shimmed up his body like it was a tree trunk, digging her nails into the back of her neck.

“You fucking dickhead,” she sneered, and he cupped the base of her ass as she locked her legs together. “Your smarmy, cocky, domineering shit might work on any pair of tits you’ve come across in sleazy bars, but I’m not that girl.”

Negan grinned because he could feel her gyrating on his jeans, and he started to move back towards the bed. When the back of his legs hit the mattress, he sat down, and she jerked his head back, yanking on his hair. “In fact, maybe it’s you that should be begging me.”

“Sugar, I could walk out this door right now and have ten bimbos sucking my cock in under an hour.”

He hadn’t enjoyed tossing back and forth with someone like this in years, and it made him feel… alive. Life was way more fun when there was someone to volley bullshit right back to him. “Of course you could, James Dean,” she mocked him, pursing her lips. “The second you flash your pearly whites at anyone with ovaries, they just spread their legs.”

Negan nodded in agreement, and she lifted her shirt over her head, her hair covering her face, not that he fucking knew. As soon as he saw nipples, he was distracted, mesmerized as they hovered just inches from his mouth.

April extracted herself from his arms, righting herself so that she was standing between his spread legs, and she unbuttoned her jean shorts, letting them drop to the floor. Her entire body was bare to him in under ten seconds, and he reached for her waist, but she hit him on the fucking wrist joints again, sending a numb shock through his fingers. “Oh, don’t mind me,” she taunted. “Since you’re such a stud, feel free to run on outside and find a bimbo to suck your cock.” Her head tilted to the side as she took one step back, running her hands over her body.

“Get the fuck back over here,” Negan stood back up, whipping his shirt off and unbuttoning his own pants, stepping out of them in haste. “You wanted to fuck, so let’s fuck.”

“Maybe I changed my mind,” she said, turning away from him as she skimmed her waist. “Maybe I’ll just get myself off, and I’ll see you in an hour.”

She let out a shriek when he picked her up, tossing her none too gently onto his bed, and she scrambled up to the pillows, as he crawled on top of her, keeping his body from touching hers. “Just fucking admit you want me, sugar.”

“After you admit you want me,” she breathed, scanning his body and zeroing in on his dick, straining his boxers. Negan was pretty sure the second he came in contact with her, he was going to shoot his load.
“I want you, April,” he acquiesced, finding it surprisingly hard to say, because he truly did. He wanted to touch her and taste her, like no one else in a long fucking time. As he bent down, he waited for permission, and when she brushed her fingers along his chest, he let his weight fall on top of her, sucking at the base of her neck. The skin was salty and sweet at the same time, fueling his drive, and he felt himself separated from her entrance by only a thin film of cotton.

“Condom?” she breathed, kneading his shoulders, and he rolled off reluctantly, grabbing at his jeans with his toes to reach them. Somewhere in his wallet was an emergency one, since he’d packed light, not expecting to get laid on what was supposed to be a short trip. When he held it up, she snatched it out of his hands, ripping at it with her teeth as she pushed him onto his back. He opted to let her take the lead, allowing him some time to get a good look at her body.

Soft, mid-sized breasts, a narrow waist, and hips that were made for gripping. She didn’t have the grotesque proportions of someone like Brenda, or the other women he’d been drawn to, lately, but there was just something there that was currently driving him crazy, an itch that needed to be scratched. While she opened the foil pouch, he lifted his hips, tossing his boxers into the same general direction of his jeans, and when she got a look at what she was about to get, she muttered ‘jackpot’ under her breath. That was what he liked to fucking hear, and April placed the condom on the tip of his dick, using her palm to slide it on with practiced movements, swinging her leg over his hips.

Their eyes met, and she edged herself over his cock, taking it and rubbing it against her opening, and he growled impatiently, his thumbs on her thighs. That familiar tightness, the heat and the slick were virtually the same for every woman. It was the rest of the package that mattered, and the second she lowered herself onto him, it took his breath away. He’d had sex more times than he could remember, but when it was someone he was genuinely drawn to, it made the act that much more intense, and as she began to move on top of him, his eyes roved over her body, watching his dick disappear between her thighs, relishing the feel.

The faster she moved, the more April clenched around him, locking on as he finally got his hands on her breasts, he pinched her nipples, causing a direct reaction to her movements, speeding them up and adding more muscle contractions around him. He wanted to taste them, and he tried to turn her onto her back, but she braced herself, keeping him underneath her, and she gave him a smile, clicking her tongue in warning. “Not yet.”

His eyebrow rose, questioning her, but she just covered his hands with her own, encouraging him to continue. So, he let her do the work, let her have control of his body, and it sparked a weird commotion deep in his heart. Most of his hookups were with him calling the shots, positioning arms and legs and commanding the pace, but April was sure about what she wanted and how she was going to get it. This girl was a fucking refreshing change for him, and he shut his eyes, just giving in to the sensations that she was drawing out of him.

“Now,” she said, snapping him out of his head, and he smirked at her, sitting up and stilling her movements as he closed his mouth around one of her breasts, and she moaned, resting her head on his shoulder. His tongue moved clockwise, making the little peak stiff and wet, lapping at it until she was shivering, he switched their positions, leaving the warmth of her legs to explore her torso, finding a cluster of birthmarks underneath her left breast, running his nose along them.

“Like a fucking peach,” he muttered, reinserting himself as his libido took over, and when she reached around him, squeezing his ass, Negan arched his back, searching for her sweet spot and grunting when he found it, her heels pressing into the back of his thighs, and for the first time in a long-ass time, he came in time with his partner, the two of them riding it out with jerky movements, and when he could think again, it dawned on him that they’d just fucking, but never even kissed.
As he bent down to do it, April turned away from him, letting her legs drop back down onto the mattress, and he pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at him. She was flush with heat and there was fear in her eyes, immediately making him think that he’d pushed her too far, but when she spoke, it made his chest feel heavy.

“Why do you want to save me, Negan?”

“Because you’re fucking worth saving, sugar.”

Their lips touched as she let out a strangled sound, and when he deepened the kiss, it felt…right. More than just a sexual attraction. He felt something for this fucked-up girl in a fucked-up situation, digging a deeper hole for himself than he could probably ever get out of.

“Where the fuck did you go?”

Negan leaned back on his bed, sticking his feet under the covers as he absently rubbed at his stomach. Simon was his second phone call of the day, and he sighed as he listened to the air conditioner working overtime. April was out at the pool, having wheedled her way out of the room at the first opportunity, seeming as overwhelmed as he was at what went down between them. It wasn’t awkward so much as…just a fucking lot to change their dynamic. He didn’t regret it, but it brought up feelings that he wasn’t ready to process after knowing her for only a few days. Most of his hookups were on his terms, and now it wasn’t.

“Hello? Asshole?”

“Fuck, sorry,” he apologized, tearing himself away from thinking about the buzzing in his gut he felt when they kissed. “We had to fucking bail. The girl snuck out while I was taking a shower, and Caleb almost grabbed her.”

“That little pissant that you used to work with?”

“Yeah. The idiot’s mixed up with the mob, and they want the girl.”

“Jesus, Negan,” Simon sighed, and the line went quiet for a second. “Did she do it? Did she kill the guy?”

“No.”

“You sound awful fucking sure.”

“Tisone’s men took him out, Si. Her boyfriend was working for them and stole a shitload of money. Now they’re laying it at her feet, and she’s fucked unless I can figure out where this Johnny guy stashed their money.”

“That’s not your job, man. All you have to do is bring her in. Why are you getting involved?”

Negan didn’t answer, and Simon chuckled, raising his hackles. “How long did it take her to get into your pants?”

“It’s not like that,” he stood up, pacing in the small space between the two beds. “She’s out of
fucking options, and what kind of man would I be if I didn’t help her out?”

“The kinda guy that still has his head attached to his body at the end of the day. This isn’t your problem, Negan, and even if she’s telling the truth, you can’t beat Cosa Nostra.”

“Just…can you find out what the fuck I’m dealing with? Is there someone in your precinct that works this sort of shit?”

“I’ll ask around,” he said, seeming resigned. Simon had known him long enough to guess that he wasn’t going to be able to talk Negan out of getting involved. “These guys are old school mafia, friend. They don’t back down, and if your little bounty is in their crosshairs, you have a snowball’s chance in hell of keeping her safe.”

He knew that, because he wasn’t a fucking idiot, but that had never stopped him before. Switching subjects, he prodded his oldest friend about Lucille, and Simon assured him that his girl was on her way back to Alexandria, hand-delivered by Simon’s nephew, Tony. Before they hung up, Negan thanked him, telling him he’d check in the following day, and he sat back, lost in thought.

Not even a week before, his life had been easy and uncomplicated. He had a girl to screw whenever her husband wasn’t around and easy pickups to pad his bank account. Now he was essentially on the run with a woman that he barely knew, and he was still scrambling for firm footing. Resolving to turn his brain off for an hour, he shut the drapes and flipped off the lamp, leaving the door unlocked for April to get in.

The pool was on the other side of the building, and a quick check through the bathroom window showed him that she was still laying on a lounge chair, her legs dangling over the bottom. There was no one else out with her, so he threw caution to the wind, closing his eyes to try to sleep.

A soft murmur woke him up, and he came back to the land of the living, disoriented in the pitch dark of the room. For a few seconds, he forgot where in the hell he was, and when he turned over in bed, he felt someone curled up next to him. It was April, and she smelled like coconut tanning lotion, the smell mixing in with the chlorine from the pool. As he pressed the button for the lamp, she covered her eyes, seeking him out in a half-sleep state, and he draped his arm across her waist, watching her chest rise and fall.

He was about to say something, probably stupid and crass to wake her up when he spied a pack of condoms on the bedside table, and it sent a wave of affection through his body as opposed to lust, prompting him to pull her closer as he set his chin on the top of her head.

Damn this girl. She might be a fucking keeper.

Chapter End Notes

Up next...more road tripping, and a phone call with one Rick Grimes, officer of the law.

:)
Chapter 10

April

April turned off the water, wringing out her hair before opening the shower curtain and taking both towels, wrapping one around her chest and the other over her wet head. Negan was still in the motel room, talking in a low voice to some guy named Rick. It was his second conversation with the guy, the first of which occurred while she was laying in his bed, pretending to be asleep.

After they’d had sex, she felt more emotionally bare than physically, especially after they kissed. She’d been struck with a paralyzing fear, not only for the budding affection she was feeling for Negan, the complete opposite of Jimmy, but of actually dreaming of staying alive. She’d asked him why he wanted to save her, and in a moment of honesty, he told her she was worth it. It scared her down into her marrow, and when they broke apart, she’d asked to go to the pool to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

Figuring that he could finally trust her, Negan told her to go, and she dressed in her only bathing suit, a worn-out black two-piece, fleeing to the empty area to reorganize her thoughts. Under the late summer sun, she pondered the large, obnoxious man. He was sexy and repulsive at the same time, undercutting his good looks with a borderline revolting personality. But underneath, under lock and key was an honorable man.

He could’ve easily hauled her ass back home and collected what was probably a huge payout from Tisone, but when that Caleb shithead told him about it, it seemed to offend him. Somewhere in between the constant sex talk and cuss words was a heart and a sense of what was right, and she didn’t know how to process it. She’d felt so…marginalized for so long that having someone in her corner made her feel weird.

By the time the sun started to set, it had gotten chillier, and she ambled back to the room to find him sound asleep. She’d closed the door quietly, edging her way through the dark room to her bed, shutting her eyes to try to get some rest herself, but her dreams were filled with remnants of Johnny’s death, all blood and viscera, and she woke with a gasp, feeling like he was breathing cold breath down her neck, even though logic told her that it was just the air conditioner.

She ended up crawling into his bed, his warm body making her feel safe, and it allowed her to go back to sleep with much more mundane dreams, involving memories from tending bar. Some regulars showed up in her brain, and she made fruity drinks for everyone. When she finally came back to consciousness, Negan was sitting up in the bed, absently stroking her hair as he spoke to the stranger named Rick.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Grimes. Have I ever fucking lied to you before?” he asked, and she could hear a low murmur on the line. “I’m telling you, this shit is more rotten than Denmark. You have to know something ain’t kosher at the department. All I’m asking is for you to look into the file. Look into him.”
They talked for a few minutes more, and when he hung up the phone, she took a deep breath, trying to make it look like she just woke up.

“Hey, sugar,” he murmured, meeting her eyes.

“What time is it?”

“It’s after eight. I thought that we could get cleaned up and go grab some dinner while I figure out where to go next.”

“Okay,” she said, stretching and feeling a tenderness in her inner thighs that she hadn’t experienced in a long time, and Negan ran his hand along her waist before she sat up, padding to the bathroom. As she studied herself in the smeared mirror after her shower, he came to the doorway, watching her for a second.

“You’re fucking pink again,” he observed, taking in the slight sunburn that she’d gotten on her shoulders and cheeks. “It brings out your freckles.”

“Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse, eh, James Dean?” she joked, but he looked annoyed. “I’m just fucking with you. I don’t have any plans on dying young.”

“April,” he sighed, crossing his arms. “We need to talk when you get dressed, sweetheart.”

Her eyebrows rose, and he retreated to the room to wait for her to come out. She took her time, towel drying her hair and adding a touch of makeup, finally walking out and throwing on her skirt and blouse, sitting down carefully next to him on her bed. He took her hand, and she jerked it back automatically, waiting for the hammer to drop. He didn’t seem offended, just maybe a little hurt, and she cleared her throat.

“I talked to a buddy of mine at the police department, sugar.”

“And?”

“I’ve known this guy for years, and he’s unfortunately one of the most honest people in the world, and I briefed him about what was going on with you.”

“…and? What are you trying to say?”

“He said he was going to look into your case, what you said about Tisone having people all through the government on his payroll. I called him while you were in the shower, and he said that there’s nothing out of the ordinary in your file.”

“I told you what happened,” she said, peering him into his eyes. He didn’t look like he thought she was lying, but he also didn’t seem ready to throw himself on a sword for her, either. “Tisone killed Johnny because of the money and the books. He left me alive to take the fall, Negan.”

“I believe you, sweets, but without something to go on, we’re a little fucked, here.”

“What do you want me to say?” she barked, standing up and jerking free as he grabbed ahold of her wrist. “I don’t know dick about this. Johnny told me hours before he died. It was all in his ledgers. He never named names.”

“I need you to think,” Negan remained calm, even as she started to pace. “Where could he have hidden this shit? His office? The house? Your apartment?” She went to turn away from him, but he held her in place until she looked up at him, and he tucked her damp hair behind her ear. She didn’t
know what he wanted to hear. Johnny’s office was probably sold already, and she had no clue what would’ve happened to his house. It was bought and paid for, so maybe it went to his parents who were still alive. Besides, they’d turned it inside out, that much she remembered, and it wasn’t like she knew if there was a crawlspace or anything secret like that.

“I don’t think he’d be stupid enough to keep it at his office, and Tisone’s men and the cops on his payroll probably went through the house with a fine-toothed comb. I mean, my apartment was wrecked when Tisone bailed me out, but I didn’t stick around long enough to see if anything was found.”

Negan pulled her towards him, enveloping her with his arms, and she put hers on his waist after a long hesitation. “It’s a fucking start, sugar.”

She could get used to this, even for a short while, having someone to lean on, both physically and in other ways. He smelled good, like a man should. There wasn’t an abundance of cologne or scents to cover up his natural musk, and it mixed in with the after-effects of their romp, so she breathed it in, letting it soothe her back to a calmer state. “Get your shit together,” he told her in a husky voice, and she stepped back to see that his pupils were dilated. “We’re going to do some driving. And don’t forget the condoms,” he winked at her.

“Right.”

Negan put her in the car, muttering lowly about the Toyota as they checked out, and she took advantage of the fact that it was nearly dark to study him as he drove to find them a place to eat. Johnny had been at least four inches shorter than him, but they’d both been blessed with good looks. Negan’s hair was darker, finer, even though he tried to keep it slicked back, and Johnny’s eyes were blue instead of brown. But they both had strong jaws and broad shoulders, and she felt a pang of sorrow and guilt for sleeping with him when Johnny was gone.

How long did someone mourn? What was the protocol, especially since her own life was hanging by a thread? She wasn’t sure, because nothing about her existence had been normal. She didn’t have any siblings, thank God, but that also meant she’d had to navigate her parents’ fucked-up version of family all on her own. April didn’t know what a normal childhood felt like. She’d only had snippets of it when she’d spend the night with a friend here or there. It was like watching animals in the wild, studying how the moms would make dinner and the dads would ask how everyone’s day went.

“Turn your fucking brain off for an hour, sugar.”

April blinked, finding Negan had pulled the car into a Hooters, and he smiled like a jerk as she refused to say a word, exiting the car and stalking towards the entrance. He caught up to her, escorting her in, and they were immediately met by a hostess with her ass cheeks hanging out and boobs all up in her face.

“Welcome to Hooters,” she said in a cheery voice, making sure to make eye contact with both of them, a wise move. “Just two?”

“Yes,” April smiled. “A booth if you have one.”

“Right this way.”

The restaurant was reasonably busy, and they weaved their way through tables and hot chicks, finally making it to their booth. She didn’t even need to turn around to know that Negan was probably drooling with a tent in his pants, and she slid into her seat, catching him eyeballing the hostess as she walked away. When he noticed her staring, he attempted a bashful grin, sitting down
“What do you want me to do? It was the nearest place.”

“I’m sure.”

Their waitress appeared almost immediately, a cheerleader type with glossy lips and shiny blonde hair, and April ordered a Diet Coke, forgoing any alcohol. Negan asked for a beer, and as the girl jigged away. They both watched her go, him with fascination, and her with resignation.

“The pay isn’t bad here,” she murmured, fighting a smile as his eyes widened.

“Tell me you worked here,” he said, shifting in his seat, and she nodded after a moment, regretting that little taste of honesty almost immediately, because he let out a wolf whistle, his eyes trailing over her chest as he tried to imagine her in a tight shirt and shorts. “Well, that’s gonna fuel my fantasies for a while.”

“It was fine, I guess. Mostly frat boys and older men, most of which would ignore their dates to mentally undress the wait staff,” she said pointedly, and he adopted a haughty look.

“That’s what this place was built for, sugar. Titillation.”

“Exactly,” April shot back, fiddling with her napkin and placing it on her lap. “Guys like you are easily parted from your money just by a perky pair of tits. Titillation.”

“Here you go,” Terrie said, setting their drinks in front of them. She could tell there was a chill in the air, and she backed away as they both opened their menus. It wasn’t the first time she’d encountered such an uncomfortable environment. It was almost expected at Hooters, and she busied herself by wiping down a recently vacated table, her ass bouncing as she moved. Negan worked extra hard to keep from looking her way, and April snorted derisively.

“Just go ahead and look before your neck snaps from the effort. Excuse me.”

Tossing the menu on the table, she walked back to the front of the restaurant to the restroom, locking herself in a stall and sitting down heavily. What was wrong with her? Normally she never gave a shit if someone she was seeing was checking out random women. It wasn’t the greatest feeling, but it happened, especially in a fucking place called Hooters. It’s just because you slept with him a few hours ago, she told herself. You’re just emotional from having a good orgasm.

Yeah. That was it. Choosing to believe that lie, she washed her hands and fluffed out her hair, flipping her head over to give it some body. Her cheeks were a little burnt, but it brought out the green in her eyes, and she took a few deep breaths to get herself centered again. By the time she walked back to the table, it had completely dissipated when she saw Terrie laughing at something Negan was saying, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

Keep your mouth shut. Just don’t say anything.

Terrie’s head jerked up and the retracted her hand, pasting a smile on her face as April did the same, easing herself into the middle of the booth. “Are we ready to order?”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger, extra ketchup,” she said, beating Negan to the punch, and he ordered a steak and another beer. Terrie wisely left, and April stared at the television that was just above the bar, blindly watching a news report instead of conversing with him until she felt her hand being pulled across the table, and when she glanced back, he was giving her a serious expression.
“I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable,” he told her, his jaw clenching as she jerked her arm back as if he’d burned her.

“We’re not dating, we just had sex. It’s not a big deal.”

“Well, it obviously bothered you that I brought you here, so I apologize. It was pretty thoughtless.”

“Enjoy yourself, Negan. Life’s too short,” she said, taking a sip of her drink. “Look at perky tits, and watch those asses bounce.” He blanched slightly, a pink tinge staining his cheeks like she’d accused him of something unethical. “I’m fine. Just days away from freedom, right?”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, throwing his hands up in the air. “Right the fuck back where we started.”

April shrugged, not really sure what he expected. She felt out of sorts and like this was some sort of test, one that she’d clearly not passed, so it was easier to retreat back into her shell. The waitress was more subdued when she brought over their food, and Negan drained his second beer, declining another as they ate in silence. By the time the check was left on the table, the majority of the restaurant was empty, and Negan slammed down cash on top of it, stalking out and leaving her standing by the booth.

In no hurry, she took her time exiting, and when she walked out into the night, he was leaning against the Corolla with his arms crossed. It caused her steps to falter, but she made herself continue on, avoiding his heated glare. As she rounded the front end, he circled around the rear, meeting her at the door.

“What?” she finally snapped, her voice getting loud and high. “What the fuck do you want? Do you want me to ask you to not stare at other women? Am I supposed to be insanely jealous? What?”

She shrank against the door as he slammed his hands on either side of her, rocking the car. He was angry, breathing heavily and she jutted her chin out trying to remain strong in the wake of his size and stature.

“Can’t we just have a normal fucking day? Just one?”

“What about this is normal?” she shrieked, pushing at his chest, but he wouldn’t budge. “Me waiting to die? You dragging me somewhere so that you can eye-fuck blondes? Tell me!”

Negan pounded on top of the car, leaving a dent, and she ducked underneath his elbow, walking towards the street. He caught up to her, and she flailed her arms and legs as he scooped her up, dropping her back on the trunk of the car, kissing her as she fought to get free, but it only lasted as long as it took for his tongue to make its way into her mouth, and she let out a pathetic whimper, shuddering lightly. When they came up for air, he gripped the back of her neck and shut his eyes, getting himself back under control.

“I’m sorry,” the words were soft and heavy at the same time. “I don’t fucking know how to do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

“Interact like a normal guy and girl would. I haven’t done shit like this since Lucille.”

“You don’t know how to not be a dickhead?”

He laughed bitterly, releasing her, though she stayed in one spot, her knees resting against his
sides. They were probably the most fucked up people in the world, and they were tethered together like they’d been bound with a straightjacket. “No, I don’t. Every woman I’ve been with since she died has just been for convenience. In and out. Literally. A fucking month at a time, just like you said.”

“Jesus,” she muttered. “You’re a fucking head case.”

“I don’t know why I brought you here.”

“You wanted me to be jealous,” April said, and his eyes opened, studying her face as his lips thinned out. “Why?”

“Because I fucking like you, and…I don’t know. I thought if maybe I showed you who I really am it would make things easier.”

“For you or for me?”

The doors of the restaurant opened and a bunch of young guys came out, talking animatedly as they passed by the car, and Negan got an approving head nod from one of them, making her roll her eyes. She pushed him back, and this time he let her, and she jumped down to the ground, wiping her lips.

“I like you, too, James Dean,” the words were halting and slow, and it only made his shoulders slump. “But you need to face the fact that you may not be able to save me like you think you can. And even if you do, it doesn’t mean I expect a happy ending here. We’ll just do whatever it is we do with each other and leave it at that, okay?”

He nodded, and she went back to the passenger’s side, shutting the door and fastening her seat belt. He joined her a minute later, and the car was tomb-like as they started driving. April was so out of sorts that she never bothered asking him what was next. For once, she just didn’t care.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, these two!

Up next: Someone gets to take an even longer trip, and someone comes to a horrible realization...
“This is like the fucking Bates Motel.”

Negan grunted as he opened the door to their latest room, disgusted with the brown carpet and drab furnishings. April wasn’t as bothered, slipping in behind him and going immediately to the air conditioner. It was just as crappy as the dozen other places she’d stayed at over the last few months. They were back to one queen-sized bed, and she sat down on the edge, kicking off her shoes as he rifled around in his bag, pulling out a fresh shirt and pants and taking a clean pair of boxers with him into the old, green bathroom.

When they hit Winston-Salem, Negan instructed her to keep an eye out for the cheapest, out of the way motel they could find, and they drove for another forty-five minutes in the middle of the night to locate the Greentree Lodge and Inn, on the outskirts of a town called Fulp. It was deserted, surrounded by trees and farmland, most likely a stopping point for truckers and lost souls.

It was just after four in the morning, and she was wired. There was no way she could lie down, and April cursed her body clock for getting screwed to shit over the last few days. They’d been travelling so much at night and resting during the daylight hours, and now she was reaping the repercussions. But it gave her time to think, and as she listening to the shower start up, she undressed, waiting until the shower curtain closed before walking into the bathroom in her bare feet.

The splash and splatter of water behind the curtain told her that he was under the spray, and April moved the green plastic aside quietly, slipping into the small space behind him as he tilted his head back, rinsing the shampoo from his hair. While he was otherwise unaware, she took the opportunity to study his body. They’d had sex, but she was so ramped up at the time that it hadn’t registered with her. Too freaked out by their intimacy, she’d avoided any conversation with him, preferring to flee towards the pool and the sun.

April knew he was tall, obviously, but seeing his long, muscular legs, all bare and dotted with dark hair was alluring for some reason. Considering how bulky he was, his hips were narrow, an inverted triangle compared to the broadness of his shoulders. Negan was blessed with, or worked hard for his muscled physique, his shoulders and chest absolutely bulging. And let’s not ignore his dick, she thought as she stared at it, the way it hung down, brushing his balls.

She jumped when he cleared his throat, meeting the smirk on his face with a grimace. “See something you like, Hooters?”

“You know, being attractive works to your advantage,” she said, taking a step forward. “It takes the focus off your hideous personality.”

Negan laughed as he ran his hands along his chest, sweeping the soapy water down the planes of his abs, and she watched as the opaque bubbles made a trail down his legs, swirling around his feet towards the drain. “Foreplay, sugar? ‘Cause I’m starting to get rock hard as you can tell.”

She could, and she reached for the washcloth, wetting and applying soap, making it foamy. “You can clean my body for me. That’s all the foreplay I’ll need. Do It well,” she told him, turning around.

Warm, wet hands swept across her neck and shoulders, allowing to concentrate on his touch and
nothing else. It felt so good, strong fingers working a soft cloth on her neck and back. As he moved
down to clean her lower half, his chest hair brushed against the sensitive skin, eliciting a soft moan
from her, even as he cupped each ass cheek, caressing them slowly, almost torturously. When the
washcloth dipped between her legs, it was followed by a thumb that lingered long after the area was
cleaned, making her heart start to speed up.

Suddenly, she was spun around to face him, his eyes as black as coal and filled with heated
passion, but he only continued to clean her, lifting her arms and sweeping the washcloth along her
underarms and across her collarbone. Negan skipped her breasts, instead palming her stomach,
massaging the area and sending electric jolts straight up her spine and back down between her legs.
“I fucking love foreplay,” he sighed, leaning down to wash her legs. When he straightened up, he
finally touched her nipples, sliding them between his fingers as he started to kiss her jaw, and April
wrapped her arms around his neck, seeking his lips.

“When I first saw you in the diner,” he muttered, nipping her lower lip and moving his hands to the
base of her spine, “I thought this was going to be a piece of cake because you were the opposite of
every woman I’d ever been attracted to, and I felt nothing for you.”

April jerked back with a glare to find him smiling, and she dropped her arms even as he tried to
pull her closer. “Let me fucking finish.”

She stared through him as he lifted her up, turning in the small space to switch their positions, and
his hands manipulated the water, washing the soap from her body, starting at her shoulders, and he
looked her in the eye, still very aroused, but also serious. “I’ve been sleeping with pretty blondes and
pretty brunettes, and sexy redheads ever since Lucille died. All of them are gorgeous and bubbly and
unavailable or sick of me after a month.” One finger trailed down her sternum, circling around her
belly button while the other traced her lips. “But not one fucking person since Lucille has made me
feel so off-kilter, sugar. What I didn’t see in you that first day is now glaringly obvious. You’re
smart, you’re gorgeous, and you’re not…simple. You’re a fucking challenge, and I need it. I need
you, April.”

This was bad. It was really bad, and she shoved him back, making him almost fall on his ass in the
slippery tub. Out of the water before he could react, she stalked towards the bedroom, dripping water
all over the brown shag carpet, itching to just get dressed and walk out. What the fuck was wrong
with him? Why did he say all that shit?

“What the fuck was that about?” Negan came into the room looking bewildered, holding a towel in
front of his crotch. She felt the urge to punch him in the dick, and she actually took a step forward
with her fist raised, making him hold up one hand defensively. It was all weighing on her. The fact
that he was starting to have feelings for her and she for him. The way he’d acted at Hooters and their
fight in the parking lot.

But what it boiled down to was fear. She didn’t want to like this asshole, and April could feel
herself starting to care about him. There was no point in it. They had no fucking future together,
because whatever he thought about her now, it wouldn’t last. He’d see her for what she really was, a
woman with no family and no way forward. A girl that couldn’t hold anything about her life
together.

“Can’t we just screw without you turning into a huge vagina?” she snapped, watching his face turn
purple almost immediately. “We just fucking talked about this like, six hours ago. I don’t want to feel
anything. I just want to have sex, asshole.”

Negan dropped his towel, reaching out and snagging her by the waist, he picked her up like she
weighed nothing and he dropped her on the bed, pinning her down as she glared up at him. “Don’t
you ever call me a fucking pussy again, you got it? I may be many things, but a ‘vagina’ isn’t one of them.” Spreading her legs, he inserted himself inside her halfway, making her hips buck. “Does this feel like a fucking pussy to you?”

“Shut the fuck up, James Dean,” April fought against his hold, her fingers curling over and digging into his knuckles. “All you fucking do is run your mouth,” she moaned as he went all the way in, huffing in her face. “I don’t want a running commentary. I just want to get off.”

Negan let go of her right arm, covering her mouth as he started to move, knocking his knees against her thighs, propping them up on his, and April nipped at the soft underside of his fingers. His cock was bumping up against her g-spot, and she used her free hand to stimulate herself in between his thrusts.

“If all you want is dirty sex, then I’m happy to oblige,” he snarled, looking down into her eyes with malice. “In fact,” Negan withdrew himself, leaving her feeling empty. Before she could protest, he flipped her over, propping her up on her hands and knees. “I don’t even want to look at your fucking face right now.”

Some depraved part of her keened at his anger, and she bent her head as he jammed himself back into her, not bothering to be gentle or accommodating. A sharp sting bloomed on her ass cheek as he swatted her, making her head jerk up, but he just kept fucking her, reaching around to pinch one of her nipples. It wasn’t gentle like his touch in the shower, it was forceful and erotic as hell, and April leaned into it, arching her back as he slapped her again on the other cheek. Her entire body was overheated, like she’d been dipped in lava, and when she came, she moaned his name softly, shaking from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

All of the energy that she’d had was nearly gone, out into the cosmos, but Negan was still raring to go, and he used his forearm to haul her upright, making her bounce on his cock as he worked her nub, already sensitive. “I can’t,” she breathed, as limp as a dishrag, but he only rubbed faster, sending another spasm up her spine. “Oh, you fucking can and will, bitch,” he said, sucking on the side of her neck with his teeth, another wave of heat coursing through her organs.

“Fuck,” he moaned, letting her drop onto her chest as he pulled out, and she felt his seed splatter across her back as he jerked the last remnants of pleasure out of himself. Almost immediately, the liquid began to cool, and he backed off the bed, returning with his towel and wiping it off so that she could roll over. When she saw his face, she reached out for him, sitting up as he maintained a stiff, closed off posture.

“Don’t go,” she asked softly, watching in wonder how all the anger she’d brought out in him evaporated, and he understood why she was being such a bitch. “Just stay, okay?”

“I can’t, sugar,” he bent over her, resting his arms on either side of her head. There was a reason he pulled out fresh clothes instead of his pajamas when they got there, and she didn’t want to deal with it or pretend it was happening. She just wanted to revert to an emotionless…thing, like she’d tried to be over the last few days. “We’ve only got a couple of days before you have to go back, and I need to meet with Rick and try to get something concrete to go on.”

“I told you-“

“And I fucking told you that I was going to save you,” Negan nuzzled her cheek. “I need to get back, and it’s not safe for you to come. I’ll start with your apartment and then Johnny’s house.”

“No, you can’t. Don’t you think they’ll be waiting for someone to show up there?”
“April, this isn’t a compromise,” he told her, lifting his face to meet her eyes. “Despite what you think, I’m pretty fucking good at my job, and I know how to get in and out of places without drawing unwanted attention.”

“Yeah, you’re a hunter, not a private investigator,” she kneed his hip, getting him to roll onto his back, nearly falling off the side onto the floor. April dragged him back to the middle of the bed, straddling his waist so that she was on top, and she bit her lip as he watched her through lowered lashes. “This is the mob, not a rogue runaway.”

Her hair hung down over them, the wet ends brushing his chest, and he hid them behind her ear, adopting that smirk that simultaneously irritated her and endeared him to her at the same time.

“I’m intelligent, I have friends and more importantly, I have street smarts, kiddo. I’m not going to do anything stupid, but we’ve gotta find this fucking ledger and money. Maybe we can make a deal and figure out a way to get you off the hook for Johnny’s murder.”

It wasn’t going to work out, and they both knew it, but she bent down to kiss him anyway, not having done it enough. She enjoyed his lips as much as the rest of his body and the way they took control, molding hers the way he wanted. They stayed locked together for a few minutes until she yawned into his tongue, and he snorted quietly, tipping her onto her side. “I’ll be gone when you wake up, but I’m leaving you some money and a number for you to reach out to if you need anything.”

“Don’t go,” she mumbled, her eyes closing on their own, and he hugged her to his chest carefully stroking her spine, sending her off into a deep sleep.

**Negan**

Negan gave April one last look before shutting the door, feeling a pang of anxiety as he walked towards the Toyota, stowing his bag on the front seat. After spending several days with her, he felt a certain emptiness filling his chest at the thought of leaving her here in the middle of nowhere, but he couldn’t take her back yet.

Written on a slip of paper was Ajax’s home number along with a request to contact him if she needed anything and a promise to return in under thirty-six hours. Given that a round trip would take about twelve, that gave him around a day to become a fucking superhero and save her life.

April May Brower, the bitchiest, toughest broad he’d ever had the misfortune and pleasure to come across, had staked a claim over what little was left of his heart, and he drove away from her towards an insurmountable task, determined to come through for a woman that had never been able to count on anyone but herself.

“What do you think, Lucille?” he mumbled to himself as he bore down on the gas pedal of the Corolla, squinting against the sun. “Do I even deserve another chance?”

Flipping on the radio without looking, his pulse faltered when that falsetto child came blaring through the speakers, and he laughed to himself. Maybe, he did.
Chapter End Notes

Just a little snippet as they go their separate ways for now. Stay tuned to see if Negan can come through...
The alley behind his apartment building was empty, save for the dumpsters that were scattered along the fence that lined the street and regular old metal cans. No other cars bothered to park back there due to the high rates of theft, and Negan stopped the Corolla directly behind his home, looking around before stepping out. He allowed himself a second to stretch, using the time to scout the adjacent complexes for any sign of someone watching, but every window was either empty or completely shuttered.

That little fucker Caleb knew where he lived, and Negan wasn’t stupid enough to just go barreling in there. Instead, he plucked his gun from the bottom of his bag along with the baseball bat and loped slowly over to the fence, jamming the handle with his elbow when it refused to move. This fucking thing needed oiled more than a female bikini wrestler, and he cussed under his breath as it screeched shut, leaving him standing in the open space behind the building.

Any time he left town on a job, returning was always an odd feeling. Alexandria always looked a little cozier, a little more foreign at the same time, and this was no exception. Negan lived in a craphole, and it appeared even more drab in the light of day, not that he’d been bunking at the Ritz lately. But the dingy brick, surrounded by dead bushes and old pieces of metal really brought out the absolute squalor he’d been living in, just to save a buck or two for his retirement.

“You need to turn your goddamned television down.”

Unfuckingbelievable.

Negan rounded the corner, right into Old Man Johnson, standing over one of the garbage cans with more papers. All this fucking guy did was toss shit into the refuse, and Negan let one eyebrow raise in question.

“Pardon?”

Johnson kept tossing one piece in at a time, waiting until it fluttered to the bottom of the can before adding another. “Your television,” he repeated. “Ya left it blasting for the last two days. Between that and your goddamned cat, I’m ready to call the super.”

“Sorry, Mister Johnson,” he edged past the coot, palming the gun in his pocket. “It won’t happen again, I promise. I’m going to kill the cat.”

“Good.”

Christ on a cracker. The side entrance to the building was open, an old paint can keeping the door open, and Negan stepped inside, taking the back set of steps up to his floor. His door was closed, and he turned the key quietly, letting it drift open. His television was off, and he wanted to punch the crazy old man in the head to see if his scrambled brain righted itself. Not only did the codger think he had a cat, now he was hearing phantom sounds from the television. Everything was just like he’d left it, from the socks on the floor by his bedroom to the blanket that was balled up on the couch, and he walked assuredly through the room into his kitchen, when he stopped in his tracks.

On the floor near the garbage can was a tiny piece of black string, no more than an inch across, and he rushed forward, plucking it off the ground. It had been carefully placed between the cabinet door
and the wood by him, and now it was on the floor. Someone had been in here, and he opened the bottom cabinet where he kept his liquor, his ammo, and his lockbox full of money, hidden under a pile of towels. The liquor and shells were there, but the lockbox was gone, and he punched the wall with everything he had, a white-hot searing pain ripping through his knuckles. “Fuck!”

He’d had over forty-thousand dollars in there, and it was gone. Slumping onto the ground, he held the bat but dropped the gun, letting it bounce on the linoleum, willing it to just go off and shoot him in the fucking head. All of the money he’d earned this year just disappeared, and he knew who was responsible.

‘Always keep cash on hand, kid. You never know when you’re gonna need it.’

Caleb had fucked him over for the last time. Negan was a ‘one and done’ kinda guy, and he didn’t take well to getting screwed without foreplay, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. The anger had rendered him powerless and unable to rise off the floor, staring at the scuff marks on his shoe.

Besides the outright theft of his shit, the fact that strangers had been in his apartment was a violation that he didn’t anticipate. What else did they take, or worse, what did they learn about him?

His bedroom was in the same state that he left it, save for a picture that was two inches to the left of where he normally had it. That was what did it. Someone had touched her and looked at her. They put their dirty fucking hands on the only thing he had left of his wife, and he set it down softly in the spot that it was supposed to be in, opening his drawer and taking out his spare gun, stuffing it into his pocket.

Whistling loudly, he locked his front door, strolling down the hall past Old Man Johnson, flipping him off when he began yelling about Negan’s nonexistent cat, not giving a shit that it was rude as hell and not the old fuck’s fault that he was crazier than a March Hare. It took him less than one minute to make it out to the parking lot, and he bent down next to Lucille’s trunk, feeling around the fender until his hand brushed the magnet that held the car keys. Simon told him where it would be, and he chucked the box over his shoulder, sliding behind the wheel with a grin.

That blonde little fucker was going to see just how badass Negan really was.

April

The sound of crickets drifted through the late afternoon air, a lazy and soothing sound, and April stood at the window, watching random trucks barrel past for about an hour before tying her hair up in a bun and heading out to the manager’s office to meet Daniel. He owned the place and she’d wandered over there when she woke up, finding herself alone with a note from Negan.

True to his word, he’d left while she slept, even though it felt more like he was ducking out on her. All he’d written was the personal number for Ajax, her bail bondsman and his boss, along with eighty bucks to have food delivered. She had her own cash, so she tossed it on top of her duffel bag, taking out a few loose dollars to get something to drink from the machine out front.

Daniel had been sitting on a rocking chair, whittling with a small knife and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth when she walked over, nodding his head politely at her as she stared at the selection,
finally picking Orange Crush. The can clattered into the dispensing area, and she popped the top, taking a sip and coughing when the carbonation bubbled up into her nostrils.

As the turned, the old man patted the rocker next to him, and she sat down with a curious look. Eighty if he was a day, the manager had fluffy white hair, mostly hidden under a ballcap, wrinkles that spanned his face like a roadmap of yesteryear, but sharp blue eyes.

“Yer fella left in a hurry this morning,” he mused, flicking shards of wood onto the porch with dexterous fingers that were gnarled with time.

“Yes, sir,” she said, holding the can on her knee.

“Mighty strong looking gentleman. Hope there wasn’t any trouble. He have business to attend to?”

April smiled softly, watching as he rounded the top of the slim block, a smooth circle beginning to form. “More of a fool’s errand, really. He thinks he can change something that can’t be fixed.”

“A man on a mission is a dangerous thing, missy. Best to let him ride it out, and hope for the best.”

He was spouting generic platitudes, but it made her sadder than she’d ever been in her life, except for Johnny’s death, and she felt a tear pricking at her eye, wiping at it slowly. “Name’s Daniel,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette.

“April.”

“Well, April, I figure I should keep an eye on ya ‘til the big man gets back, so why don’t ya come for dinner tonight?”

“You’re cooking?”

“I can fry somethin’ up for ya.”

“How about you tell me what you’ve got, and I’ll do the cooking? It’s the least I can offer for the pleasure of your company?”

Daniel smiled, his thumbs smoothing the carving, and he gave her a wink. “My first date in twenty years.”

Since there was nothing else to do and they were in the middle of nowhere, she sat with him for another hour, watching as trucks drove past, some hauling metal spools and others that carried food and other supplies. It was kind of peaceful and relaxing to just do nothing, and when she rose to leave, Daniel handed her the little figurine, a girl with her arms clasped in front of her. Kissing him on the cheek, she returned to her room to shower, wondering how Negan was and if he’d found anything yet.

Daniel’s kitchen was small and spartan, and it made sense since he was on his own. It’s not like he needed a whole lot, and he welcomed her in, pointing to the mess of food that he’d laid out for her to inspect. April studied it before deciding to make a shepherd’s pie, setting aside the vegetables and frying up the ground beef that was thawing in the sink. While she worked, he sat at the breakfast bar, chain-smoking cigarettes and telling her about the locals of Fulp.

Apparently, the mayor married his first cousin, who in turn ran off with his oldest son from his prior marriage, the scandal keeping tongues wagging for well over twenty years. Daniel knew every
single resident that lived in their small town, and told her their deepest darkest secrets, such as who
snuck off to shag who in his motel. Wives stepping out on their husbands. Husbands meeting up
with other men. It was a deluge of gossip about people that she’d never met, and she laughed when
he mentioned that the local celebrity, Melvin Dobbs, liked to dress up in leather and flog himself.

“Caught the largest bass ever recorded,” Daniel grunted. “Was in the Guinness Book o’ World
Records. ‘Course all I ever think of when I see him at the grocery store is him in a leather mask. Not
the kinda guy you’d figure would be into that kinda stuff. Real…sturdy and all.”

“You should write a book, Daniel,” April put the casserole into the oven, wiping her hands on the
dish towel. “People would pay good money to read this kind of gossip.”

“What about you?” he said, nudging the bottle of hooch towards her, and she poured a bit into the
glass that he’d set out for her. “You and your fella got big plans?”

Her hand hovered over the glass for a second, then she scooped it up and swallowed it all down,
wincing. “Not really. I haven’t known him long, and there’s no future there.”

“Eh, you’re young. Let it play out.”

“I’m a marked woman, Daniel. He’s better off not coming back.”

He studied her as he lit up another cigarette, some hand-rolled thing that smelled like vanilla.
“What kinda trouble did ya get yourself into, missy?”

“You don’t want to know. You’d kick me right out of your hotel, and then where would I go?”
April poured herself another drink, sipping at it this time.

“I seen too much to throw a young’un out,” he scoffed, raising his eyebrow as he waited.

“The short version is that I fell in love with the wrong guy, and now he’s dead.”

“And the longer version?”

By the time she finished telling him the tragedy of her life, he’d smoked half a dozen more
cigarettes, shaking his head sadly as she relived Johnny’s murder yet again, sparing him the gory
details. “They set me up to take the fall for Johnny’s murder, and when Tisone ordered my bail, I
split. I didn’t want to die there, so I headed west. But Negan found me a few days ago, and he was
bringing me in. He’s a bounty hunter.”

“Ahh.”

“Yep,” she leaned onto the counter, resting her head on her hand. “And the poor thing thinks that if
he can locate the money and secrets Johnny stole, that I’ll go free. He wants to protect me.”

The oven timer went off, and she pulled the shepherd’s pie out, setting it on the rack to cool down,
and when she walked back over, Daniel was puffing on his smoke, looking at her seriously. “A
man’s got ta have a reason to get up in the morning, you understand? He’s no good to the world if he
doesn’t, and that man o’ yours wants to put things right for you.”

“He can’t,” she argued delicately, feeling her eyes getting sandy. “He’s only going to put himself
in harm’s way.”
“You’re a lost soul,” he sounded sad, patting her forearm with calloused fingers. “If he hunts things down, let him find ya.”

April floundered for a second as she and Daniel traded stares, the smell and smoke of his cigarettes creating a cloud around them. She wanted Negan to succeed, but deep down she knew it was fruitless. No one in town was just going to offer up information, and for as much as she knew Johnny, it wasn’t going to help her find millions of dollars that he’d stashed somewhere. Their life together was chaotic and stilted, never being able to spend more than one night together at a time.

“Of course, if ya wanted to save that boy some heartache, I have an old junker out back that ya can have.”

Smiling morosely, she shook her head, offering up a soft ‘thank you’. “I can’t run anymore, Daniel. I’m tired, you know? I’m just too tired, and he should at least get his payout for bringing me back.”

“I loved a girl once,” he told her, rising with a little bit of spirit and going to the cupboards to get them some plates, handing her one, and he hummed lowly as he leaned over their dinner, inhaling it. “You remind me of her. She had a lot of bite to her, just like you. Chased her for years, but couldn’t ever pin her down.”

He scooped out a healthy portion for himself, ducking his finger into the potatoes, nodding his head in approval as she held her plate to her chest. “She still haunts me to this day, that one. Was like an untamed stallion that I couldn’t break. A part of me loved that about her, and an equal part resented it, because I wanted her to choose me.”

“What happened to her?” April watched as he carried his dinner over to the counter, sitting back down and tucking into the meal, chewing as his head bobbed up and down.

“Ran off to Hollywood and became an actress. Was under contract with the big studios. Boy, she was sight to see up on the silver screen.”

“Wow,” she didn’t know what else to say, taking a spoonful of meat and veggies for herself.

“Drove out to California to see her once. Put on my best suit and bought a bouquet of roses, but she just…”

“What?”

“It was like tryin’ to catch smoke, that one. She never married or settled down. Died in a plane crash a few years later.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, and he smiled, taking a bite. There was a sparkle in his eyes, and for a split second, she could see him as a young man, probably with blonde hair and a charming way about him, trying to work his magic on a lady.

“Hopin’ for a better turnout for you and your fella.”

When the food was cleaned up and the dishes were washed, April wished him a good night, heading back to her room. Dinner with Daniel had given her a lot to think about, and she wondered who his love had been. Was she a big star, or some bit player that tried to make a go of it? And what led her to seek fame and fortune in Hollywood instead of being a wife and mother? Not all women were cut out for it. God knows she wasn’t, after having no good examples of what domestic life was supposed to be, growing up.
But when she’d taken off, it wasn’t because she’d wanted to. She had to, though she still thought that she’d never be someone’s wife even if Johnny hadn’t died. She loved him, but there was never fantasies of settling down and spending the rest of her life with him. Either she didn’t think he was the one, or she didn’t believe that she deserved normalcy. Too much of her life had been spent dodging creepy older men and stoned out parents. What chance had she ever had?

Bored of mindless television and aching from a sudden bout of loneliness, April unzipped her bag, deciding to organize her worldly possessions for lack of anything else to do. It was too late to call that Ajax guy to check on Negan, and she didn’t want to sleep, that lingering fear of someone breaking down the door and just busting a cap in her ass. Taking out each piece of clothing one at a time, she folded them and set them by type, putting all of the shirts together along with the pants, laying her one skirt in between.

Her bras and panties were balled up in the corner, and she scoffed at their condition. Threadbare and boring, she longed for something fancy, as pointless as it was. A woman liked to feel sexy and attractive, even ones that were marked for death, and she threw them on the bed, saving her socks for last. When her finger brushed the corner of the bag, she felt a raised edge, making her frown. It wasn’t the stitching, and she turned it over, dumping out the rest of the contents, curious.

Too dark to make anything out, she carried around the bed, squatting under the lamp as she folded it inside out, seeing that there was a dark red, iron-on patch there. She’d bought the thing a year ago for a camping trip with Johnny, and had never looked at it again, shoving it under her bed. The only reason she’d grabbed it to use when she’d made her getaway was because it had been poking out from under her quilt, and she’d never completely emptied it while on the run, just grabbing shit haphazardly when she needed it.

Her heart began to thump unevenly as she picked at the six by six-inch square, annoyed and unnerved that she hadn’t noticed it earlier, using her thumb to try and loosen it. As the minutes went by, she started to get pissed, because the fucking thing felt welded on. It took her nearly breaking a nail to get the edge to fold away, and she gripped it with shaky fingers, expecting to find a rip or something, but her breath left her body as a white piece of paper appeared like it had been produced by magic.

She had to fold and crumple it to get it free, dropping the duffel as she sat back, feeling like she was going to pass out. Even turned over, she could see ink underneath, and April unfurled it with a sense of dread.

‘April,

If you’re reading this, then everything went to shit. I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry that I fucked everything up for you. I just got so lost…’

The more she read, the more unstable she became, and April Brower broke down for good, never to be the same again, curling up on her side as she cried. “Goddamn you, Johnny.”

Chapter End Notes
Rick in the next chapter for sure! I just loved writing about Daniel. :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A white Maserati sat along the curb, with gold hubcaps and a license plate that said ‘BADAZZ’, parked directly in front of Mazzio’s Lounge, and Negan swung at it as he walked past, breaking the left brake light. The sound echoed through the air, bits of red plastic flying out in all directions, and Negan whistled under his breath, opening the door to the bar. It only took him two tries to find the blonde little douchebag, and it made his bloodlust increase by tenfold.

Mazzio’s was a low-level mob meetup, usually for hangers-on and those that had just been inducted, and he swept the area before stepping inside. Twelve tables, set at increments of two, half of which were occupied. Four older guys playing cards, two more about the same age arguing over plates of pasta, and two sitting across from each other drinking.

And then there was Caleb, that cocky fucker, acting like he was holding court at the center table, surrounded by guys his age, all watching him as he mimed fucking a girl until he happened to catch sight of Negan, his face breaking out into a big smile.

“Hey, old man,” he called out, making his table mates turn to stare. “I figured you’d show up at some point.”

“Caleb,” Negan twirled the bat around like a baton, spinning it in an increasingly larger circle, the heel of his boot holding the door closed so that no one could come in behind him. “Give me my fucking money.”

Two of the men looked between him and Caleb, adopting stony expressions, but Caleb only cocked his head to the side, feigning confusion. “What money?”

“Give me my fucking money.”

All of the conversations in the lounge came to a halt, the attention focused solely on what was happening, and Negan kept the bat moving, pursing his lips as Caleb started to preen, trying to prove what a ‘badazz’ he was to the others. Only he could see the unease that set in his shoulders, making them raise up slightly. “Oh, you mean my money,” Caleb mocked him. “I mean, I think that’s what you’re referring to, right? I’m just claiming what you cost me until you bring my porn whore back. It’s insurance.”

That was the second fucking time he’d called April a porn whore, and there wasn’t going to be a third. Negan took a step forward, kicking a chair out of the way as everyone aside from the main table scrambled towards the back of the room, filing into the hallway. Caleb’s buddies stood up, and Negan beat them to the punch, brandishing his gun as they all froze. All except the one person in the room that he wanted to strike with the bat, and he realized just a hair too late that he’d left the door, and he felt cold metal press into the base of his neck.

“This was a pretty stupid move, even for you,” Caleb taunted him. Suddenly he was swarmed by men, both from the front and the back, someone kicking at the back of his knees and dropping him to the floor. The bat was ripped from his hands and the gun was wrestled free, leaving him defenseless. “Coming here like this? You never see the bigger picture, Negan. That’s why you’re small-time. And you just signed your own death warrant.”
“Wrong, fucker,” he said, staring up at him as he edged closer so that he could look down on Negan. “Your boss wouldn’t authorize anyone to kill me, not as long as April’s still out there.”

Caleb’s face turned three shades of red as Negan grinned up at him. “She’s worth a lot more than your hurt feelings, you naïve dipshit. By the way, how did it feel to wake up in a dumpster? That’s never happened to me before.”

Someone behind him laughed, and Caleb started to glare before his face smoothed out, backing up a few steps, and Negan sensed someone approaching through the open door.

“How you doin’ Dick?”

The two men hugged, one towering over the other just like he had back in high school, and it was like no time had passed. Sal had nicknamed him Dick because of the amount of pussy he’d consumed throughout school, and hundreds of memories came rushing back to him. He and Sal and Simon spending Friday nights at the drive-in, cruising for dates. Sal crushing a home run during the last game of the year, giving them a perfect season. “I thought you’d fuckin’ died, man. The day after graduation you took off and no one heard from you again.”

Sal held him by the cheeks, shaking his head with a smile. He was older now, and definitely a lot heavier, but that grin was still the same as twenty-five years ago, and Negan gave him a light punch in the stomach, which didn’t go over well with the litany of men that were surrounding them.

“Uh, boss?” Caleb sounded uncertain as Sal slapped Negan’s cheeks lightly, giving him a wink.

“Out,” Sal snapped his fingers, and everyone but Caleb followed the patrons down the hall towards the back of the lounge. This fucking fool was still trying to posture, but after a protracted silence, he turned tail and disappeared from sight. Sal let out a deep breath, removing his jacket in the now-empty room and laying it carefully on one of the chairs. Rolling up his sleeves, he went behind the bar, coming up with a bottle of red wine, pouring them each a glass. “Remember when we kept swiping my old man’s red and kept replacing it with punch?”

Negan laughed, walking over to the bar. “He fucking chased us with an axe when he found out. I thought we were gonna die.”

Clinking their glasses together, they each took a big gulp, and Negan wiped his mouth, setting it down carefully on the bartop. “What happened to you, man? One day we were hanging out together, and the next you were gone.”

“I left right after graduation,” Sal told him, leaning over the bar. “Headed for Miami.”

“Into this?”

“It was in my blood, Dick. You knew that.”

“I also knew you wanted to go to college and become an accountant.”
Sal directed them over to the closest table, though Negan sat with his back towards the wall, still not trusting the situation. As much as he loved his old friend, the fact was, they were on opposite sides. Salustri had old-school Italian parents, while Negan’s mom was Sicilian, married to a Pole. They’d grown up around two-bit gangsters, but Negan thought that they were both smart enough to steer clear of a life that was bound to end up nowhere.

“I went a different way, as did you, old friend.”

“Well, we seem to find ourselves in a fucking pickle, here, Sal. What do you know about this case?”

Leaning over the edge of the table, Sal looked not like his old buddy, but more a seasoned mobster, one that took his job seriously. “I was requested back here about a week ago by Mister Tisone once Caleb found out that the girl had been spotted in New Mexico. He wanted me personally because I was from this area. I’d heard your name bandied about, old friend, but I was waiting for this situation to play out.”

“And?”

“Look, it’s not about the money,” Sal sighed, tapping his index finger on the table, flicking a napkin aside. “Six million is a lot, don’t get me wrong. But in the network, it’s livable to not have it. Johnny stole it, and that’s the rub. He took what didn’t belong to him.”

“And the ledgers that contain all your boss’s dirty little secrets?”

“That shit can bring down our whole operation, Dick. Not just here. This particular capo doesn’t just run Alexandria. He’s bringing together every family in the States. It’s not about staking out territories anymore. It’s about combining resources, and we’ll own everything, from the federal judges and Congress on down to the sheriff in Mayberry. I want to bring you into the fold. I want you on my side, like the old days.”

“The girl is innocent,” Negan got up and grabbed the wine and glasses, pouring them each a hearty amount. “She doesn’t have the stuff, and she doesn’t know where it is.”

“Where is she?”

“Safe,” he smirked, even though Sal was looking at him coldly.

“You always championed the downtrodden, didn’t you?”

“You fucking know me well,” Negan sipped at the red, trying to maintain his edge, even as he played the part of a prospective employee. “I’m here to try to find the money and books. But if I do, what’s gonna happen to her?”

“What do you want to happen to her?”

“She goes free, to live out the rest of her life.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Sal said. “If you bring me Mister Tisone’s property, you have my word that the girl will be safe. We’ll make sure that the charges are dropped with our people and she can leave town.”

The two shook hands, but as Negan began to pull away, Sal jerked him forward with surprising strength, and he lost all trace of warmth from earlier. “We have a history, Negan, but this is my family now, so don’t fuck me over. Either you come through, or you end up at the top of the list with
the girl. Until that ledger is found, it’s open season on April Brower.”

His mouth went dry, and he was no longer with Sal Salustri. He was with the head of the Miami Mafia, and he was thoroughly fucked if he didn’t come up with the goods.

“Understood.”

“You’d better get going.” Sal dropped his hand, getting to his feet and unrolling his sleeves, slipping on his jacket and smoothing his hair. “Ten percent of the six mil will be waiting for you when you finish the job. And Caleb will be returning your money, after he’s licked your floor clean with his tongue.”

Negan forced a smile, and before he left, Sal kissed him on the cheek. “I believe in you, Dick. Don’t prove me wrong.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

He was cold, for the first time in a long while, even though they were still in the throes of August, and as he sat in Lucille around the corner from the police department, he turned on the heat, rubbing the arms of his leather jacket. He’d driven aimlessly since he’d left Mazzio’s, watching for anyone that could be tailing him, but there weren’t any signs that he was being followed. It must’ve been on Sal’s word that he be left to his own devices, but it still didn’t make him feel any safer.

Everything he’d fought for in his life was fucked, and he was now stuck between a rock and a gun to the head. He’d called Rick from a pay phone, and now he was waiting for him to finish his shift so that they could talk.

Before Negan walked out of his meeting with Sal, he’d been given all the information they had. April’s apartment had been swept from top to bottom, with no signs of the money. So had Johnny’s house and office, so there was no fucking point in him wasting his time searching there. He was officially out of ideas, and the only other place he could think to look was the bar that April worked at. She’d said that Johnny had liked to hang out there, so maybe…

“Sorry,” Rick Grimes muttered as he got in the passenger’s side, scaring the shit out of him. He’d been so lost in thought that he hadn’t noticed his friend approach, and he was thankful that it wasn’t one of Tisone’s people sneaking up on him.

Rick pulled a file out from under his shirt, a thin one that had Johnny’s name typed on the outside. He started to open it, but Negan stopped him with a look, starting Lucille and pulling out onto the road. “Not here, man. It’s not safe.”

He drove them out to Bailey Road, just past the power plant, to an open field where there was no sign of life, and Rick looked at him nervously as he turned on the dome light. Negan’s face was pale and drawn, and he produced a small tape recorder from his jacket, pressing play. “You need to hear this first.”
“If you bring me Mister Tisone’s property, you have my word that the girl will be safe. We’ll make sure that the charges are dropped with our people and she can leave town.”

“We have a history, Negan, but this is my family now, so don’t fuck me over. Either you come through, or you end up at the top of the list with the girl. Until that ledger is found, it’s open season on April Brower.”

Negan stopped the tape, tossing it onto the dashboard as Rick swallowed heavily, and he sniffed his nose, still feeling chilled and stiff. “I fucking told you, Rick, this shit is fucked harder than my prom date was twenty minutes after we left the dance.”

“Who, uh,” he stammered, clenching the file in his hands. “Who’s on the list from the department?”

“I don’t fucking know, man. I’ve never seen the books, but they obviously exist, and Johnny told April that it’s just about anyone. Cops, lawyers, prosecutors, all the way up the line into the big government. She’s screwed, and now so am I.”

Rick handed him the file, and Negan studied it under the light. The cops notes were unremarkable, listing what they found. April covered in blood, her prints on the knife. Refusal to co-operate with law enforcement. There were more crime scene photos, and a shit ton more blood and gore, but something caught his eye when he looked at the autopsy photos.

“What the fuck?”

“What?” Rick leaned over to look, and Negan pointed to a few spots.

“The bruising here and here,” he gestured to Johnny’s shoulders, were four light bruises were prominent on both sides. “Looks like finger marks.”

“Let me see,” Rick shuffled through the notes. “Coroner claims it was hemorrhaging.”

“Those are bruises and you know it. The fucking guy was held down. And look here,” Negan held up the photo of Johnny’s head, where there was a faint circular mark by his temple. “I suppose that’s hemorrhaging, too, and not from the barrel of a gun?”

“Birthmark,” Rick muttered as he checked the notes, looking disgusted. “I take it the coroner’s one of Tisone’s?”

“How does nobody think to question this?” Negan snapped, the warmth returning to his limbs as he started to shake with anger. “This girl was screwed from the get-go. And who the fuck would believe that she had enough strength to butcher a big guy like that? I mean, what the fucking fuck, Rick?”

“Don’t yell at me,” he shot back, now pale as Negan started to red. “I don’t work homicide.”

“Well, what do we do?” Negan lost his shit, punching the wheel as the horn started to blare. “What the fuck do we do?”

They were alone in this, and there was no one that they could trust. If the coroner covered it up, and the prosecutor was paid off, April was dead for sure, and he had nothing to go on. This wasn’t even despair. It was so much deeper that he thought for a split second about abandoning his life and cleaning out his savings to take her away and just disappear into the middle of nowhere. They could
live somewhere that had more goats than people and just grow old.

“Negan, stay calm,” Rick said, gripping his shoulder and breaking him out of his temper tantrum. “I’ll think of something.”

“She’s gotta be back in two days, and I don’t have dick to go on. This Johnny asshole screwed her royally. Tisone’s men ripped their house and her apartment up and down looking for the money and the books. I don’t know where else to look.”

Rick didn’t have an answer for him, and they sat in Lucille for at least twenty minutes, each staring at the lights of the power plant, obscuring the stars in the sky. Negan dreaded going back to April, to have to tell her that he’d made the situation worse. Like his failure to keep his vows to Lucille, his promise to her to keep her alive was a lie. It’s all he did, he realized dumbly. He lied to women. He told them what they wanted to hear to get them into bed, and he told the ones he cared about what they wanted to hear to make them happy, and all it ever brought was heartache.

“We have to go back,” Rick said softly as they entered their thirtieth minute of dead silence. “I think there’s someone I can call for help, and you should get back to the girl.”

“What for? So I can tell her that she was right and there’s nothing anyone can do?”

Christ, he sounded more petulant than a teenage girl, but he didn’t know how to shake himself loose from this funk. “No, so you can protect her and see if you can’t jog some information loose, something that she’s forgotten.”

Negan snorted under his breath, and he received a punch to the shoulder for it.

“You came to me for help, Negan,” Rick sounded strangely confident and almost excited, and he snatched the tape recorder off of the dash, sticking it in his pocket. “So, let me help.”

Lucille started up with a purr, and Negan reluctantly drove them back to town, dropping Rick off just outside the station, which was quiet, only a few cars coming and going.

Before he got out, he turned in his seat, giving Negan a head nod. “Call me in twenty-four hours. I’ll have more information for you, then. Just stay positive, if not for yourself then for the girl.”

Rick stepped out, tapping the hood lightly before walking off with purpose, and Negan watched until he was out of sight, finally deciding to just drive back to Fulp to see April. He wasn’t sure what he was going to tell her, but he had six hours and a hell of a lot of emotional baggage to unpack while he drove.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Negan...not the welcome back he was expecting.
April

April was still awake when she heard the rumble of Negan’s car, stopping just outside the door of their room, the Greentree Lodge and Inn having become both a refuge to her and a prison. It was the place that she met Daniel, the sweetest, oddest man she’d ever come across, and it was also the place that Johnny came back from the grave to haunt her and wreck her life one last time.

The door opened, and Negan came stumbling in, looking worn out and sad. Sadder than when he told her about Lucille, and he stopped short when he saw that she was sitting up with the lamp still on, her arms curled around her knees and her lips resting against them.

“Why aren’t you sleeping, sugar?” he tried to sound casual, but she knew he’d failed. It was in the set of his shoulders and the dullness in his eyes, among other things.

“Worried about you, I guess,” she mumbled into her legs. “It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours, so either you did a bang-up job finding the stuff, or you failed miserably.”

Removing his coat, he let it fall to the floor, adding his jeans and t-shirt as he crawled onto the bed, laying on his side as she looked down at him. “It’s not that simple,” he said, using his hand to push her legs down flat. “Why are you really awake?”

“I told you. Why are you back so soon, Negan?”

“Caleb broke into my house and stole a lot of fucking money from me,” he said, and she slid down the mattress so that they were facing each other. “So, I found the little fucker at Mazzio’s, and I ended up surrounded by about twenty gangsters.”

“I’m so sorry, James Dean,” she said, the tears threatening to resurface, and he frowned. “How… how much did you lose?”

“About forty grand,” he began, but she sat up, trying to… who the fuck knew when he forced her back down. “I’m getting it back.”

“Your life has been totally fucked since you went to Albuquerque,” she told him, covering her face, and he snagged her hands, looking completely lost as to why she was so emotional.

“Let me fucking finish, sugar.”

Biting back a swear word, she freed herself, gesturing for him to continue.

“Anyway, so I ended up totally outnumbered, when this guy walked in and ordered everyone out.”

Negan was still holding her left hand, and he laced their fingers together, bending his other arm and resting it under his head. “It was Sal Salustri.”

“Who?”

“The head of the Miami mafia and my old friend from high school.”
“Jesus Christ. Now Miami is involved?”

“Tisone brought him in, April, and this shit is nation wide. They’re not just consolidating Alexandria and D.C. They’re coming together to form a fucking ‘super Mafia’ or some shit. They’ll have control over every major city and then some.”

She could feel the blood draining from her face, but he kept talking, oblivious, or just too drained from not getting any sleep. “I’ve known Sal all my life, and he swore that if the money and the books are returned, he’ll have the charges dropped, and you’ll be safe. So, I need you to really think about where the shit could be. We have under forty-eight hours to find it, and I’m keeping my promise to you.”

He couldn’t, no matter what he did, and he was so deep in denial that he’d lost sight of all rationality if he really thought that his friend, the head of the fucking mob would just forgive and forget. She could see it in his eyes, the hope that things would work out, and it broke her heart.

Overwhelmed and exhausted, she leaned forward, kissing him softly. It was sweet. Bittersweet, and he let go of her hand to pull her closer, pressing her so firmly against his chest that she went breathless. This absolute fucking fool of a man was going to die because of her, and she vowed to herself that she’d never allow it. The tables were slowly turning in that room, and it was going to be her that saved him.

“Where’d the alcohol come from?”

April leaned back as Negan inclined his head towards the table, and she sat back up, eyeing it carefully, an idea forming in her head. “Daniel gave it to me last night.”

“And who in the fuck is Daniel?”

He sounded pissed and right on the verge of jealous, so she turned her head to glance at him, and he was staring daggers at her, ready to rip her a new one. “He’s the old guy that owns this place. We had dinner last night.”

“Oh,” he appeared to be incrementally mollified, and she stood up, grabbing it and carrying it back to the bed, unscrewing the top. She took a small sip, handing it over to him and he shook his head before changing his mind and chugging it, enough that her own stomach turned at the thought. “He’s sweet. I made him shepherd’s pie and he gave me some advice.”

“You didn’t fucking tell him what was going on, did you?” Negan set the bottle on the nightstand, and April took the opportunity to climb on top of him, squeezing his pecs to distract him.

“No,” the lie came out easily enough, and his hands went to her waist, surrounding it and holding her in place. “Just general, ‘old people give meaningful platitudes’ type of shit. But it gave me a lot to think about, and I think you’re right, James Dean. Things are going to work out.” For you.

“Does that mean you believe in me? That you have some fucking idea where to look?”

“It means I’m amenable to your suggestion, and if you have enough energy to screw, then we can take a nice, long siesta and maybe my brain will provide us with some paths untaken.”

“Really? You’re actually fucking horny right now?” Negan stared at her doubtfully, and she shrugged, deciding to try to persuade him to expend some more energy.

“No, I’m not, but I’d like to be,” she said, moving her hips in hope for a reaction. There really wasn’t one, and she backed down towards his knees to kiss his chest, biting at the skin. “I could use
some affection, couldn’t you?”

Catching his eye, he looked like he was torn between telling her to stop and egging her on, so she made her way down to his stomach, waiting for some sort of response, and he placed his hand on the top of her head, giving her a little push down, and she spent some time on his belly, rubbing his legs until she felt him start to get harder, his erection bumping up against her neck, and for a few minutes, April didn’t think about the outside world. She just turned all of her attention towards him and the brief time they had left together.

By the time she sat up to remove his briefs, a paralyzing sadness settled in her chest, the enormity of everything choking the breath from her lungs, and thankfully, Negan’s eyes were closed so he didn’t see the redness in her eyes as she reached for the condoms that were laying on top of her bag along the side of the floor. She’d let her hair down earlier after dinner with Daniel, and she tilted her head forward to hide her face, opening the packet as she forced the emotion back down to the pit of her stomach.

“You okay, sugar?”

Negan’s voice was husky, and she placed the rubber on the tip of his dick, smiling as he watched her with hazy eyes. “I’m good, James Dean. About to be better in a second.”

It wasn’t fair. Life was a never-ending snowfall of shit and pain, and she wanted to make a happy memory with this asshole, one that would make her smile in her final moments. April laid herself on top of him fisting his hair as he lifted his hips, seeking his mouth with a whimper, and he began to thrust inside her, his fingers splayed along her spine.

There wasn’t really any pleasure in it, on her side, but she moved with him, willing her body to do what it needed to do for him. She had no power in this world, nothing that could change it, but she could leave him with maybe one good experience with her, and she melted into him, hiding her face in his neck.

‘I just got so lost…’

She didn’t realize that she’d started to make any noise until he rolled her over, stilling his hips.

“April?”

With fluttering lashes, she looked up to see him hovering over her, and she forced his face to hers with one hand, the other raking down his back to his ass. “You’re a good man, Negan,” she whispered, and his face changed into something muddled, some tenderness that made her want to run far away and never return while also soothing the burn of pain that had throbbed in her heart since she found the damned letter. “Thank you.”

He resumed his movements, at a much softer pace, and his thumb skirted her cheekbone, wiping away the wetness before he kissed her, and she shut her eyes, letting her brain go to a primitive state. Physical sensations, from the warmth of his skin as it met hers to the gentle friction of him inside her, pleasure began to smolder in her core, making its way along her stomach until the orgasm bubbled up like slow-moving lava, and April cried out, latching onto his body like he’d disappear, riding it out as he did the same, dropping onto her with all of his weight.

Clover and rosewood.

Johnny used to wear a cologne that contained those smells, but Negan was different, more of a musky type, cleaner. Like Bay Rum, and she pressed her nose behind his ear, breathing it in until her lungs were about to burst.
“Well, that was sad and erotic at the same time,” he mumbled, easing himself out of her and fumbling with the condom, but April held onto him, thinking of a thousand things she wanted to say to this relative stranger that she’d spent only a week with. He barely knew her, yet he understood her better than anyone in her life, ever. Maybe even better than Johnny, and now it was over.

When she finally let him go, he dropped off of her onto his back, and he tugged her slightly, wanting her to rest her head on his chest. It was damp from exertion, but she didn’t mind, laying her cheek over his heart, listening to it thump rapidly, gradually slowing down. “It’s gonna be all good, sugar,” he mumbled, sounding barely awake, his hands dropping down to his sides. “I’ll take you away when this is over, and you don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“I’m not.”

She wasn’t sure if he heard her, his chest rising and falling under her head in a slow movement, and she laid there for another ten minutes, lifting her ear and tilting her face to see him completely out, his mouth parted and eyes shut.

“What?” It was said softly, but close enough to get a reaction if he was still with it at all, and she didn’t see anything. Just the feel of his breath across the tip of her nose, and she eased back slowly, waiting for him to wake up, but she made it to the edge of the bed, setting one, then both feet on the ground.

Twenty minutes later, she opened the door, holding her breath when Negan said her name in a sleepy voice, and she looked back to see that he’d rolled to his side, facing her. He must’ve been dreaming, because he smiled, and she stepped into the morning sunshine, closing him away forever. All she carried was her wallet, with five hundred dollars sticking out and her driver’s license. Everything else, including the rest of her savings was sitting on the table, waiting for him, and she walked down the covered sidewalk towards Daniel, who was rocking in his chair, working on a new figurine. This one was being carved from a white piece of wood, and he nodded once when he saw her coming.

“Good mornin’, girlie.”

“Morning, Daniel.”

April sat down next to him, watching in silence as the knife worked on its own, nicking out grooves and slots, and he set it down after a few seconds with a deep breath, lighting up a smoke. “I take it yer fella didn’t get the outcome he wanted.”

“No, but he thinks he did.”

“That’s a shame. Just a cryin’ shame.”

“Not really,” she smiled, wiping her nose until he reached into his pocket, handing her a handkerchief. “I decided to take your advice and save him some heartache.”

He stopped rocking and rose to his feet, disappearing into the manager’s office and coming back out with a car key, placing it in her palm. “I hope you know what yer doin’, April.”

“I do. I finally know what I’m doing for once in my life.”

“It’s the old Plymouth in the back.”

“I’ll never forget you, Daniel,” she kissed him on the cheek, tucking all but fifty dollars into his chest pocket as he patted her arm. “Just…don’t let him go running off, okay? All he needs to know is
that I went home. You can tell him if I get a good few hours ahead of him. By then it’ll be too late for him to do something stupid.”

“Just like my June, you are,” Daniel whispered, sitting back in his chair as she walked away without looking back.

Of course her name was June, she thought with a sad smile as she rounded the corner.

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Lucille was a vision, a goddamned Botticelli come to life as she walked down the aisle, and it wasn’t because of what she was wearing or how her face was made up. It was her aura. She radiated joy and beauty and love, and she was headed straight towards him. Hair pulled up with a few stray pieces hanging down and flowers in her hair. A simple white dress and wildflowers in her hand. There was no one in the world more vibrant than her, and he was dumbstruck at the sight, grinning like he’d been given a lobotomy.

‘I do.’

Two words bound her to him for eternity, and he felt like the luckiest person in the world.

Lucille was a memory. She was no longer a person, breathing and living and loving him. She was in the ground, covered by wildflowers and a lacquered coffin. He was dumbstruck at the sight, watching her being lowered into the ground with a blank expression on his face like he’d been given a lobotomy.

One final gasping breath had torn her from him for eternity, and he felt like the unluckiest person in the world.

April came walking towards him, wearing a diner’s uniform, her cheeks sunburnt and her hair back in a bun, and his heart lurched to his throat. Why hadn’t he seen her beauty from the moment she met his eyes? How did he not recognize her soulfulness? Her pain? Why did he only think about the money?

‘My life was a waste,’ she said in a monotone voice as she poured him a cup of coffee.

He opened his mouth to tell her that it wasn’t, that her life was just beginning, but nothing would
come out. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. She waited for him to say anything, and a frantic feeling started to grow in his chest. He wanted to help her, to reassure her that everything was fine. He was there now, and he would protect her.

But he couldn’t do anything, and she turned and walked away, down the hall towards a coffin, climbing in and shutting the top, a bright light exploding and obscuring everything.

Negan let out a snort, adrenaline pushing him upright in the bed, covered with sweat and goosebumps. His brain fucked with him while he slept, and he felt a creepy crawly sensation on his skin, a thousand prickles of unease as he rubbed his face.

230pm. The red, digital numbers shocked him, and he stretched, trying to relieve the ache in his body from sleeping for over eight hours in a row without waking up, a new record for him. It was the wrong fucking time to be getting his beauty sleep, and he looked towards the bathroom door, which was shut.

They were on a serious deadline, and he needed to sit April down to narrow down places to look once they got back to Alexandria. “Hey, sugar? I need to take a piss and then we gotta brainstorm.”

He got no response, and he swung his legs over the edge, rolling his shoulders as he felt about a hundred goddamned years old. It was a struggle to get to his feet, and he padded with half-open eyes, knocking three times on the particleboard door. “April? Seriously, I’m ready to piss my pants here.”

When she didn’t answer a second time, he opened the door, blinking when he found it empty. The toilet seat was down, and he lifted it up, relieving himself as he cracked his neck. She was probably with the old dude that ran the place, and he washed his hands, walking back out into the bedroom to grab his toothbrush when a piece of paper caught his eye.

Motherfucker. If she ran off to a bar again while he slept, he was going to spank her ass hard. They didn’t have time for this shit, and he stalked over to the round table, snatching it up, a silver key sliding along the wood underneath.

It wasn’t her writing, and his heart, already overworked from his subconscious went into overdrive.

April,

If you’re reading this, then everything went to shit. I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry that I fucked everything up for you. I just got so lost in my life, and now it’s all on you, and I never meant to bring you more pain than you already had.

I made a choice to work for Tisone, and I was too stupid to realize until it was too late that I could never leave this life. It made me resentful, the work I put in that wasn’t going to get us anywhere. Tisone depends on me, but he doesn’t recognize me.

It’s blood money, April. Literal fucking blood money, stained with red when it’s tossed onto my desk. I’m expected to clean it in every sense of the word, and I eat shit on a daily basis from mobsters, cops, leeches, and everyone else that’s suckling at the teet of corruption. The whole
town is compromised, and even if I could walk away, there’s nowhere we can go that isn’t tainted by corruption.

So, I thought. And I thought again.

It started with a hundred dollars.

It wasn’t missed.

A hundred became two hundred, then a thousand. They took my word for it because I oversaw all financial transactions. Tisone depended on me to keep track of everything, and I took advantage of it. He owed me, baby. He was taking away my future, so I was going to get paid. I didn’t think about us, but at the same time, you’re all I was thinking about.

Your parents didn’t do shit when it mattered, and you thought I was different. I’m sorry that I’m not. Most of all, I’m sorry that this letter means I’m gone, and that I won’t be able to protect you. All you’re left with is money, information, and a price on your head because of me.

So, take this, baby. Take this key to Paradise and forget everything about me. Forget the pain I caused you, and just think of my birthday.

I love you, April.

I loved you.’

Underneath that was an arrow pointing to the other side, and Negan set the letter down, feeling like he was going to puke. Johnny not only fucked her over, he left her the shit and she’d had it for months. Had she been playing him this whole time?

The other side wasn’t as long, but the writing looked like April’s, in blue instead of black, and his legs gave out from under him as he read it. There were a few round, crinkled spots, and he realized that they were most likely dried tears, and he felt a painful punch to the gut.

‘I found this last night when I cleaned out my bag. Funny to think that I hadn’t completely emptied the damned thing ever since I stood in the wasteland that was my apartment, shoving whatever I could into it as I waited for someone to bust down my door and blow my brains out.

Johnny hid it. Fuck, he buried it under a patch, and my hand just happened to brush over it. Can you believe it, Negan? Three months of running, and the answer was right fucking here with me the entire time. Excuses and apologies, and now I’m about to do the same thing to you.

Every possible scenario bounced around my brain last night as I sat in another hotel room, wondering if you were dead, or if you’d been kidnapped by that asshole Caleb. And it would’ve been all my fault. Your life isn’t worth seventy-five thousand dollars, and mine’s worth nothing.
Your buddy might really be your buddy, or he might lie to your face and tell you the hit on me was off, but I can’t take that chance. There’s so much regret on your plate already, James Dean, and a week’s worth of manufactured emotion in a vacuum can’t erase that.

I care about you, really care about you after a week. So much so that I spent hours thinking about what it could be like if we were normal people, ones that met in a grocery store or something. Would we go to dinner on Friday nights? Lay on the couch with legs and arms linked together? Gotten sick of each other after a month?

Who are you when you’re not ferrying an accused killer across the United States? Who am I when I’m not constantly afraid?

If there was even a snowball’s chance of the two of us walking away from this, I’d be here now, but you know, deep down that there isn’t. And you’re too fucking stubborn to admit it to yourself, so this is when I start making the choices that are going to affect my life and yours.

By the time you read this note, I will hopefully have turned myself in to the police.

The money and books are at Wilson’s Storage on Paradise Road.

Johnny’s birthday is January thirtieth.

Take the money and run, James Dean. Live a good life and think of me once in a while.

April

No.

His mind was screaming at him to get the fuck up and go to the car, but his body wasn’t cooperating. He was still sitting on the dirty floor ten minutes later, staring at random words in her goodbye letter, but his eyes kept going back to a select few. ‘mine’s worth nothing.’

What did he do? What the fucking fuck did he do?

Crawling up the table like a drunk, he closed his fist around the key, trying to will himself back into control.

Call Rick.

The answer came in the form of a whisper, somewhere in his brain. It wasn’t his voice. It wasn’t anyone’s voice, just a robotic forming of words, and he stumbled towards the phone, his fingers numb and clumsy. The first time he dialed the numbers, an old woman picked up, prompting him to slam down the phone. The second time got him a ‘not in service’ message, and he punched the drywall, sending a searing pain up his arm.

“Hello?”

Rick sounded weary, and Negan started yelling in his ear, irate and ready to have a heart attack.
"She left, Rick. She fucking left and headed back to turn herself in."

"What?"

"Fucking listen to me, asshole! She left hours ago while I was sleeping. You need to get your ass to the station and stop her."

"Negan-"

"Now," he roared, slamming down the phone. His fucking brain started firing up, working in overdrive as April's body in a coffin flooded his synapses. She was right, and she was dead fucking wrong. He knew it. He could've fucking saved her. Sal wasn't going to kill him. If Johnny was telling the truth, six million dollars and a nuclear amount of information was sitting in a storage locker, and he was going to save her. He wasn't losing anyone else in his pathetic excuse for a life.

The only thing he took with him was the letter, the key, and his wallet, throwing the door open half-dressed, zipping up his fly as he moved. He half-expected to see Lucille gone, that she'd hot-wired it or some shit, but she was sitting right where he left her, except with the old man leaning against her, and he came to a sudden stop.

"I gave your girl a car to use," the old man mumbled, dropping a cigarette into the dirt and extinguishing it with his boot.

"Excuse me?"

"She’s a pistol, that one. And she cares about ya somethin’ fierce."

"I don’t know what she told you, but-"

"Listen, young man," he said sharply, snapping his fingers. "I know about the other guy and the money and everything else that got April into trouble. She’s tryin’ to do what she thinks is right. Don’t go blamin’ her for that."

"I have to go," Negan brushed the guy aside, unlocking the door to the car, and a wooden figurine was thrust in his face. It was a horse in full gallop with its mane flying, pale with streaks of pink brushed across the snout.

"She deserves better than what was handed to her, ya hear? Don’t go galavantin’ off if ya can’t give it to her."

With that, the interaction was over, and the old man shuffled off towards the office, sitting down in a rocking chair and picking out a fresh piece of wood, leaving Negan floundering once again. Give her the horse? Or give her something better?

At this point, he just wanted to give her another twelve hours alive, and he took off down the road, repeating the same words over and over to himself as he drove wildly back towards Virginia.

Not today.

Chapter End Notes

The race is on, and Negan's lagging far behind...
April

Don’t do this, you fucking idiot.

It was about the fiftieth time the thought ran through her head, and April ignored it once again, turning right onto Second Street, a mile from the Alexandria Police Station. She’d been there a few times over the years. Once, to bail her mom out of jail for a drunk and disorderly, and another to file a restraining order on a customer that harassed her for six months. Three months ago when she was hauled in for Johnny’s murder, still covered in his blood and wearing only a nightgown.

No longer just a brick building with a blue and white sign, the police station was a death sentence. A house of horrors that was waiting to consume her. At least half of the staff there worked for the mob, and as soon as they realized that she was there to turn herself in, dozens of men and women would be tripping over themselves to be the first to let Tisone know that she was back.

A litany of possible ways to die flooded her mind, from a simple gunshot to the head to more sinister option. A Columbian necktie, or disembowelment. Maybe they’d cut her tongue or her eyes out and just dump her somewhere, another unsolved murder that seemed to plague their city. Of course, knowing what she did now, they were probably all tied back to Tisone.

Just another statistic. Another piece of lowlife trash getting what she deserved. April parked along Smith Boulevard, on the corner of the station, cutting the engine of the mint green Plymouth and sitting quietly as she stared at the entrance. It was just after one in the afternoon, and a part of her heart went numb, thinking about Negan. Hopefully, he was still asleep, unaware of what time she’d left, or else he would’ve probably called his friend Rick to stop her.

The front desk was manned by a bored looking woman, tapping a pencil on a pad of paper as she held a phone to her ear. April laid her shaking hands on the counter, clenching her fists as a bead of sweat formed along her hairline, adding to the abject fear that was coursing through her veins.

“Uh huh, Mrs. Janson,” the woman said, rolling her eyes and holding up a finger to indicate that she’d be with her in a moment. “I already passed the message along to the detective. He’ll be out to inspect the damage as soon as he can. Just hang in there.”

Once she hung up the call, the woman offered a fake smile, looking at her expectantly. “How may I help you?”

“I’m here to turn myself in.”

The smile was frozen in place as the girl stared up at her. “For what?”

“My name is April Brower.”

There was no recognition there, so clearly she wasn’t Cosa Nostra material, and April found
herself getting more annoyed than upset, oddly. “Could you just find a detective please?”

“Have a seat,” the woman pointed to the red plastic chairs near the door, rising with a pissy attitude that some stranger was clearly wasting her time. April sat in the one with the black flecks in it, staring at the white tiles, mentally counting them. Each row had ten of them, and she added them in her head, getting to one hundred ten before her name was called.

Looking up with a start, she saw that the receptionist appeared nervous, the door opening and two cops walking out. They were the same ones that drove her to the station the night of the murder, and it was like she was right back there again, watching them as they subtly threatened her, trying to ferret out where the money was.

The taller one smiled at her, gesturing for her to stand up, and it took her a few seconds to get her legs to work, her head still screaming at her to run away and hide. But there was nowhere to go now but with them, and she followed the shorter one, essentially boxed in as they led her into the precinct. There were at least a dozen cubicles in the main room in sets of four, and she was aware of at least four people that stood up from their seats to watch her procession through the room.

Detective Abrams veered to the left hallway of the two, stopping in front of Interrogation Room One, using his hand to push her firmly into the claustrophobic space once they were out of sight of witnesses, and she turned quickly, holding up her hands.

“Miss Brower,” he said, smirking at her before holding out one of the chairs. “You’re early.”

“I didn’t have anywhere else to be, sir.”

Abrams let his lips melt into something that resembled a frown, but there was a sliver of menace there, and the other one, Bradford, his nametag said, shut the door, leaning against it with his arms crossed. It was intimidating as hell, and she glanced at the two-way mirror, all hope for fair treatment evaporating when a light clicked on, and she saw that there were four other cops in the room, all watching her with the same expression.

“What’s the money, Miss Brower?”

“I don’t have it,” she told him, told all of them. “I never did.”

“Look,” Abrams sighed, leaning over the table, getting in her face. “Things will be less…painful for you if you just give us the money and the books.”

“I don’t have it,” she repeated, staring through him. “I never did.”

“Well, that’s a fucking shame,” he shook his head, nodding to his partner. “A real fucking shame for you. Call the bus.”

“The bus?”

Abrams got closer so that their noses were touching, and he grinned as she flinched back, the pounding in her head so loud that she could barely hear him. “We’re taking you to the jail, Miss Brower. They’re going to be very…raucous in there.”

“And my attorney?” she managed to spit out, knowing the answer before he had to say it.

“Worry more about surviving the next few hours, Miss Brower. I imagine the inmates that you’ll be placed with to await your trial are pretty rough women. It would be a real tragedy if anything happened to you.”
So, this was it. This was really happening. It wasn’t a three-month nightmare and it wasn’t just in her own head. She was sitting in ‘protect and serve’ central, watching a group of men feed their bloodlust as the countdown to her death marched on. She’d never been more afraid and intimidated in her life than she was right now by the corrupt power that sat just beyond the edge of a white table.

Now more than ever, she was sure that she made the right decision. Leaving Negan to find the money and get away was the best of all shitty options that she had. It didn’t mean she was looking forward to whatever they had planned for her, but there was an underlying relief in not having to run or hide anymore. Someone wasn’t going to pop out one day when she thought she was safe. It was just going to happen, and April made peace with it, hoping that Negan would as well.

Six million dollars could buy a whole lot of peace.

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Negan

Not today.

Please

Negan’s eyes scanned the horizon, looking for cops that could impede his progress, gunning the engine. He was just under an hour away, and ready to lose his mind. He’d stopped at a gas station at six o’clock to check in with Rick and found out that she was already on her way to the jail.

“By the time I got there, Abrams and Bradford had arranged for her to be sent over,” Rick panted, sounding like he’d run a fucking marathon. “I can’t get in to see her or find out anything without arousing suspicion.”

He may have said something else, but Negan never heard it, dropping the pay phone and rushing back to his car, sending dirt and stones onto some poor asshole that was hitchhiking along the road. He knew that it was probably too late to stop her, but still, he hoped that she’d taken longer than he had to get back to town. But a woman like April was too fucking intense and focused on becoming a goddamned martyr, and he sped up to ninety, weaving around other drivers like he was on the fucking Autobahn.

Jail or storage?

Weighing the pros and cons of each, he decided at the last minute to get the goods first, veering over two lanes to take the exit closest to Paradise Road, turning Lucille like she was born for reckless moves like this.

Wilson’s Storage was one of the bigger facilities in town, spanning several acres, and there was a check-in booth just off the street. A beat-up Dodge Dart was already there, and by the looks of it, the driver and the employee were shooting the shit. Negan gave them exactly ten seconds before gunning his engine obnoxiously, attracting the worker’s attention. He and the Dart spoke for a few more beats before the POS started rolling through, edged on by Lucille’s bumper coming obscenely close to the back of it.

“Can I help you?” the booth guy asked, looking at Negan suspiciously.
“I’m looking for locker 130,” he said, holding up the silver key, and the man pointed him straight, telling him to take a left before the second building. “It’ll be the third building down. You’ll see the sign.”

Tossing him a twenty, Negan pulled through, muttering to himself as he tried to keep his speed under fifteen. The last fucking thing he needed was the clerk calling the Alexandria police. Who the fuck knew who’d show up, and he wanted to find someplace safe to check the money and books. As much pressure as he was under, he still needed to think this through so he could figure out the best way to move forward, and when he saw the sign with the arrow pointing right towards lockers 120 through 130, he felt his mouth fill with saliva.

If he was a little bitch, this is when he’d vomit.

Storage room 130 was about the size of a single car garage, with a silver roll-up door and white brick. He stopped Lucille directly in front, leaving the driver door open as he approached with the key and his bat, just in case this was some sort of set-up. Deep down, he knew that April was incapable of something so heinous, but it didn’t hurt to err on the side of violence.

The lock was positioned about six inches off the ground, so he crouched down, hoping for just a split second that the key wouldn’t work, but he didn’t know why. Having another dead end would guarantee his own death, and April’s for sure, but a part of him didn’t want it to end, because if he failed, it would be yet another in a string that made up his life.

*I can’t let another woman down.*

With a twist of his fingers, the key slid in, and a soft click freed the shackle, allowing him to thread it out of the hold. “You’d better have come through, asshole,” he muttered, hoping Johnny had done one thing right for her.

It was like announcing to the entire fucking town he was there, the screech as he rolled the door upwards, and he stood there in shock as the contents of locker 130 revealed themselves.

A vintage Harley Davidson sat front and center. Two shelving units loaded down with bankers boxes, each marked with red words. ‘First editions’. ‘Baseball cards’. Even one for fucking comic books. This motherfucker not only stole money, he blew it on useless shit. The world in his hands, and this idiot was worried about collectibles.

There were narrow pathways on either side of the bike, and he edged into the locker after checking for any ‘Goonies’ type of booby traps, pushing boxes aside to look for something that stuck out. But everything was labeled, so he had no choice but to open every one, growing more frantic with each one that led to nothing. Thirty-one boxes of nothing, until he reached the one marked ‘coins’.

It was triple taped, hidden behind two other boxes even though it was twice the size, and he hauled it out, cutting the side of his index finger when he tried to rip it, finally going back to Lucille and getting his little switchblade, stabbing the top to get inside.

Negan always thought that seeing piles of money would be exciting, bordering on erotic, but knowing where this particular batch came from made him physically recoil. It was real. It wasn’t bullshit. Johnny Dunning had stolen from the fucking mob, and it was right in front of him. Stacks of cash, all neatly bundled into packs of ten thousand, twenty thousand, even five hundred. Almost afraid to touch it, he pawed through the fortune, his thumb brushing what felt like leather, and he pushed the money aside, seeing that it was a leather book.

The box was stowed in the trunk with a rapid heartbeat and a few furtive looks up and down the
lane, and he went back into the storage, dutifully checking for any more, just in case, but the rest of
the boxes were clear. He wasn’t sure what was going to happen to everything else, so he locked it
back up, tossing the key in his console and hauling ass out of there.

The bungalow on River Road was empty, just like it normally was, and Negan pulled in under the
cover of night, cutting the lights as soon as he turned into the drive.

Neighbors were few and far between, and before taking the box out of the trunk, he went around
the back of the house, turning on the generator and getting the key that was buried under the lilac
tree, inhaling the phantom scent for a few moments.

The smell was tied to Lucille, and he always thought of her when he saw the purple flowers in
bloom, a sad sight for years. It was in this very spot that he’d proposed to her, ring in hand and heart
on sleeve, and she’d let him sweat it out for about a minute before she said yes. It was because of that
memory that he couldn’t bring himself to sell the bungalow, left to them by Lucille’s parents.
Unused, he’d pondered many times either renting it out or moving there himself, but it would be like
living with a ghost. Too many memories here. He paid for the grass to be cut, and occasionally he’d
come by and run the water, but other than that, he stayed away.

But it was the safest place for him to be since his name wasn’t on the deed, and Negan opened the
back door, knocked sideways by the mustiness that engulfed him. A soft humming spurred him
forward to turn on the kitchen light, and a cursory look around assured him that everything was the
same inside, a snapshot into his past. A pale, yellow table and chairs, jaunty white cabinets, and a
worn tile floor, and for a moment, the pain of missing his wife made it hard to breathe.

If she was here, maybe his life would’ve been better. Maybe Lucille would have been able to move
past his infidelity and they could’ve had a fresh start. A new city or a different job, one that didn’t
constantly provide temptations in the form of eager secretaries. He could have come home to her
every night, and he tried to picture it in his mind, but all he could see was her standing over him in
the dead of night, pale and tired. ‘Do you love her?’

April.

Her name, a fleeting thought that danced through his mind brought him out of his reminiscence. If
Lucille was here, she’d still be marked for death, and Negan was probably the only person that could
save her. That could’ve ever saved her, but it wasn’t going to happen if he didn’t get his ass moving,
and he crossed through the kitchen to the living room, unlocking the front door and going to the
trunk, shutting it quietly, just in case.

After locking all the doors and double checking the curtains to make sure they were shut, he
plipped down on the floor, setting the box in between his spread legs and opening it slowly, still
somewhat shocked to see the money. Like he was logging it in, he set each stack on the floor into
little groups, from smallest to largest, and after counting it three times, he discovered that there was a
grand total of six million, four hundred thousand and twenty dollars.
“Fuck.”

Like it was set to explode, Negan gingerly set the cash back in the box, turning his attention to the leather journals, of which there were three. Each was black, and every page was filled with deposits, transfers, and names of the recipients. Three senators he recognized immediately, at least two local congressmen, and more cops than he could fathom. All were on Tisone’s payroll. To ease his own conscience, he checked every page, relieved and heartened to see that Rick Grimes was nowhere to be found amongst the assholes that chose money over what was right.

The only good thing to come out of this discovery, besides the chance to square things away with Sal was the ability to know who he could trust and who he couldn’t if he survived this. But it was farther down on the list of importance, and he hugged the ledgers to his chest as he leaned against the couch, thinking about his next move.

Two hours later, he left the bungalow with a shaky plan, turning off the generator and stowing Tisone’s property back in the trunk. There was a bar about ten miles away, and he pulled in, wanting nothing more than to just drive to the jail to see April, but he’d get fucking nowhere.

_Eyes on the prize, dick._

Negan had spent more than his fair share of time at this particular watering hole, and because of this, he knew there was an old fashioned pay phone in the back, with glass door and all, and he strode past the bar, ordering a whiskey on his way, dialing a number he wasn’t sure he was going to call at all. The line rang a few times, and when the other side answered, he spoke in a low voice, shutting his eyes, praying he was doing the right thing.

“I want to set up a meeting with your boss.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's hoping Negan's negotiating skills work!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Just a short chapter, because...you'll see.

April

Warden Henderson Pritchett was not a man to be trifled with.

April recognized that as soon as she saw him, standing at the entrance to the prison, flanked by two guards, waiting patiently for her arrival, the last one of the day. Her escort was not as astute, and she sat in Pritchett’s office, handcuffed and afraid as Officer Bean argued with the man in charge.

The warden, he of two last names, was somewhere in his fifties, salt and pepper hair and sharp blue eyes that didn’t miss a thing. Not the way April shrank away from Jeffrey Bean, seeming almost relieved to be in his company, or in the way Bean expressed a desire for her to be housed in gen pop immediately.

April herself had offered up no words, other than ‘yes, sir’ or ‘no, sir’ to his introductory questions. Name, birth date, social security number. Each one was answered in a tremulous voice. She’d been kept at the police station when she was arrested, so being in a correctional facility was like stepping onto a foreign planet. Her neighborhood growing up was ugly and dirty, but there was freedom to go anywhere she liked. The bar she worked at while going to school was rundown and sleazy, but she could handle herself. This…was frightening, because she didn’t know what lay on the other side of Warden Pritchett’s door.

“You understand this girl is a cold-blooded murderer, right?” Bean asked him, placing his hands on his hips while April stared at the floor. “She doesn’t deserve special treatment.”

“And you seriously overstate your job, Officer,” Pritchett informed him with a quiet voice. His back was straight, as if his spine was a steel rod, and though he was shorter than Bean, he projected power and size. “Your job isn’t to judge or convict, and your job certainly isn’t to tell me how to run my prison. Miss Brower is being treated the same as any new prisoner. She’ll be given an examination, she’ll be searched, and she’ll be placed in a cell by herself for the first night. Your role in her incarceration is completed.”

Jeffrey Bean wasn’t only stupid, he was cocky, and he laughed right in Pritchett’s face as April’s head dropped down even further, the only thing visible to her were the handcuffs that bound her wrists. Bright silver, with black spots dancing around them as the tension in the room started to rise, at least to her.

“Do you know who this girl is?”

“I read her file,” Pritchett said, sounding just as authoritative as he had earlier. “I’m well aware of
what she’s been charged with.”

“No,” Bean stopped him, and she could hear the shuffle of boots on the tile, but she kept her eyes down. “You’re not getting me, Pritchett. This *girl* is more than just a prisoner, you understand? My boss is very interested in her case, and it would be in everyone’s best interest for her to be in the general population as soon as possible.”

Her head snapped up when she heard the door to his office open, and without breaking eye contact, he crooked two fingers. The two guards came in immediately, and with a smile, he inclined his head. “Your boss is not my boss. This is my prison, not his, and if he wants to change that, have him appoint someone else. Until then, stay the fuck out of my building.”

It was like an electric prod to her system, the sheer fact that someone was standing up to the mighty Tisone, and her mouth dropped open as the guards each took Bean by the arm, escorting him out, but not before he looked back at her with pure hatred. “Enjoy your last night.”

Once the door was closed, Pritchett strode over to his desk, sitting down stiffly. He opened her file again, running his index finger down the center of the report. “Your trial is scheduled to start in two days,” he said, glancing up and waiting for her to nod before he continued. “I can only guarantee your safety until seven tomorrow morning.”

The words sent a shiver up her spine and a tear down her cheek as she swallowed to keep from crying out. He wasn’t stupid. Warden Pritchett wasn’t blind to what went on in his prison, and he leaned back in his chair, linking his hands together as they rested on his stomach. “You’ll be escorted to the infirmary and given a full checkup, as I said, as well as a cavity search. Then, you’ll be placed in a holding cell for the night.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man’s eyes softened as he studied her, and April fidgeted in her seat, wondering what he saw when he looked at her. A murderer? A pitiful, powerless figure that was living on borrowed time?

“This is my building, but I only have so much power here, Miss Brower. I try to bring in guards and employees that are trustworthy, but Mickey Tisone is omniscient. He’s lured far too many of my people into his web, and the prison population is its own world. There’s an inmate that I can place you with that I think will be...safe. She’s been here for ten years and has always been a model prisoner.”

“Thank you.” She sounded like a child, small-voiced and unsure, and Pritchett stood up, closing her file. He took four steps, opening the door, and she hunched over again, pinching her thigh to try to wake herself up. Being anywhere, even back in bed with Johnny’s lifeless body would be better than this.

She was led by armed guards from Pritchett’s office down several hallways to the infirmary, kept under lock and key as a nurse named Ingrid escorted her into a small room with a female guard, unshackling her and requesting that she undress fully. The room was cool, and her skin was covered in goosebumps in seconds, placing her hands on the exam table and bending over as she was told.

Rough fingers spread her ass cheeks open, and a whimper bubbled up in her throat as she was searched, a burning pain that had nothing to do with the violation of her body formed in her gut. Every other orifice was checked, and then she was told to dress and get up on the table as the nurse made notes on a clipboard.

The minutes ticked by as she had her blood pressure taken, her temperature as well, and answered
standard health questions, including allergies. By the time the exam was finished, she was shaking, and Ingrid, the nurse from hell told her she was done, allowing her to climb down.

Her next stop was to get a prison uniform, and a rough pair of white cotton underpants were thrust upon her along with a dingy bra, t-shirt and orange pants with a matching top.

DOC VC-644966.

She wasn’t a free woman anymore. She was a series of letters and numbers as she was once again forced to strip in front of strangers, just another waste of humanity in the eyes of the justice system, and she tugged at the shirt, the shame threatening to strangle her from the inside out. Woven shoes with rubber soles and crew socks completed the ensemble, and a thin pillow and scratchy blanket were all she owned in this place.

With her head down, April was taken to Holding Room A, an eight-by-eight-foot room with a twin bed, stainless steel sink, and a toilet. The sound of the metal door closing was like thunder in her head, and when she was finally alone, April curled up on the bed, hiding her face in the corner as she sobbed, hating everything about her life and hoping that it was over soon.

When the lights went out, she shut her eyes, seeing nothing but Johnny with his neck slit open and Negan, with a gunshot to the head. It was her fault, all of it. Trying to do the wrong thing didn’t work, and trying to do the right thing was even worse. The last, long night of her life brought her a clarity that she didn’t want or need, and as the dark gave way to light, she tried to ease her mind for what was coming, what she knew was going to happen.

Her blanket was already folded back up, sitting on top of her pillow when a new guard came to get her at seven in the morning, watching her wordlessly as she stood up, and he gestured to her to grab her sleep stuff, stepping aside as she joined him in the hall.

Cell Block C was filled with prisoners that were doing at least twenty to life, and she was stared at like she was the newest attraction at the zoo, women coming over to the bars of their cell to watch her as she made her way past. April carefully avoided all eye contact, her shoulders up near her ears as a few whistled at her. The day guard, Guy, led her down the middle of the hall, past all of the cells and up a flight of steps to the second floor, the metal walkway creaking lightly under their feet.

The middle cells were all occupied, and Guy stopped in front of cell C242. “Morning, Leona.”

The door swung open, and April peered inside to see a woman that had to be at least six feet tall, reclining on the lower bunk, knitting. She was probably about forty, with short black hair and cocoa skin that was almost dewy in appearance. She set her needlework aside, offering a gruff grumble but an easy smile, rising up and striding forward with fluid movements.

“This is the newbie Henny wanted me to watch?”

Her voice was melodic, a rise and fall that would be soothing under any other circumstances, but as it was, all April could do was stand there shaking. Leona reached out for her hand, shaking it and pulling her into the cell as Guy laughed lightly. “She’s had a long night, Lee. Show her the ropes, won’t you?”

He shut the door with a clang, telling them that breakfast would be along shortly, and Leona let her go, pointing to the top bunk. “Toss your stuff up there.”

April set the blanket and pillow down, lost. She had no idea what to say or what to do, but Leona took control, patting the bottom bunk and telling her to sit. “So, what’re you in for?”
She sat down gingerly, unable to speak as the other woman took the far end of the bed, resuming her knitting. Leona was using blue thread, and she appeared to be making a blanket, one that had a white rose stitched on one of the corners. “Stupidity.”

“Come again?”

“I’m in here because I’m stupid.”

“Honey, we’re all in here because we’re stupid,” Leona chuckled, looking up at her even as her hands continued to crochet, the two needles moving back and forth with the spongy material. “Henny didn’t say what you did, he just told me to keep an eye out for you. That trouble was bound to find you in here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” April said, glancing at the woman out of the corner of her eye. “I was set up for my boyfriend’s murder, and someone in here is going to make sure that I never leave this place.”

“Oh, April,” Leona shook her head, sighing. “You got that right.”

April turned to face her, and Leona leaned forward to hug her. At least, that’s what she thought at first until the woman smiled, her arm retracting, and she saw the glint of steel and bright red. Her brain registered that it was blood. Her blood, and she slumped to the floor as the pain kicked in trying to crawl away but getting nowhere, feeling another sharp stab into her back as her world first went white, then to black.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Negan

“A pack of Marlboro Reds.”

Negan leaned against the counter, drumming his fingers on it as the clerk turned around, fetching him a pack of cigarettes. His own eyes were on the clock above their heads, the relentless ticking of the seconds inching him closer to the most dangerous moment of his life. Hundreds of accused rapists, larcenists, pyromaniacs. He’d dealt with them all, but none of them compared to what he willingly agreed to walk into, and he needed a goddamn motherfucking drag.

“That’ll be a dollar eighty.”

Handing him a five, Negan palmed the carcinogenic beauties, taking the bills and dropping the two dimes in the donation bin, tapping the top of the pack against the heel of his left palm. As he slid into the driver’s seat, he rolled down the windows and flicked the lighter that he normally kept next to Lucille’s picture, the engraving a slight indentation under his thumb.

March 31st, 1969.

His wedding day. Lucille had given him the lighter as a pre-wedding gift, back when he smoked regularly. The day she told him that she had cancer, he’d thrown out his cigarettes and never looked back, but under the circumstances, he figured she wouldn’t hold it against him if she was watching over him.

The first drag was like inhaling fiberglass insulation, burning and coating his lungs with a dry scratchiness that made him cough. The second drag, though? Oh, that was the shit, and he rolled down the window, to keep his car from smelling like a flophouse as he blew out a cloud of smoke. Halfway through the cigarette, the numbers on the display changed from 8:59 to 9 o’clock in the morning, and he started the engine, tossing the butt out onto the asphalt.

Two sides of his being were sloshing around inside him, like waves rolling into each other. The rational side, the one that screamed from the abyss of his mind that he was driving himself to his own death was being drowned by the waves of bloodlust, and that, aside from Lucille was what was propelling him down Barton Avenue towards the Ambrosio Brothers Parking Garage.

He’d picked the spot to meet Sal because it was owned by Tisone, and Negan wanted to assure his childhood friend that he was being compliant. But he’d also made the stipulation that only two other people accompany Sal to the meeting.

“You doubt me, old friend?” Sal’s tone was friendly when he called Negan’s apartment at five in the morning.

“Of course not, Sal, but I’m not a moron, either. That’s what you respect about me, right?”

The king of the Miami underbelly laughed, and Negan shifted on his couch, gun firmly in his lap. His doors were locked and the windows were covered, not that he had the money with him, anyway.
The only things that he’d brought back into his home with him were his weapons and a white horse with pink streaks along the bridge of its nose.

“If you’ve made good on your promise, Dick, it’ll all be water under the bridge. In fact, I want you to think about relocating. I could use you in Miami.”

“A change of scenery might definitely improve my state of mind,” Negan said, staring blankly at the wall, his thumb moving back and forth over the wood figurine. “Assuming we both leave with what we want.”

“The girl is safe,” Sal told him. “She’s in a holding cell for the night. Now, what happens tomorrow is on you,” he cautioned. “If you’ve recovered everything, I’ll make sure she’s back on the streets in twenty-four hours.”

“Thank you,” Negan worked to sound sincere. “The best thing about this clusterfuck is the fact that you’re involved. I know you’re a straight shooter. You’ve never fucking lied to me, man.”

“Only when I told you a buzz cut looked good on you,” he shot back.

“Fuck you. I look good in everything.”

“Get some sleep, amico. Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life.”

You’re goddamned right it is.

Ambrosio’s was smack in the middle of Little Italy, a three-story parking garage for visitors and regulars that wanted a taste of Alexandria Italian life. Most people used it for daily outings, coming in to visit the bakeries and restaurants, while others knew what it really was. An easy mark to steal cars and make deals. Negan himself had collared several skippers by just hanging out on the levels, snatching them up like a bird skimming for fish.

Because of that, Paulie Ambrosio, who worked the ticket booth, waved him in without a second thought at 9:13 am, several minutes ahead of his scheduled meeting time with Sal Salustri, and he backed Lucille into his pre-chosen spot on the roof in the open air. He wanted a visual of every neighboring building, scouting the area before stepping out and lighting another cigarette, leaning against the trunk to wait.

“Ten minutes,” he muttered to the fresh air, keeping his head on a swivel and his gun in his waistband. The baseball bat, still stained with Caleb’s blood was resting next to him in the sunshine, and he counted the drops of blood that were a dark rust color, making it to nineteen when a shiny black Cadillac appeared on the ramp, looking very much like a shark cutting through the water. It made a wide arc before coming to a stop in the spot two ahead of his, the middle of the roof.

Negan kept his relaxed posture, his face breaking out into a smile when the driver exited. “Awesome.”

Caleb Cage glared at him, backing up without losing eye contact and opening the rear door. The other side swung open, and a guy that was almost a head taller than Negan stepped out, with long, stringy brown hair and a face that was made for punching. He had beady eyes, focused only on him,
and he wore a black dress shirt with a gun holster that hugged his torso.

Sal was the last to step out, looking every bit the man in charge that he was, and it threw Negan a bit, still wanting to picture him as the wide-eyed kid that used to follow him everywhere. He always used to defer to Negan, and he was the one that usually decided what they were going to do, whether it was to skip school to hang out at the quarry or head to the drive-in on Friday nights with Simon. Their roles were reversed, now, and it was Negan who waited for instruction from Sal.

“Still smokin’ the Reds, eh, Dick?”

Sal started to walk forward, and the big dude and Cage flanked him on either side, watching him warily for signs of a setup. But Negan just chucked the cigarette, flicking it with his thumb and forefinger, the butt rolling and coming to rest against one of the light posts. “Just started again.”

“So, what have you got for me?” Sal shook his hand, a firm grip that reminded him that guys like Sal never got theirs dirty. The skin was smooth and supple against his own calloused and rough fingers. More than likely, he’d never done an honest day’s work since he left home, and it chafed at him, being looked at as a lesser-than, especially by one butt-ugly giant and a peroxided douchebag.

“Never send a boy to do a man’s work,” Negan quipped, unable to resist getting a shot in at Caleb. His face was so goddamned out of joint that Negan wished he had a Polaroid so that he could snap a picture.

“Fuck you, old man.”

“Caleb, get the cellular phone,” Sal instructed with a wave of his hand, shaking his head in exasperation. He wanted to do this quickly and cleanly, though he knew Negan well enough to guess how he’d react to Caleb being there. “Fucking young ones don’t have enough respect, right, Beto?”

The large guard just nodded once, and Negan straightened himself, showing both of them slowly that he was armed. “That hurts, Dick. You don’t trust me?”

“I don’t trust them.” His tone was cold, and so were Sal’s eyes as he watched the gun get set next to the bat. “I just want to do this quickly and cleanly so that the girl stays safe. All the rest, we can work out between you and me.”

“Beto, wait by the car and have Caleb call the prison. Put ‘em on hold.”

The murderous part of him wanted to start swinging, to shoot first and ask questions later, but hazel eyes, wide and unsure kept him from doing the unwise thing. Instead, he waited until Beto was a respectable distance away, moving the gun and bat to the roof of Lucille, his trunk key held loosely in his hand. Rather than bring a half-torn box full of money to the meet, he’d purchased a red duffel bag that looked exactly like April’s, and it sat alone in the trunk.

“So, how does this work, Sal? I give you the money and the books and just walk away? What about the girl?”

“Negan, you’re overthinking this. First things first. Unzip the bag.”

He did what he was told like a good little soldier, opening it to show Sal the money and books, his old friend inspecting it without touching it. “Did you look at the books?”

“Your goddamned right I did,” Negan smirked, one eye on Sal and the other tracking Caleb’s movements by the Cadillac. “If I’m going to be working for Tisone and doing his dirty work, I
wanna know who the fuck I can trust. You’ve known me for a long time, Sal, and I don’t walk into shit with blinders on. I avoided this life for as long as I could, but I want to get paid, man. I want what’s due me, and to have it, I’ll do whatever you want. Collect money, beat some ass. You name it. The only thing I want is for you to call off the hit on April.”

Crooking his finger, Sal signaled for Caleb to approach, and he was holding one of those big portable phones, the ones that only criminals and doctors carried around. The big guy lagged a few steps behind, and Caleb’s face showed only anger and disappointment when he got close enough to see the money and the ledgers, but he was a trained lap dog, so all he did was shoot Negan a deathly glare while handing the phone over.

“It’s Sal. Call it off.”

Whoever was on the other side of the call must’ve said something, but Sal’s expression remained the same, and he pressed the button, handing it back to Caleb before shooing him away.

There was no conversation, no back and forth, just the two of them staring at each other for several long seconds as the pressure inside his chest built to a fever pitch.

Because he knew something had gone wrong.

“I’m sorry, Dick. It’s too late.”

Caleb’s smile was what did it. That was the moment that everything went to shit. His control went down to zero, and he lunged forward, knocking the fucker on his ass before he wound up in a headlock, his air cut off by Beto’s ridiculously large arms.

“Hey! Calm the fuck down.”

Sal was in his face, spittle on his lips and blotches of red dancing across his cheeks, but he was nothing. He was no one to him anymore. Just another filthy fucking liar gangster, another piece of shit, and Negan tipped forward, flipping Beto on his back.

“I told you, Sal. I warned you not to trust this asshole—“

Caleb hit the ground again, this time missing a tooth, and Sal took the bag from the trunk, aiming his own gun at him, firing a shot into the air. “Enough!”

“Fuck you,” he roared, skidding to a stop when his own fucking gun brushed the tip of his nose. “You didn’t have to fucking hurt her, Sal.”

“The hit wasn’t supposed to happen until after ten,” Sal shrugged, unbothered. “I know it sucks, Dick, but you’ll still get paid. The girl’s death won’t change that.”

“You think this is about some fucking money? The girl was innocent, and now she’s dead. You knew she didn’t take the money and the books, and you kept the hit on her, anyway. What if I fuck up, Sal? Are you going to take me out, too?”

“Get the fucking bag.” Sal waved the gun towards Lucille’s trunk, and Caleb scrambled off the dirty ground, ramming his shoulder into Negan’s as he passed between the two, zipping up the bag and hoisting it over his shoulder. “I’m going to give you a pass here, Dick. You’ve had a rough couple of days, and I know you don’t like losing clients. So, I’m willing to cut you a fucking break. Take a few days to get over this shit, and I’ll have your finder’s fee sent over to your place.”

He tossed the gun back to Negan as Beto skulked over, getting between him and Caleb, but
Negan’s brain was already stunted and muddled, the anger and the last image he had of April blinking like a neon light in his vision. Sad. Smiling. Underneath him as he covered her with his body, not knowing it would be the last time they’d be together.

Negan didn’t see Caleb raise his weapon until it was too late, he only felt the bullet as it entered his shoulder, knocking him back into Lucille, knocking the breath from his lungs. Sal was still walking away with Beto, but Caleb was aiming the gun at his head…until another shot went right through his hand, sending the gleaming metal into the air and out of his line of vision. His body gave out, sending all receptors and attention to the searing hole in his chest, and his eyelids fluttered as a swarm of cops ascended to the roof. The last image he had of Sal Salustri was him being surrounded by federal agents, their eyes meeting one final time as Negan smiled grimly before passing out from the pain.

_The sky was blue, the kind of blue that only existed in Technicolor movies, with little round clouds out of a child’s drawing. He was on his back, only the sound of the wind blowing through the tall grass. It was peaceful, the kind of day that only good, normal people got to experience._

_Lucille lifted her head from his chest, sitting up on the red and white checked blanket they were laying on. “I have to go, sweetheart.”_

_He tried to pull her back towards him, but she rose with the same fluidity and grace that she had in her youth, blocking the sun with her silhouette. Her hair was waving in the breeze, and she vanished, like the snap of a finger._

_Strangely, he didn’t feel melancholy, only a muted happiness that she was somewhere so nice. But the sun dimmed and the clouds became larger, greyer, the wind getting colder, and it was not soothing anymore. It leached the warmth from his bones and his skin, all except for one spot. His upper chest, and he lifted his head to see brown hair with golden streaks pressed against the spot. Sad, hazel eyes that were watery and made the hot part of his torso get even more uncomfortable._

_“I have to go, James Dean.”_

_She rose with shaky limbs, and he reached out for her, but she didn’t disappear like Lucille. She just staggered off, out of his sight as he lay trapped on the red and white blanket, calling her name._

_But she never looked back._

_“Negan?”_
The burning in his chest wasn’t part of the dream. It was real. He’d been shot, and as he came back into consciousness, he tried to roll to his side, but the pain made it impossible.

“Negan? Come on, man.”

It took him a while to make his eyes open, but when he did, he saw Rick’s anxious face above him and an iv pole to the right.

“Is it done?” his voice was scratchy and weak, but Rick nodded in relief, cranking up the head of the bed so that he could see. Sitting in the corner of the room were two agents, the ones he’d met an hour after he set up the meeting with Caleb.

“Tell your boss I want to set up a meeting.”

There was silence on the other end of the line until Caleb snorted into the phone. “When?”

“Tomorrow morning. Nine thirty on the top level of Ambrosio’s.”

He hung up without waiting for a confirmation, stopping at the bar and downing the alcohol before paying, leaving a generous tip and driving through the dark to the home of Rick Grimes. There was a Big Wheel in the driveway that he almost took out with the front end of his car. He honked the horn once, but there were no lights on in the house, and in a bout of frustration, he laid it on for ten seconds, the living room lamp switching on.

Rick’s face peered out the window, and Negan got out of the car, dragging the box with him up to the front porch. “It’s late, Negan—“

Pushing past him, he walked into the cluttered room, filled with toys and furniture, classic suburban romp, sitting down on the blue couch and gesturing to the box. “It’s all there, Rick. Every name, every kickback. Everything. I want them all to go down.”

Rick eyed the contents, plucking out the top book and running his palm over the top of it. “You said you thought there was someone who could help,” Negan prompted him.

“April’s in jail, and I set up a meeting for tomorrow morning with Sal. We’re on the fucking clock, man.”

“We can’t set something up in less than twelve hours, Negan. Jesus.” Rick ran his hand through his hair, wearing a pale blue Mickey Mouse t-shirt and blue plaid flannel pants.

“I don’t even know where—“

“Do it, Rick,” he launched to his feet, towering over the other man with his fists clenched. “She’s out of fucking time and I’m not letting her down. I’m going through it again.”
Agent Michonne Williams was fucking gorgeous. Long, braided hair and skin that probably tasted like honey. She was also a badass bitch, and Negan watched admiringly as she stretched out on the floor of her apartment, legs askew and the most serious expression on her face as she read through each journal, making meticulous notes. Occasionally she would nibble on her lower lip, letting out a low, guttural sound as she came across another name that she knew, and it was just after midnight when she looked up, appearing as awake as he felt tired.

“I can work with this,” she said, rising to her feet and padding out of the living room of her high-rise apartment. Rick was sitting on the couch next to him, fidgeting like a fucking teenager with a hard-on.

“Jesus Christ,” Negan elbowed him in the side, getting a huff of breath to the side of his neck. “Reign it the fuck in, Grimes.”

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“I need her help, asshole. If she catches you popping a boner while she’s looking at the names of her friends that are dirty, I’ll kill you.”

“It’s fine.”

They both jumped as Michonne moved smoothly back into the white living room, having changed into a pantsuit and boots, affixing her badge to the waistband. Rick’s face turned a reddish-purple, and got even worse when Michonne winked at him. “Stay here,” she told them, sweeping out the door with just one of the ledgers.

He and Rick sat next to each other on the couch until Negan couldn’t take it anymore, pacing around the room before stopping at the window and staring out into the night.

“Do you think she’s okay? That she’s safe for now?”

“Prison policy means she’ll be in a holding cell by herself for the first night, so, yeah,” Rick sounded unsure. “If we can really do this, Michonne will make sure that she’s put in witness protection.”

“Good.” Even if it meant that he’d never see her again.

“Lucille wasn’t your fault either.”

Whipping his head around, he gave Rick a withering look, the dead spot in his heart pulsating with anger. “What the fuck do you know about her?”

“I know she was your wife, and she died. You told me you weren’t going through it again, so I figured you were talking about losing someone you cared about.”
“Just...don't talk.”

He didn’t need to be reminded of all his past failures. They were always there, mocking him. Just like the obnoxious woman who was no doubt scared shitless right now. He owed her a debt. He felt things for her. He could possibly even love her, if given half a chance. But first, he had to save her.

Michonne returned two hours later, with another agent, signed order from a judge, and a litany of recording devices, ordering him to shave his chest in her bathroom so that she could see which one was going to work best.

“You don’t engage, Negan,” she lightly touched his chest, and he bit back an inappropriate comment as her partner, a redheaded guy with a handlebar mustache watched him with hawk eyes, expecting him to act like a degenerate. “You make the exchange, and you discuss the hit on April. Anything we can get on tape is going to bolster this investigation.”

“This is huge. Real fucking huge,” the guy, Abraham muttered. “Fucking nationwide, huh?”

“You don’t know the half of it, Little Red Riding Hood. Hey, are your pubes orange, too?”

Michonne ripped the tape off, scratching his right nipple, and he winced, reaching for his shirt. “This one will work.”

By the time three thirty rolled around, he was beat, even as the agents’ jobs were just beginning, his head overflowing with information and a recording device in his hand. He also carried a promise from Michonne that they would get April out of the prison first thing in the morning, a call already placed with the warden.

“I’m sorry,” Michonne murmured, taking his hand and giving it two squeezes, looking down on him in his hospital bed like the victim he was. “I’m so sorry, Negan.”

“You said she’d be safe. You said you’d get her out.”

“I know, and we tried. My whole...everything is insane right now. Every branch of government is going to be in an uproar once all of this goes public. You’re not safe, Negan. As soon as you can be moved, you’ll be placed in a safe house, and then you’ll be gone. As it is right now, you’re dead. You died up on that roof.”
“Fuck my situation. I want to know about April, Michonne.”

“She…” Michonne’s face softened, and it made him feel worse, bracing himself to hear something terrible. “She was placed with another prisoner that had no history of violence in the last ten years. But she was given privileges that others weren’t. She stabbed April several times, and she didn’t make it.”

You’re lying.” Her face blurred in front of him, so he turned his head. He didn’t want her to see him cry, because he wasn’t a crier. “You’re fucking lying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Then I want to see her. I want to see her body.”

Michonne came around to the other side of the bed, holding his head steady so that he couldn’t look away. “She’s gone, Negan. Her body’s been removed from the prison and they contacted her parents to claim it. She’s being cremated today.”

Someone started to sob, a high-pitched sound that broke through the quiet, and he finally realized that it was him. He was the one crying, and he heard the sound of shoes shuffling and the door closing, leaving him alone with Michonne and the pain that was emotional and not physical.

It was all for nothing. April Brower really was dead.

Chapter End Notes

A LOT to get to in this chapter, but...poor Negan. :( 
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Just a little baby chapter as Negan starts the next adventure of his life...

Death Notices
August 17, 1989

Schnarr, William
Alexandria
91 years old

Burton, Maybelle
Rose Hill
66 years old

Harrish, Peter
North Ridge
67 years old

Brower, April
Alexandria
31 years old

No matter how many times he looked at the name, it didn’t take away the sickening feeling in his stomach. There hadn’t been any write-up, no waxing poetic about her life or her accomplishments. Just one measly line of text in the paper, dwarfed by the other deaths that day.

At least Rick had been kind enough to provide information for his own obituary, and he’d held a somber memorial for his ‘dead’ friend, complete with a cheesy framed picture and candle burning next to it. His passing was glossed over, a glowing tribute to a friend and not the whistleblower that helped take down one of the biggest crime families ever, and the effects were just getting started.

Every day as he prowled the safe house, a cabin in the middle of fucking nowhere, Georgia, the shitty little black and white television in the living room poured out nonstop news, new arrests daily of politicians, congressmen, and the first big gun to go down.

‘...Senator James Tate of Virginia, seen here being led out of his office in handcuffs, is the latest power figure to be arrested in what is now being called the largest organized crime bust in American history. Thanks to an unnamed source, authorities were able to uncover and name over a hundred high-ranking officials that were taking money from the Tisone crime family in exchange for special privileges...’
Sal was one of the first to go down, identified as Miami’s top public enemy, and just a month ago, Negan might’ve given a shit. Now, he hoped the asshole suffered, and the image of him being walked into court in cuffs and shackles made his dick hard. Not even the sight of his two kids, trotted out for sympathy along with his pretty wife made a dent in his anger. If he had to live in misery right now, so did fuckin’ Sal. It was his fault that everything went ass up.

Negan had torn out the pages with Sal’s name on it from the ledgers, hoping to let his old friend off the fucking hook, but after his ‘give no shits’ attitude about April’s welfare, Sal’s bullshit at the parking garage was all his. He had to own it, just the way Negan had to own his guilt over not one, but two deaths. Lucille and April were his cross to bear, the anchor that weighed him down.

The only other thing tethering him to his old life was Michonne. He was waiting on her to come and set him free somewhere else in the country, under his new name. She was given full lead on the case, and it was her that arranged for him to be transferred out of the hospital in the dead of night, giving him less than eight hours in a hospital bed to mourn the girl. Negan had been wheeled into a sedan with tinted windows in the parking garage of United Medical Center, the entire area clear of visitors and staff. From there, she and Abraham drove him down to Georgia, where he’d spent the last ten days recovering and offering up all information he knew about Tisone and April.

They’d made him recount their cross-country trip in excruciating detail, from when he was informed of her whereabouts to how long it took him to locate her. He recalled the trip through Texas, the Caddy that was tailing them, and their stop in Chicago. Michonne wrote down Murray’s Bar and Grille since the owner would be able to corroborate his account of Caleb showing up, though he wasn’t present for their ‘conversation’.

There was only a slight nudge of guilt in his stomach as he told them what he knew of April’s childhood and life, and Abraham seemed grim as he met Michonne’s eye. “We interviewed her parents. They seemed like…”

“Pieces of shit,” Negan supplied, and Abraham nodded. “Johnny Durring seemed like he was different than the trash that she grew up with, but in the end, he was just another asshole. Another person in her life that let her down and fucked her over.”

Michonne frowned as she glanced up from her notes, giving her partner a look, and he excused himself, stepping out onto the front porch of the cabin and lighting up a cigar.

“You didn’t let her down, Negan,” she closed her book, patting him on the hand. “You sound like the only one that truly tried to help her.”

“The fuck lot of good it did her.”

They moved onto the next subject, and Negan broke down their time in Nashville along with their last stop together, Fulp. But for some reason, he kept her budding friendship with Daniel as secret, a strange intuition that no one needed to know about it. He wanted to keep that just for her, though his eyes flitted towards the wooden horse that sat on the credenza. That and Lucille’s lighter were the only things he had left to call his own. Everything else was left behind, the possessions of a dead man.

After two days of meticulous notes, Michonne and Abraham left him at the cabin with a guard, returning to D.C. to continue their investigations. A whole team, handpicked by Michonne, thanks to the assload of information that Durring posthumously provided the authorities, and because of that, the entire Bureau was being cleaned out, from the Director on down. A temporary one had been installed in his place, and Negan overheard the guard muttering something about the President demanding answers as to how the law enforcement system along with the highest levels of
government got so fucked up.

He, for one, didn’t give a shit, not when his chest was itchy as fuck and keeping him from just getting the fuck outta Dodge. He’d asked the guard at least twenty times where he was going to be sent, but the guy, Michael, didn’t have a clue. “Take it up with the boss, when she comes back.” The problem was, he had no fucking clue when that would be. So, he spent his days healing, sending the guard out for cigarettes and food, and watching the news obsessively, all in between staring at her name in the paper, mentally berating himself as he wondered how the people in his life, his former life were holding up.

On Tuesday, August twenty-ninth, he woke to the sound of car doors slamming, and he sat up, feeling only a dull ache from his chest wound. The two-bedroom cabin was stiflingly hot, since there was no air-conditioning, and he was covered in sweat, even though he was buck ass naked. Normally, he would’ve probably strode out of the room completely nude, but he shrugged on a pair of gym shorts, tiredly pawing at the healing spot as he trudged out to the living room/kitchen.

He went to the fridge, one that seemed to have come from the 1950s, taking out a bottle of Coke and opening it with his bare hand instead of using the pop topper that was built in. The only visitors they’d had were the old couple that owned the cabin and the twelve acres that it sat on. They knew Michonne somehow, and they’d agreed to let her use the place for his safekeeping. His guards had been hand-picked by her, so he felt reasonably safe being in the middle of nowhere.

Still, his hackles went up when two strange men walked into the cabin, all decked out in suits and shades, looking like douchebags of the highest order. He kept his relaxed posture as they flashed their badges, and he logged their names as Hutchence and Jacobson. Michael, his regular guy accompanied them, and they gestured for him to sit down at the table, though the Hutchence guy offered to let him get dressed first.

“Nah, I’m good,” he grinned, squaring his shoulders as they stared at him blankly. There was an itch on his left ball, and he rubbed it with abandon, amused when all three men averted their eyes. “When am I getting sprung from this shithole? Not that it hasn’t been fun hanging with you, Mikey, shootin’ the shit and all.”

“That’s why we’re here, sir,” Hutchence waved towards the table, and he sat down as a white envelope was placed in front of him along with another manila one. He opened the folder first, seeing his handsome mug smiling up at him, ensconced in a brand new driver’s license. Underneath that was a birth certificate, two credit cards, and a title to a new car. The agent set a pair of car keys alongside the folder, and his throat closed up, Lucille the car and the woman flooding his mind.

He thought that he’d have that car forever, and the thought of someone else driving her, touching her, created a rumbling sound in his belly that everyone fucking heard. To distract himself, he studied his new name and made-up address which would be changed when he figured out where he was going. Michonne had scoffed when he told her what he wanted his new moniker to be, but when he explained why, she agreed to let him have it. His new destination, though, was his choice, provided it wasn’t a large city or on either coast, pending her final approval. “There’s still a lot of mob activity in those spots, and we’ll never be able to rid the country completely of these guys,” she told him.

“Even though we recorded your death, it would be monumentally stupid and irresponsible to place you anywhere you could be recognized.”

“Well…fuck,” he’d slumped in his chair, visions of a beach house dissipating. “I’m guessing Mexico is out, too.”

“You never had a shot of going there,” she smirked, and he admired again how fucking pretty she
was.

But she wasn’t her.

Shaking his head, Negan took the white envelope, sliding his index finger under the flap and ripping it open to find a note from Michonne, written in an elegant hand. He stood up without a word, walking back into the bedroom to read it in private, and he sat on his unmade bed.

Negan,

I wanted to thank you for all of your help, and for everything that you’ve given up to do the right thing. Our work is far from over, but I’m hopeful that the rest of your life is a peaceful one, and that you’re able to move on from everything that you’ve lost. While I can’t tell you what the future has in store, you’re the most resilient person that I’ve ever encountered, and that’s a good thing. April would be proud, and I know she’s in a better place, free of the pain and disappointment of her life.

Sincerely,

Michonne Harrison

P.S. Choose your new home carefully.

She’d drawn a smiley face underneath the letter, which he thought was fucking odd, and he stared at the words for several minutes, lost in thought. It wasn’t until one of the agents rapped on the door jamb, getting his attention that he had an epiphany. As he looked at the uniformed man, it clicked in his brain, and he broke out into a smile.

“Buddy, I know exactly where I want to go, and you’re going to make it happen.”
Chapter 19

June 29th, 1991

The Centerville Public Library was abnormally quiet for a Saturday afternoon, with only two cars parked in the small lot. The library was a former Victorian home, with a manicured lawn in front and a porch for hanging out and reading.

Negan parked in the spot closest to the door, tucking his keys into his jeans pocket and bounding up the steps to the entrance, nodding at Mrs. Clayton, who was perched on her usual rocking chair, thumbing through a copy of Little Women.

The front door had one of those old-fashioned bells that rang overhead when the door opened, and he passed by the empty front counter, heading directly back to the periodicals section, parking himself on a small chair by the fireplace after grabbing a handful of newspapers. The librarian, Sandy, had taken to ordering the local papers from all over Iowa for him, after some casual flirting on his part when he first arrived.

Up until the last month, he’d never allowed it to go beyond that, but as the days passed and he became more downtrodden and depressed, he and Sandy ended up sleeping together. It’s not that it was bad, because it wasn’t. Sandy was cute and sweet and obviously smart. But she liked him a little too much, and the feelings weren’t reciprocated.

In an ironic twist to his existence, he’d become the one to back away after a brief period with any woman he started seeing since he’d been relocated to Iowa. He was the one that grew bored or just annoyed with them, no matter how gorgeous or rich or…whatever they were.

Centerville, Iowa had a population of about five thousand residents, a small town near the Missouri border, and it was as far from the life he knew as it could get. Everything moved at a more relaxed pace, and he was like a shiny new toy when he showed up almost two years ago, driving a pickup truck and not a clue what to expect.

Michonne had set up everything, finding him a little house that was put in his new name and a job at Ron’s Auto Shop. His life as a bounty hunter was over, and he sure as shit didn’t want to go back to teaching. Luckily, he was a whiz at mechanics, and Ron had accepted his employment over the phone after received a glowing recommendation from the largest auto body shop in Houston, Texas.

His life was…okay. It wasn’t bad, but it certainly wasn’t what he wanted, and his urge to hunt, to find, was still going strong. The women were nice, but he was alone more often than he was partnered up because he just couldn’t put in the effort aside from a few dinners out. Two Jennifers, a Roberta, and a Katherine. Negan dated them, bedded them, tolerated them, and ditched them, all while he continued to search.
He’d been sitting in a cabin in Georgia when Michonne had sent him his new identity and the freedom to choose where he wanted to go. And something about the letter seemed like a hint as to where that should be. It had taken him a few minutes to work it out, and when he submitted his request, she’d approved it immediately, so he thought that was steering him in the right direction.

April was alive. He felt it in his marrow, and he came to Iowa with a plan to find her, though Michonne never confirmed it. The problem was, it was nearly two years of fucking nothing. He drove around different towns every weekend when he got off of work, he looked through newspapers from every municipality that he could, and he checked out every woman that he came across, but she wasn’t here.

Six months in, he finally lost his shit, calling Michonne’s office and demanding that she tell him if he was wasting his time, but she was calm, cool, and collected as he ranted and raved about April, and when he finally took a breath, she murmured softly in his ear. “April Brower is dead.”

And hung up.

He spent that night drinking so much that he woke up with vomit on his shirt and a cut on his hand that he had no recollection of how it happened, and after the world’s saddest, loneliest pity party, he shut off his emotions for weeks, working his ass off for Ron and screwing one of the Jennifers, telling himself to move the fuck on.

A month later, he was back at the library, obsessively checking newspapers once again for any sign of her. She couldn’t be dead, she just couldn’t, because he wasn’t a fucking failure anymore. He could do anything. He was the baddest of all badasses. He helped take down a fucking mob stranglehold on the federal government. Who the fuck else could boast that?

The second time he called Michonne for help, it was just after Memorial Day, 1990. Using a pay phone, he hunched over in the booth, his eyes burning and squeezed shut as he waited for her to come on the line.

“Harrison.”

“Michonne,” he said, expelling a tremulous breath.

“You can’t call me,” she whispered, and he heard a muffled sound, like she was covering the speaker. “This is dangerous.”

“I just need to know, Michonne. Please. You don’t have to tell me where she is, but…just tell me I’m not crazy. Give me something, here.”

Everything was hinging on her answer, and she sighed softly. “All I can say is April Brower is dead. But think about Field of Dreams.”

“Huh? What about it?”

“I have to go. That’s all I can tell you. April is dead.”

The line went silent, and he let the phone drop, not sure if he should be confused or emboldened, and the next morning, he went to the closest Blockbuster, renting the movie and taking it back to his house. The plot was about fathers and regrets and baseball and he was one the verge of calling her back until Kevin Coster’s dad asked him if this was Heaven.

'No, it's Iowa.'
Heaven. Iowa. Heaven was Iowa and April was in Heaven.

He connected the dots, and it gave him a renewed focus, allowing him to continue to search, though after another fucking year of nothing, he was reaching another breakdown. Still, in between working his job and getting to know Iowa back and forth, his thoughts would flit to Lucille. He missed her, even after everything he’d gone through. He missed having someone who knew him backward and forward. Who could steer him back when he’d gone off the rails. But he had to do it himself, now, and he kept searching.

“Hey, handsome.”

Negan lifted his head as Sandy the cute librarian that he was seeing came into the room, pecking him on the cheek. “You smell like motor oil.”

“Sorry, babe,” he dropped his eyes back to the latest issue of the Pella Chronicle, scanning an article on an upcoming Fourth of July celebration, but nothing seemed familiar with the names.

“No, I like it,” she confessed, and he turned the page, mildly irritated. Sandy knew that he didn’t like to be bothered when he was reading, but she took the seat next to him and he pasted a smile on his face, setting the pages on his lap. “I was hoping that we could go to the Bowery tonight when I get off work. That band I like is playing.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

Drinking was better than sitting at home, and at least he’d be able to get laid, and Sandy lit up, jumping to her feet and ducking behind the bookshelf as he watched her. She was a pretty girl, with brown hair and blue eyes. Short, but with a shapely body, she was wearing a peach skirt and white sweater set, her hair combed back neatly into a bun. A few years ago, he would’ve corrupted her so completely that she’d probably never recover, but he didn’t have it in him, now. They had a nice time and nice sex, but it lacked fire and passion. Negan was afraid he’d never have that passion again.

She walked back over, hiding something behind her back, and with a flourish, she held a new paper under his nose, one he’d never seen before. “Fairfield?” He’d heard of the town, about an hour away, but it wasn’t one of the ones that he’d researched. For some reason, he thought it too ‘modern’ for April to reside at, picturing her in some one-horse town, safe from any sort of danger.

“It was sent to us today. I don’t remember signing up for it, though,” she said cheerfully, kissing him again, this time on his temple. “As a librarian, I encourage everyone to read, and since you love to read newspapers, I figured I’d save it for you.”

The bell above the door sounded, and she returned to the front of the library, leaving him alone as he studied the Fairfield Ledger, the lead article about budget cuts for the state, and he scanned the article for…something. Anything, expecting yet another dead end, the prospect of finding one goddamned person in a state of millions pressing him further into the chair.

Until he reached the lifestyle section, coming across an article about the installation of a gazebo in Fairfield’s Central Park, the star attraction of the upcoming Fourth of July parade and party. He was reading the article, looking for any signs of April, and when he finally glanced at the picture of the
crowd on hand for the ribbon cutting, his heart beginning to race as he brought the picture just inches from his face, not even noticing that the paper was shaking in his hands.

Sandy was stamping books when he went flying past without stopping, spitting out a few words as he shot through the door.

“Rain check, all right?”

“Hey! Where are you going?”

Fred Hasenfeld was a happy man, driving the tractor on the outskirts of the Trotter family farm, a cool breeze along the back of his neck and blue skies above him. He’d helped tend to this land and the animals that occupied it since he was nine years old. A gentleman of simple means, dirt under his nails and muscles that were sore signaled an honest day’s work. A job well done.

Samuel Trotter hadn’t been a gregarious man, but he was steadfast and fair, and the Hasenfelds had worked for the Trotters since they’d settled in Fairfield, some eighty odd years ago. The land had once been parceled between the two clans, but as the depression hit and finances became uncertain, Fred’s father had sold his share to the Trotters, with the understanding that their families would be allowed to maintain employment and a share of the crops in perpetuity.

The arrangement had worked out well for generations, as the Trotters had slowly died off, while the Hasenfelds were fruitful with descendants. Samuel Trotter was the last of his name, and when he’d passed suddenly, the farm was thrown into chaos as the lawyers tried to figure out what would happen to the farm. Fred wasn’t a rich man, but he was content, and though it had occurred to him to maybe take out a loan to purchase the property, he wasn’t getting any younger himself, and his only son, Andrew, had taken a different path. The boy was a hard worker, but he had no interest in the family trade, preferring to open a mechanic’s shop in the city limits.

And then one day in October of 1989, as he was tending to the cows, getting them fed and settled for the night, old Jessup Clingensmith came driving up, hitching up the belt holding up his good brown suit and carrying a stack of papers. Fred came out of the barn with his handkerchief, wiping his fingers as he spat out his chaw.

“Evening’, Jess,” he said, the two meeting up just feet from the cattle. “What brings you out here?”

A tickle of nervousness bubbled up in his gut, a feeling he hadn’t had since Andrew was born and his momma began to fade away in the bed.

“I have some news for you,” Jessup said, gesturing towards the house, a good walk for the two older gents. They walked in a companionable silence as the cows let a few evening calls to each other, and they sat on the steps in the dusk. “As you know, Samuel didn’t have any children, so we’d

July 3rd, 1991

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been in a bit of a pickle trying to determine how we were going to suss up ownership of the property.”

“Andrew isn’t going to want to purchase this place, and I’m getting’ up there, Jess,” he said, but the lawyer held up his hand to interrupt.

“I don’t blame you,” he replied with a nod. “It turns out that Samuel had a distant cousin, and his daughter is still alive. A private detective reached out to us, having done a thorough family tree consultation for her, and they found out about the connection. What do they call that, archeology?”

“Huh,” Fred thought for a second, snapping his fingers when he remembered. “Genealogy.”

“Right. The investigator had perused the records and discovered that old Samuel had just passed, so we’ve been negotiating with the woman to see if she was willing to take on the property or if she wanted to sell.”

“Are you sure this is on the up and up?” Fred was worried, imagining some city slicker coming in and tearing everything out and installing something wacky, like wind turbines or something. “Are ya positive this person is Trotter stock?”

“We’ve done our research, Fred. This is legitimate. The good news is that she doesn’t want to sell the property. She’s intending to move here and we’ve explained to her about the history between the Trotters and the Hasenfelds, so she’ll be along in a week to meet with you. The investigator said she’s keen to get to know you, and she expressed an interest in keeping you on as long as you’d like to be here.”

“Is she married?” he wondered. “Does she have young’uns that will be learning the ropes as well? A husband?”

“She’s single, so go easy on her. I just wanted to update you and let you now that the property isn’t going to be sold.”

It was a load off of his mind, and the two sat and talked for a while longer under the clear night sky, stars twinkling down on them like silent applause.

He thought about that day often as he came in sight of the tool barn, and he pulled the tractor into its usual spot, chuckling to himself when he turned it off and the sound of modern music filled the air. He wiped his brow, the heat still strong in the late afternoon as they made their way into mid-summer. The closest cow barn, once a faded burgundy was returned to its bright red color, bringing him back to his youth when he’d sneak in to lay in one of the stalls for an afternoon nap.

“…I turn to stone when you are gone
I turn to stone
I turn to stone, when you comin’ home?
I can’t go on…”

The boss lady was standing at her makeshift working station, writing furiously as her left boot
tapped in time with the song. Clad in red Wellies, jeans, and a blue button-down, June’s hair was a sopping mess as the fan in the corner of her work area blew warm air over her. The music was so loud that she didn’t hear his footsteps, and she jumped at least a foot off the ground when he tapped her shoulder.

“Every damn time,” she shuddered, clutching her chest as he chuckled. She pressed the button on the sound system, flooding the large expanse with sudden quiet, leaning her lower back against the shelf and fanning her face. “You’re going to give me a heart attack one day.”

“The field’s looking good and the corn is loaded up in the flatbed for tomorrow. We got more than enough for the parade.”

“They have everything set up for the roast?” she asked, and he nodded in the affirmative.

“It’ll be fine,” Fred assured her as his eyes strayed down to her notes. “How did it go?”

June Daniels was…innovative, he guessed. Not a traditional woman, at least as it related to agricultural affairs, maybe because she was young. Her most recent passion had been using music to increase milk production in the cows, and every day she kept a meticulous log of how the ‘kids’ as she called them responded.

“Um, ELO seems to be pretty popular with this group,” she bit her lip, staring intently off into space. “We had twenty percent more product today with them than with the Beatles, but it was still less than Mozart.”

Every few days, she changed the type of music, and so far, it seemed to have some merit to it. The cows all came trotting over from the field when they heard the first few strains of music, and even though he didn’t really understand it, June was focused on the welfare of their animals. As they stood there, one of the barn cats came over, weaving her way between his legs, and June went over to the little fridge that she kept in the barn, taking out a small bottle of fresh milk, pouring it into the dish that she kept under her shelf.

The cat, Hershey, meowed loudly, and June gave her a few scratches before starting towards the other side of the barn. Fred followed behind her, checking each stall as they walked past, deeming them clean enough to let them go for one more day. He was as anxious to see Buttercup as June was, and they stopped in front of her stall, watching the brown and white cow quietly. The heifer was due to give birth any day, and though it wasn’t an uncommon occurrence on a dairy farm, it never failed to delight the woman.

Despite Fred’s urging, she steadfastly refused to remove the calves that were born and sell them to increase production. “I can’t do it,” she confessed, tears forming in her eyes after the first baby was born when she arrived at the farm. “I can’t tear a baby away from its mother like that.”

“That’s how this works,” Fred tried to explain, at a loss. “The longer you keep them together, the more they bond.”

June didn’t want to hear it, insisting that she wasn’t looking to make a huge profit here. “I care more about the animals, Fred. I want to make this place somewhere that they can feel safe.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that cattle were stupid, but then Daisy, the first to give birth for June had wandered over and licked her finger, and he knew it was going to be a losing battle. These animals weren’t just property to her, and over the next eighteen months, he came to respect her. She grew from an overwhelmed woman to someone that he respected, and as June fed Buttercup some sweet hay, he watched how the smile on her face widened. She was truly happy.
here, and he bid her goodnight, loping back to the front of the property where his truck was parked.

June was more than capable of closing up the barns for the night, and he trusted in her to let him know if that would ever change. She insisted that he head home as early as possible every evening, telling him that he needed time to relax and recharge. “You’re just down the street,” she reminded him regularly. “I’ll call if there are any problems, and I keep the shotgun by my bed.”

She’d come a long way over the last year, far from the sad, hopeless thing that showed up with a single suitcase and more pain in her eyes than should be possible for someone so young. Theirs was a special friendship, and June had often told him that he reminded her of a special person that had come in and out of her life quickly.

“Life is precious,” she’d say as they walked the grounds. “I don’t take anything for granted, anymore.”

July Fourth was always a day for celebration in Fairfield, and he hauled his tired bones to his truck, glancing back once more at the barn before starting his old girl up and swinging the front end in an arc, whistling to the dogs to move. The two Golden Retrievers trotted off to the grass as he started down the long drive, having put in another good day’s work, and with a flip of the visor, Fred blocked the setting sun as he drove home, not noticing a black pickup sitting off the road half-hidden by the wheat field.

Chapter End Notes

Yes! April is alive, and we’ll get some of her perspective next chapter. She’s been through too much to die in a damned prison. :(


Dizzy with pain. Paralyzed with fear. Waiting to die.

The only part of her that wasn’t slamming with pain was her right cheek, and it rested against the cool concrete floor, getting warm when her blood flowed against it as she stared blankly at the grey wall, watching slipper-clad feet pass by her line of sight.

This was how it was going to end for her. It was destined, pre-ordained by her shitty lot in life to expel her life essence on the dirty floor of a prison, forgotten before the year ended, probably. As she felt herself fading, she could hear whoops and yells, but they sounded so far away that she thought she might’ve been imagining it.

“Stay with me, April. Just hang in there. You’re going to be fine.”

She’d never heard the voice before, a low baritone as the click-click-click of something above her fought for her attention. Her arms and legs were numb, and she tried to open her mouth, but it wouldn’t co-operate either. She was just a lumpy thing, half-alive and half-dead, trying desperately to be one or the other. Not both.

“Declare her deceased so we can get her the hell outta this place.”

Rolling through black and white, April tried to tell the disembodied voice that she was alive, that she didn’t want to burn, or have her neck slit open, but she was stagnant in her own body, the flames licking at her neck as she was pushed towards the fire that would consume her, and she heard Johnny’s voice like an echo in her mind.

“Welcome back, baby.”

“Junebug?”

The heat was radiating off of her body as April opened her eyes, finding white teeth, a long, pink tongue, and killer breath right in front of her face, and she rolled onto her back, trying to calm herself down. She had nightmares at least twice a week, no matter what, and it always took a few minutes to come back down to earth and remember that she was safe. As safe as anyone could be, at least.

Miles away from Alexandria, the mob, and politics, April lived now not as a child of junkies, but as June Daniels, a long-lost relative of Samuel Trotter. The animals didn’t care how she grew up or
what she went through, they just wanted to be fed and housed, and she sat up, petting one of her beloved dogs on the head, accepting a kiss good morning.

“Gracie, you need your teeth brushed.”

The dog yipped happily, and April set her feet on the floor, cuddling her best girl for a few minutes until they were interrupted by dog number two. “Georgie boy,” she cooed, and he took a flying leap, landing on her lap, all wiggling butt and happy eyes, soaking up the attention like a sponge. She ended up on her back again, the sickening fear that had haunted her for another night starting to fade.

It was only when she heard a chuckle from the doorway that she pushed George off, sitting back up and stretching as a cup of coffee was set into her open hand. Tilting her head up, she touched her lips to Cal’s, keeping them shut so that she didn’t offend him with her morning breath, but he held her head in place, extending their embrace.

“Another bad dream, Junebug?”

April fluffed it off, taking a sip of coffee as the dogs bounced around, and he sat next to her on the bed, rubbing her bare thigh. “You know, if I moved in here, I could keep you safe from the boogeyman,” he said, sounding both serious and flippant, kissing her neck, and April leaned into it, not wanting to outright tell him ‘no’.

“You’re going to leave your own land unoccupied just to guard me against nightmares?”

“I’m sure they’ll be some perks involved,” he said, running his hand up to her hip and trying to lay her back on the bed, but she put a stop to his attempt at early morning sex, moving him towards a hug instead. “Damn, Junebug. I came all the way over here to make you coffee and help you with the heifers before the parade. Are you telling me I’m not getting any affection?”

“Cal, get up,” she laughed, pushing him to his feet and holding his waist as George and Gracie took off down the hall. “I have to brush my teeth.”

Cal Draper was the classic corn-fed Iowa boy, and she liked him. A lot. Enough to let him into her bed several times a week for the past year or so. He was tall, at least six-four, with hair the color of summer wheat and eyes that sparkled like sapphires. His skin was always a golden honey color, even in the winter, and he treated her well. Whether to take her into town for dinner or help her around the farm, Cal was always dependable, always there for her. So, why didn’t she want to live with him?

It wasn’t the first time he’d broached the subject, but she always told him it was too soon. April was just getting to know herself in this new life, and she wasn’t ready to tether herself to anyone else. Not after Johnny. And not after Negan.

Cal headed downstairs with a good-natured grumble, leaving her to get dressed, and once she heard the screen door slam, she crept to the window, watching as he headed towards the closest barn. Fred had already arrived, and even though she had a ton of things to get done before heading to the park to start roasting corn for the picnic, she went over to her makeup table, sitting down and opening the bottom drawer.

Inside was a jewelry box, one that belonged to Sam Trotter’s wife, Vera. It was decorated with mother-of-pearl in a swirly shell pattern, dotted with small rhinestones, and it was the prettiest/ugliest thing she’d ever seen. Vera had been the proud owner of a ton of costume jewelry, and she pushed the larger pieces aside, extracting the folded-up newspaper clipping that she kept hidden from everyone, including herself, only daring to look at it once in a while. It was only a year and a half
old, but the words were faded from being handled so often, and she was afraid the picture would get damaged, too.

It was the only picture she had of Negan, the only remnant of him that she possessed, and April held it to her face, drinking in his smile, taking care not to look at the words. The last words that were written about him, because he was gone. And it was her fault. The agents that came and took her out of the prison assured her over and over that it wasn’t, and that he’d died almost instantly from the gunshot, but she still blamed herself.

“He was brave,” Agent Ford told her as she recovered from three separate stab wounds in a safe house somewhere in Pennsylvania. “He wanted Tisone to go down, even if he had to sacrifice himself to do it.”

Thinking about Negan was painful, but she needed that hurt to remind her of what she lost, and what she’d gained because of him, and April looked at his face one more time before tucking him back into the jewelry box, lost in sadness for a few minutes. The dogs barking jolted her out of her stupor, and she threw on a pair of her faded work jeans and a reasonably clean undershirt, joining Cal and Fred in the barn to turn the cattle loose and muck out the stalls.

Gracie and George chased the barn cats around while they worked, and once the second barn was done, Cal kissed her goodbye, heading off to care for his own property, telling her he’d see her at the park. The cows were moving out en mass through the field towards the pond, and she whistled for the dogs to follow, their training taking over as they herded the heifers, keeping the stragglers in line, and April went to check on Buttercup, hopeful that she was laboring, but the cow was still as big as ever, contentedly chewing on her feed. “I don’t think it’s going to be today,” Fred reached over the door, patting her on the rump. “We should keep her inside, just to be safe, though.”

He turned the fan on high, angling it so that he was circulating fresh air in her space, and April refilled her water, adding some ice from the cooler, the crack as it hit the liquid making her shiver. It sounded like bones snapping, and she backed away from the stall, a weird sense of déjà vu falling over her. She’d heard the exact same sound when her face hit the cement floor at the prison, and the impact had fractured her orbital bone. Without realizing it, she’d started to rub the spot, and Fred gave her a questioning look, asking her if she was in pain.

“No,” she lied, pretending to swat away a fly. “I think I just got stung.”

“If you want to go in and get ready, I’ll finish up with the other stalls,” he offered, but she smiled, picking up her pitchfork. “I’m fine, Fred. It’ll go faster with the two of us.”

Normally, they had two other part-time farm hands, but in light of the holiday, April had given them the day off with pay, much to Fred’s disapproval. He valued an honest effort, but she had kissed him on the cheek and told him not to be such a grump. The boys, not more than twenty each, had hustled off the night before, anxious to take their girls out, hoping to get lucky. It was more than she needed to know, but working with all men came with some drawbacks. Another was when they tried to insulate her from problems on the farm, like when one of the calves passed unexpectedly not long after she arrived here.

The vet, Dr. Lumlauer, had told her that it was most likely a genetic defect, but it didn’t keep her from crying when she saw Lulu nudging her baby, bellowing loudly as she tried to get the newborn to move. The men were all uncomfortable as she had a meltdown, having seen things like this countless times, but for a woman that woke up to her boyfriend’s head nearly severed, gotten stabbed, and found out that another man she cared about was killed, it sent her into a dark place.

The wails of Lulu barely drowned out her own as she stumbled away from the pen, forced to
confront the shittiest parts of her life, suddenly. April found herself on the ground, clutching at the moist dirt, mourning a dead calf and the waste of her life up until that point. It took Fred plopping down next to her, sitting in silence as she hiccupped her way back to reason, and he placed a gnarled hand on her shoulder.

“It’s all right to mourn the loss, June.”

“It’s not just the baby,” she said, and he nodded understandingly, cutting her off.

“I know. Whatever you’re comin’ from, it’s all right to mourn that, too. Making your way through life is rough, whether it’s watchin’ critters coming and goin’ through the world or trying to come to grips with what you thought your own path was going to be not panning out. None of us knows what we’re gonna be putting up with. I lost my wife when Andrew was born, and I sure do miss her, even all these years later.”

“I’m so sorry, Fred,” she said, glancing at him out of the side of her eye. He looked pensive, staring off into the field, and she tried to imagine him as a new father, burying his wife and caring for a baby, all while trying to keep a roof over his head. Her problems were hers, and his were his, but they both lost things that they loved in the world, and they were brought together in this healing place. Maybe her life could be…better than it was.

After that day, she threw herself into learning what it took to run a farm, and she soaked up the knowledge from Fred like a sponge, surprising even him. The early days became more bearable and for at least a few evenings a week, she was too tired to fall headlong into the nightmares that used to be her only companion for the night.

Like any other East Coast snobbish asshole, April had always looked at the Midwest as ‘flyover’ country, never really appreciating it, even when she was on the run. It was just another place to get through, and it wasn’t until she went through her first spring there that she really took in the beauty of where she was. Virginia was more than lovely, but for her, the way she grew up, there were no fields of wildflowers and tender shoots of grass. There was only urban sprawl. She didn’t have pets, or sunflowers, or a place to call her own. Here, she did, and April became one of them, the type of person that went to fall pumpkin patches and summer picnics. She wasn’t really April Brower anymore. June Daniels was a beloved neighbor and local small business owner. She had new friends and a boyfriend that thought that she was great.

But it didn’t change the fact that something was missing in her life, and as she and Fred made the last of the preparations for the corn roast, adding another bushel to the pile, she thought about Johnny and Negan, what each of them would think of her reincarnation. Would they think she was a sellout, or would they be proud of the woman she’d become?

Fred waved goodbye as he drove the truck down the drive, and she jogged into the house to get showered and changed, laying out her clothes and setting out food and water for the dogs. A white, sleeveless shirt that was tied at her waist, a pair of blue shorts, and sandals were enough to hopefully keep her cool, and she topped it off with a red bandana to hold her hair up, chuckling at the overt nod to the day. April Brower, former bartender and non-celebrator, was now going all-out to get into the patriotic experience.

With one last scan of the field where the cattle were grazing, April set off for the town center, rolling all of the windows down and turning on the local hits station. The deejay was warning everyone that wanted to attend the festivities to get there early since the weather was so nice. “Bring your sunscreen and make sure you’re wearing something with an elastic waist,” the voice joked. “Several vendors will be offering up sweets and treats, and don’t forget the pig and corn roast that’ll be set up near the gazebo, thanks to the Trotter and Draper Farms.”
Donating a metric ton of corn to the town came with perks, one being priority parking, and April weaved through the crowd, waving ‘hello’ to several people, finally making it over to Fred, who was sweating already as he arranged the charcoal the way he wanted it. Doing such a large-scale roast came with some challenges, but they were able to set up several metal sheets over the large pit, secured with iron rods, and April got to work rolling the corn in newspapers.

Jack, one of the local firefighters, had volunteered his services, and the two of them had several dozen done in a few minutes, ready to be laid out for cooking. They were near the restrooms, and a hose had been hooked up to keep the ears wet, a crowd already gathering. While Jack and Fred got the fire started, April wandered over to where Cal was glazing the pig with some sort of barbecue sauce that he’d made, getting a distracted kiss. Since he had a truck with a refrigeration system, he’d brought all the butter that would be needed, and she set up the tables with salted, unsalted, and seasoned, the spectators growing antsy at the prospect of free food.

Salt, pepper, and plenty of napkins were also ready to go. They just needed something to put it on, and Jack kept the newspaper wet, allowing the fresh corn to cook. As the first batch came off the trays, there was a mini-stampede to get a piece, and April was overwhelmed with fingers, arms, and lots of ‘thank yous’, making her face light up. They kept churning out more, and she stole an ear for herself, slathering it in seasoned butter, trying not to get any on her white shirt.

In the background, music played and people congregated together, catching up and just enjoying the day. She was setting out the last of their food when ice-cold fingers brushed her neck, and she nearly dropped the platter, turning to see Andrew’s sweaty, smiling face. He loved to scare the shit out of her almost as much as Fred, and she smacked him with the tongs that were laying on the table, trying to give him the dirtiest look she had.

“Don’t do that,” she snapped, failing to keep from grinning. “You and your dad are seriously gonna give me a heart attack someday.”

“Sorry Junebug,” he teased and she rolled her eyes. Andrew had taken to calling her Cal’s pet name, and even though she still sometimes forgot that she went by another name, it felt…like having a real family. “I had to do a few emergency calls, and I just hired a new guy to help me out since Shawn joined the Marines.”

She’d forgotten that he was a guy short at his garage, though with the sheer size of the crowd that had shown up, she hadn’t even noticed that he wasn’t here. Andrew was nothing like his dad in that he didn’t have any interest in farming. He was a gearhead, and from what she knew of him, it suited him. He loved all things automotive, and even though he didn’t have a green thumb, he would still come by and visit while Fred was working, hanging out on the porch and joining her and Cal for the occasional beer.

“Don’t worry, the new guy will probably get sick of you, too, and jump ship.”

He mockingly clutched his chest, and she punched him again for good measure, winking at Cal who was watching from his spot, shaking his head. “Come on, Junebug. I’ll introduce you.”

Andrew took her by the hand, dragging her out from behind the table and leading her towards the other side of the gazebo. April was curious to see this mysterious man that had shown up out of nowhere the other day looking for a job, and as they rounded the bend, she came to a sudden stop, her arm jerking free on its own.

It happened so fast that Andrew couldn’t even grab her before she hit the ground.

“How-“ was all she managed to mutter before her eyes rolled back and she fainted, and the last image she had was of a resurrected Negan rushing towards her.

Chapter End Notes

Woot! I actually got this out before the actual Fourth of July!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something cold trickled across her forehead, dripping down the side of her face and into her ear. The sensation was what made her open her eyes, and she struggled to sit up as at least a dozen people peered at her from above, forming a circle of concern. April felt someone brace her shoulders, and it took her a second to remember Andrew’s name as he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Where…Where is…?”

She looked around for Negan, her hands reaching out blindly as she processed what she’d seen with her own eyes. He was alive. At least, that’s what she thought, but as she tried to see around knees and legs, someone else appeared in the crowd, cupping her cheeks and searching her eyes. “I’m right here, Junebug,” Cal gave her a reassuring smile. “Can everyone back up so she can get some air?”

Andrew handed Cal a wet paper towel, and he used it to wipe the excess moisture from her skin, patting it along the back of her neck. “What happened?”

What the fuck was she supposed to tell him? That some guy that she thought was dead was miraculously alive and in the same town as her? That he’d saved her life and helped her beat a murder rap? June Daniels wouldn’t know anyone or anything like that. June Daniels was a big-city girl, sure, but she came from a nice town in Washington, not a shithole in Alexandria.

“I- I just got overheated, I guess,” she said, her eyes still roving around, searching desperately for any sign of him. “I remember walking to meet Andrew’s new employee…” she trailed off, hoping that he’d provide some more info, but he was only just beginning to smile since he knew she was okay. “What’s his name?”

“What are you talking about?” Andrew cocked his head to the side, giving her a strange look, and her sense of unease started to ratchet up. “What guy?”

“You said you hired a new guy, and you wanted me to meet him,” April felt like she was losing her mind, and she tried to get to her feet, but Cal held her down, and she shook herself free. “The guy, Andrew. The- the fucking guy.”

“June, I’m just kidding,” he held his hands up, losing the grimace. “He’s around here somewhere. I think he just ran to the bathroom or something. Seeing you faint freaked him out.”

“You fucking dick. You made me feel like I was losing my mind.”

“Junebug, you need to get into the shade. You may have sunstroke or something,” Cal let her go, and she stood up, fighting the lingering dizziness as she searched the crowd. She wanted to ask Andrew what name Negan told him, but it would be weird, especially with them already concerned about her state of mind, and she took Cal’s hand as he escorted her back to her table, parking her in a chair under the tarp and grabbing her a can of Coke. “Here, drink this. You need some sugar in your system.”

Fred was fixing up the last of their corn, and she pressed the cold aluminum to the back of her neck as Andrew helped his dad, her eyes never stopping. She needed to know if she’d really seen him or if her mind was playing tricks on her from the heat. Common sense told her that she’d imagined it,
the ache of wanting to see him so badly that she'd conjured up his face and morphed it onto some poor guys body that resembled him. After all, she’d had one of her nightmares and used his picture to center herself. He was already dominating her thoughts, she told herself as she searched the crowd.

But there wasn’t any sign of him or anyone that looked remotely like him, and her mood started to verge into maudlin. Over Fred’s protests, she got up to help him pack up their supplies under Cal’s watchful eyes, trying to reassure him that she was fine. She wanted to leave, the desire to retreat to her house to brood taking over, even though it was still early.

“I’ll take this back and check on the cows,” Fred insisted, but she blew him off with a smile.

“Stay and watch the fireworks,” she tossed the last of the utensils in the bed of her truck, asserting her position as the boss. “I want to rest, Fred, plus I need to check on Buttercup. Really, everything’s fine, okay? Spending all day in the sun was obviously a mistake. Maybe I’m coming down with something. “

“I’ll take her home,” April jumped as Cal appeared by her side, trying to take her keys, but she held him out to the side, even though he could easily reach around her to get them.

“Cal, I’m okay to drive.”

“June, you passed out. I’m not going to let you drive alone.”

She stared up at him, stonefaced, and he hardened his eyes, opening the door for her. April rolled down the window, leaning over to peck his cheek, but he grasped the back of her neck, kissing her lips almost possessively, and she jerked under his touch. Guilt was hovering over her, not only for lying to him but because she was still lost in thought about someone else. “I’m following you home.”

“Cal-“

“Sorry, sweetie, but I’m not buying what your selling. You’re still not feeling good, and I’m not going to let you wreck just because you’re stubborn.”

“Whatever,” she muttered after a few seconds, and he tapped the top of the cab, loping off towards his own vehicle. His stuff was still being handed out, and he exchanged a few words with Andrew, gesturing towards her. Cal’s face as serious, but her eyes narrowed when Andrew started to laugh, fake-punching Cal and when he blew her a kiss, waggling his eyebrows, she started the truck, backing out with a middle finger hanging out the window.

The farm was a mile away when Cal caught up to her, riding her bumper as she gripped the wheel. She knew he was pissed that she took off before he was ready to go, but she couldn’t stay at the park any longer, searching for a ghost. Her head was spinning and her heart was hurting, and he wasn’t taking the hint that she wanted to be alone.

As she pulled up the drive, the dogs came flying out of the house, barking and running straight towards the truck. They were always happy to see her, and she parked the truck near the red barn, jumping down into a pile of yellow fur. “Guys, I was gone for like, six hours,” she pet them both on the head.

Gracie barked twice, taking off towards the grazing pasture, and she followed as Cal parked behind her. The cattle were spread out along the hill, and she rang the bell that was bolted onto the top of the gate, getting their attention. As she waited, the back of her neck started to get goosebumps, and she jumped when two large hands landed on her shoulders, forcibly turning her around.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Cal glared at her, boxing her in between his body and the fence.
“I told you to wait for me and you didn’t listen. What’s going on with you, June?”

They’d never really fought before, other than an occasional disagreement over what to eat or how she kept the calves longer than normal, but she could tell he was irritated with her. More than once he’d observed how closed off she could be about her past. All she’d told him was what was told to her by the FBI when they informed her that she was being given a new identity. June Daniels, a former resident of Seattle, Washington. The only living relative of Samuel Trotter, and previous employee of an up and coming coffee chain called Starbucks.

The rest of her manufactured past was up to her, and she kept it vague. Cal had wondered more than once why she just up and left her life in Seattle to come to a smallish town in Iowa, and she didn’t have a really good answer for him. Just one that was close to the truth.

“There was nothing there for me,” she said, tracing the outline of his chest. “No parents, no boyfriend.”

“I find it hard to believe that there wasn’t one guy that tried to get you to stay,” he kissed the top of her head, sending a cold shiver down her spine.

“There wasn’t. I was alone. So, I could either be alone in a place that held no more emotional importance to me, or I could be alone somewhere that was at least my own. So, I chose Iowa, and I’m glad I did.”

“I am, too.”

The first heifer made it to the fence as she bit her bottom lip, thinking of something to say. Cal gave up for the moment, and the two led the girls one at a time towards their respective stalls, with an assist by George and Gracie. By the time they got them all fed and watered, checking on Buttercup, the cattle were secured for the night in their barns, the sky was a slate blue, gradually darkening, and April took Cal by the hand as they walked back towards her house.

She was nursing a headache, the sweat from the day sticking to her neck and back, and she gestured towards the porch swing, the wood creaking as they both sat down. “I’m sorry,” she said, resting his hand on her knee, studying the calloused ridges and tanned wrinkles. “I’m just going through a weird…thing today. I don’t really know what it is, I just…I think I need to be alone and call it a day.”

“You want me to leave?”

“Just for tonight,” she told him. “I think I just need to go to bed and try to forget this day. It started off shitty, and that nightmare just followed me around all over.”

“All the more reason I should stay, Junebug,” Cal argued, hefting her up easily onto his lap, and she forced herself to relax against his chest, gripping his wrists as he wrapped his arms around her, running his nose along the base of her neck. “I want to take care of you.”

_I want someone else to take care of me._

April took a deep breath, and she opened his arms, tilting herself so that she was facing him. His eyes, so blue and open were pleading with her to let him in for good, and she wanted to. She wanted to not think about Negan, or even Johnny, but two years wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough time and
distance from her past trauma, and he nodded once at the look on her face.

“Call me tomorrow,” he gave her a peck on the cheek, easing her to the side, and he stood up, walking to his truck, giving George and Gracie a pat on the head each. As he turned himself around on the gravel, she held up a hand to wave goodbye, but he never looked twice at her, and she sat on the swing as he left, watching the dust kick up and blend into the evening sky.

Gracie was the first one to come wandering up, nosing her elbow, and April got up from the wooden swing, heading into the house as the dogs followed. Their water dishes were empty, and she refilled them, adding another cup of dry food before walking up the steps to her room to shower. On the first floor landing was a stained glass window, and she ran her finger along the yellow portion, tracing the rose that had been crafted at her request in town. Little by little, she’d started updated the old farmhouse, adding new paint and sanding the wood floor, staining it a beachy sand color.

There were a hundred more things she wanted to do, but the cattle came first, and she washed herself down, dressing in a tank top and cotton shorts. Her hair was still dripping down her back when she walked down barefoot into the kitchen, taking out a bottle of beer and chugging the first third of it before going back on the porch.

In the distance, the town fireworks display was just beginning, and it was a muted booming sound, more like thunder. The cattle were easily rattled by the sound, and she’d put on some music to drown it out. Some of the neighbor’s kids used to set them off, too, but that was a battle that she didn’t have the strength to fight. Most of the people that lived around here had animals of their own, but it didn’t stop the younger ones from bucking tradition and heading out into the adjacent fields to make their own parties.

Tonight, she didn’t care what happened in town. She just needed to wait. Either the ghost would appear, or she’d know for sure that she was crazy.

April was on her third drink when a pair of headlights came slowly up the drive, sending her heart into a frenzy, and she planted her feet on the porch as the black truck stopped just beyond the security light. She held her breath as the driver’s side door opened, a figure emerging in the dusk, and her hand tightened around the neck of the bottle.

He came forward with a slow but steady gate, and as soon as his left foot touched the first step up onto her porch, she launched the bottle with a scream, watching as it spiraled through the air, hitting him on the forehead, and she ran towards him, charging into him not two seconds after the bottle did, sending them both tumbling onto the ground.

“You motherfucker!”

She saw red, literal red from both the oozing cut on his forehead and the anger that he was alive and well, and left her alone to fend for herself. “Are you fucking crazy? You broke my fucking head,” he howled, dodging her fists while simultaneously trying to staunch the stream of blood that was pouring out of the jagged cut.

“I fucking mourned you,” she screeched, her voice bouncing off the ground and amplifying through the air, sending the dogs into a tizzy as they barreled through the doggy door and out into the yard, surrounding the pile of body parts, barking and snapping at Negan’s jeans. “For two fucking years I carried around an obituary with your picture on it, and you’re alive?”

George nipped at his calf, snagging his jeans and yanking his leg as he rolled her onto her back, pinning her arms down. “Call your fucking dogs off, April. Jesus Christ!”
She headbutted him, making her see stars, and he punched the dirt next to her head, but it gave her a chance to get out from under him, smacking him on the back with a sound that reverberated through the night, mixing in with barks, fireworks, and her own gasping breaths. Gracie had taken up a defensive position behind her, growling as George continued to try to drag Negan away, and April managed to whistle, breaking their attention.

Negan was lying facedown on the grass, and both dogs were panting, waiting for further instruction from her, and she snapped her fingers towards the house. Both of them whined, but after the second order, trotted off towards the porch, laying down as she tried to stop crying and unable to take more than a shallow breath. Guilt at taking her rage out on him started to bubble up in her heart, but she quashed it back down when she thought of every night that she spent crying with abandon over his death. The anguish when she thought about him being shot and killed, thinking that he’d failed her and she’d failed him.

“How could you do this to me?”

All she received was a groan until he turned onto his back, and April covered her face, using her inner elbow to wipe her eyes as Gracie whined on the porch. “I’ve been fucking looking for you for two fucking years.”

The words took a second to sink in, and when she dared to show her face, he was sitting up with his flannel shirt balled up in his fist, holding it to the gash to quell the bleeding, giving her a look that she’d never imagined seeing again. Even in the dark, his angry dimples were still there, and she ping-ponged back and forth between rage at being kept apart from him and fear that she was still unconscious on the ground somewhere at the picnic, her brain teasing her with a mirage, a base desire to have something, just one thing from her old life, proof that she’d really existed somehow.

“Negan…”

“Don’t,” he chuffed, holding up his free hand. “I’m fucking pissed, sugar.”

It was the pet name that sent her towards him, and he went to block her, but April hit his wrist, numbing the nerve, and she was able to get him on his back, but this time, she kissed him, almost in a frenzy. If she was out of it, she wanted to take full advantage, and if it was real, she wasn’t going to waste another second on anger.

Negan dropped the shirt, using both hands to hold her closer, and he parted her lips with his own, his tongue rolling around hers, and she thought that she was going to die, her heart trying to keep up with her soul and failing. She was falling down a rabbit hole of need, not just for him physically, but emotionally as well. Given the limited amount of time they’d had together, it was probably strange that it was still so…vibrant to her.

His touch was just like she’d remembered it to be. His smell was the same, Bay leaf and just a hint of smoke, and April went limp in his arms, letting him switch their positions so that he was on top of her. It gave her the chance to lock her legs around his waist, her nails digging into the back of his neck and Negan let his weight pin her down, breathing as heavily as she was. His bushy beard surrounded her mouth, scratching the skin raw, and April only gained a little awareness when her cheek started to get warm, bringing back the same memory of being stabbed, that slow change from cool concrete to steamy blood, and she opened her eyes to see that his face was smeared with red.

“Ew,” she muttered, feeling her own face and coming away with sticky blood. “Get up, James Dean.”

Negan’s eyes fluttered, and he looked down at her in the glare of the security light, scrambling to
sit up, snagging her wrists to get her upright as well. Both were still wired, but April managed to get to her knees, taking his hand as George and Gracie came trotting down to join them. Both were looking to her as to how to welcome the stranger, whether it be with growls or wagging tails, and she helped him get to his feet.

“It’s okay,” she soothed, and Negan grumbled under his breath that his head wasn’t fucking okay, and she let go of his fingers to steady herself. “I was talking to the dogs.”

“Well, that’s fucking nice,” he snapped, trailing behind her as she started towards the porch, waving the dogs into the house

“Go lay down,” she told the pups, waiting until they went into the living room, each taking a spot on the couch as they watched the interloper come into their home. Gracie, in particular, was hyper watchful as April headed through the dining room and into the kitchen, with Negan right behind her. She caught sight of her reflection in the window behind the sink, and she turned on the water, splashing her face to rid it of the blood, then she wet a towel taking it over to where Negan was leaning against the counter, avoiding his eyes as she cleaned up the mess she’d made of his head.

Red droplets dotted his undershirt, and April carefully wiped his cheek and temple clean, cringing internally at the open goose egg on his forehead, and she retreated to the bathroom to get her first aid kit, finding him sitting at the small table she normally ate her breakfast at. His head was tilted back, resting against the wall, and he held the towel to the growing lump. He was here. In her kitchen. In her life, and she stepped between his spread legs, using trembling fingers to move the wet cotton aside to look at the damage she’d inflicted on him thanks to her emotional outburst.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, feeling the heat of his gaze and his body enveloping her. He left her in silence as she dabbed an antiseptic pen across the cut, though his eyes watered from the stinging sensation. It bled even more, and she held a bandage to the area, jerking in surprise when his fingers gripped the back of her thighs, lodging themselves in the crease below her ass.

“I get that I fucking walked in and turned your world upside down, sugar,” he began to work the skin, using strong circular motions. “And I know that I probably deserved that beatdown. But I wasn’t fucking kidding. I have traveled thousands of miles through this state looking for you.”

Reaching for the medical tape, April ripped off a few pieces, securing the bandage to his head, and she brushed his hair back, fighting to keep from crying more. How many times had they been close to each other over the last two years? How much had they lost, and did he still want her? Would he want her a month from now, not just because he felt compelled to make sure she was all right?

“Was it just to ease your conscience?”

“Did you mourn me because of your conscience?” he hit back, his fingers gripping her tighter, almost painfully, like she was trying to escape from him. “Did you carry around my death notice because of guilt, April?”

Her hands dropped from his hair to his shoulders to steady herself, and she briefly thought about kneeing him in the balls, unsure why she felt so violently angry at the accusation. Guilt over the loss of not only his life but the way in which it happened played a part in it, but it wasn’t all that had chipped away at her, and he knew it. He was trying to make her feel vulnerable, and she couldn’t let herself feel raw, yet. Not any more than she already was.

“I could’ve gone anywhere once I was put into witness relocation. But I wanted to find you. I busted my ass to uncover any clue Michonne could give me about whether or not you were alive,” Negan confessed. “I didn’t want to believe that you were gone, and I almost gave up, sugar. I was
ready to throw in the fucking towel until a few days ago when I saw your picture in the local paper. You have no idea what that felt like.”

She snorted in spite of the seriousness of his words, and his dimples made another appearance. “And you have no idea what it was like to see a ghost in the middle of the day.”

He started to smirk, and she sat down on his left thigh, looping her arms around his neck, still unsure that this was all real. “For two people that only knew each other for a week, guilt is the least of my emotions, James Dean, and that scares me as much as the fact that you’re here.”

“I know what I felt for you- what I feel for you now, sugar, and it’s more than just a sense of responsibility for what happened to you. I want to be with you, even if it’s in the middle of nowhere that smells like cow shit.”

“So, what do we do? What the fuck do we do, now?”

“Well, you could get me a fucking aspirin and take me to bed, Hooters,” he grimaced when she stomped on his foot. “And the rest…we’ll figure out in the morning.”

Considering how the day started, spending the night with her dead lover sounded pretty fucking good, and April kissed the bandage softly, calling for the dogs to head upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

They have a lot to talk about, but they're together again!
Chapter 22

July 5, 1991

It ended up being after midnight by the time Negan and April made it to her bedroom. Instead of just going straight up as she’d planned, Negan insisted on being shown every square inch of the farmhouse. When she questioned it, still feeling like she was being pranked, her eyes following his every move, he told her that he wanted to know every entrance, every possible weapon, everything.

“I’m not trying to freak you out any more than I already have, sugar, I just need to know the whole layout of this place, just in case.”

“No, that’s not creepy at all,” she muttered, leading him down to the basement, accompanied by George and Gracie. Just like any old house, the basement was bare-bones, with old tools and assorted other riffraff. It was one of the few places in the home that she hadn’t really gotten around to doing anything with, other than to root through the fruit cellar that was built into the corner of the area. It had been carved out of the dirt, and it was naturally cool, filled with homemade jellies, pickled vegetables, and what Fred had called hooch. The alcohol was strong enough to strip paint, and when she had a particularly bad night, she’d take a few shots, slipping into a drunken sleep that was free of nightmares.

As she stood by the steps, he made his way around the musky smelling spot, lifting up canvas coverings and poking at boxes.

Negan was here. He was alive.

Her brain kept reminding her of that fact, and she began to shiver, garnering his attention. “You cold, sugar?”

“No, I think I’m in shock a little.”

He came over, rubbing her upper arms as Gracie whined, trying to separate them, and Negan sighed, taking a step back. “Is she ever gonna let up?”

“Eventually. Like any female, you’re going to have to win her over,” April shrugged, taking note of the extra goosebumps that popped up on the back of her neck. “Can we get the hell out of here, now?”

Negan started up the steps, keeping ahold of her hand, and Gracie brought up the rear, nosing the back of her leg as they moved. When they reached the top, George greeted them with his squeaky toy, and Negan, happy that someone wanted him there, tossed it down the hall while Gracie stayed glued to her side.

George was a happy boy, and they walked around the rest of the house, going through the library, the pantry, the downstairs living room, and the mudroom. In each one, Negan double-checked the locks and the windows, until they finally got to the second floor. They repeated the process in each
of the bedrooms, the attic, and the bathrooms until they finally got to her room. With a little whine, Gracie looked between them, her tail slumping as she went back down with her brother to keep watch. April stood in the doorway until the click of nails on wood stopped and she turned around to see Negan staring out of her window.

She was tired and wired, a combination that brought her back to the countless hotel rooms that they’d frequented together on their cross-country trip, and she sat down on the edge of the bed, waiting for him to notice her. She was second in line behind the shotgun that sat at her bedside, and he seemed proud of her. “Good girl.”

When he glanced at her, his face fell, and he perched next to her at the foot of the bed, resting his elbows on his knees. “Tell me what you’re thinking, sugar.”

“I don’t know,” she was honest, not really sure what was going through her head, other than the fact that it was surreal. The night before, she was worried about having enough corn for the roast, and now she was sitting on her bed with a man that she thought was dead. “It feels…it feels like I’m here with a familiar stranger, you know? Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah,” he let out a deep breath, reaching for her hand again. “A part of me wonders if it was a mistake to find you.”

“Why?”

“Because I just fucking wrecked your world, didn’t I?”

“You certainly did,” she fought a smile when he frowned, “but that’s not a bad thing. I just think we need to adjust to the fact that my past isn’t my past. Don’t get me wrong,” April reached up, turning his face towards hers, and she ran her thumb along the black and blue marks that were just beginning to form under each eye, “I’m…indescribably happy to see you and know that you’re okay. And if I ever did find out that you were alive and you didn’t come to me, I would’ve fucking flipped the fuck out.”

His eyes fluttered and shut as she continued to softly stroke his marked skin, and she felt that familiar stir in her chest, the want to be close to him and to let him into her heart forever. “We just need to get to know each other. I need to know what happened to you that night you supposedly died. What you’ve been doing since besides looking for me.”

Those brown eyes suddenly opened and focused on her, and she almost stood up to get out of his line of sight, so unnerved and emotional that it made her lips start to tremble. She was vulnerable and unprotected again, and he brought her hand up to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. “I know you’re afraid, April. I am, too, believe it or not. I fucking memorized the letter you left me, and one of the only reasons that I hesitated on actually fucking coming forward was the worry that I put my heart in fucking hand in front of you, and it turns out that you’re okay. And if I ever did find out that you were alive and you didn’t come to me, I would’ve fucking flipped the fuck out.”

The words came back to her, wondering what they would’ve been like if they had met under some mundane circumstances. It was an unthinkable option two years ago, but here they both were, living ordinary lives, and that fear was palpable for the two. What if her being just a regular girl bored him after a month? And he was the same. If he wasn’t a bounty hunter with a dangerous job, would she put up with his quirks and annoying habits?

“But you want to try?” she asked, and he used his free hand to sweep it across the bridge of her nose with a smile. “You want to live regular old lives, shoveling cow shit and working on cars, eating dinner and palling around with farmers and decent folks, nary a mobster in sight?”
“I fucking do.”

Three words. Three little words and she knew that she wanted it, too. “Then let’s do it.”

Negan leaned in to kiss her, but she stopped him with a finger, grinning stupidly as he brushed the tip of his nose to hers. “What now?”

“You have to shave that beard. You look like the love child of Charles Manson and Grizzly Adams.”

“I’ll do it in the morning,” Negan kissed her anyway, and April’s mind quieted for a few seconds, letting her enjoy it for a brief period until a different type of guilt took over and she broke free scooting back further onto the bed. “Good idea, sugar.”

“No, not that. I need to talk to Cal.”

She saw him tense up, and he unbuckled his jeans, giving her a look to confirm that it was okay for him to undress, and she nodded slowly, even as she backed up further. As he crawled onto the bed, she hopped off, ignoring his grunt and went into the bathroom, finding a bottle of Tylenol. She took out a few pills and got a glass of water from the tap, bringing it back to him as he rested against the headboard, clad only in his boxers and still blood-spotted undershirt.

He took the painkillers, drinking all of the water, and she crawled next to him, sitting cross-legged, facing him and the wall as he set the glass down. The overhead fan was moving on the lowest setting above them, circulating the central air that she’d paid an arm and a leg to have installed, and he finally tapped her thigh to get her to talk.

“I’ve been seeing him for about a year.”

“The blond piece of white bread that I saw at the picnic?”

“He’s a nice guy,” April frowned, annoying him. “I need to break things off before we do anything. It’s not fair to him and I don’t want to lie to him.”

“Listen, I’ve seen a few girls over the years-“

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Shut the fuck up and let me talk,” he snapped, giving her a dirty look. “I’m not upset that you found someone, sugar, but if you like him, you need to tell me now.”

“Of course I like him, you dick, or I wouldn’t have dated him. Don’t make me feel like shit for not wanting to hurt the guy.”

“Well, what the fuck do you want me to say? That I’ll share you?”

“No. Just let me feel crappy until I break things off with him.”

“You know, I was seeing this girl, Sandy, up until a few days ago, and she’s a good egg. A fucking librarian. I’ve dated half a dozen people over the last couple of years, and none of the relationships have lasted, so I don’t-“

“Okay, you’re making this worse,” she interrupted him a second time. “If you still have issues with relationships, this isn’t going to work.”

“ Fucking let me talk, April,” his voice was just below a shout, and she crossed her arms over her
chest, scowling at a spot above his head. Even after all this time, she knew it pissed him off when she zoned out, and he sat up, getting into her line of sight. “It’s different now, you bitch. Before I met you, it was the girls that got sick of me, because I wasn’t there. I wasn’t available and there was no future. But now, it’s been me breaking away from them.”

“That’s not helping,” she shook her head until he held her head in place, ready to unload on her and she clamped her mouth shut.

“Because they weren’t you, Hooters. Every one of them were nice, and pretty and really fucking into me, but they weren’t you. They didn’t piss me off, and make me feel sick to my stomach. They didn’t turn me on with just a look, and they couldn’t hold my interest. Because they weren’t you.”

She stared at him blankly, trying to think of a way to argue that he was bound to get bored with her, feeling like they were circling around the same old problem, but he pressed his lips together, giving her a chaste kiss, and she let out a deep breath into his face, closing her eyes. “The second I knew I’d found you, I went to that sweet girl and told her it was over. I made her cry, and yeah, I felt bad. I actually felt like shit, but I would’ve been leading her on if I didn’t. She was never going to be April Brower, accused murderess and general pain in my ass. But if you need to work out your feelings for Cal,” his mouth twisted around the name, like it left a bad taste in his mouth, “then I’ll wait. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’d just hang out, waiting for me to choose between the blonde or the brunette?”

“Mmmhmm.”

The sound was less than convincing, and she hid a smirk as he waited for her to tell him that she wasn’t going to leave him in limbo. “Good to know,” April turned herself around, laying on her side and facing the opposite side of the room. It only took about ten seconds for her to hear a slapping sound, and she started to laugh, looking over her shoulder to see a red mark on his thigh. “Don’t have a stroke, Negan. I’m breaking up with him in the morning.”

“Remind me why the fuck I like you, again?”

She rolled over to face him, poking one of his dimples with her finger, and he softly slapped her hand away, still looking put out. “What’s your name, now?”

“Huh?”

“Your name?” she prodded, poking the dimple again. “I’m sure you’re not going by Negan anymore, and you know damned well mine isn’t April. So, what is it?”

An almost childish glee took over as he sat up, and he grabbed his wallet from his pants pocket, showing her his Iowa driver’s license and she groaned under her breath.

“Seriously? James D. Clark?”

“James Dean Clark. I tell everyone my dear old mum was obsessed with him.”

“And you went with boring-ass ‘Clark’ for the last name after spending your life named Negan?”

“I chose that in honor of the Griswolds, Hooters. All for you.”

“Wow, you’ve turned into a big loser while I was dead,” she handed it back to him with a raised eyebrow, and he tossed it next to the empty glass, steadfastly refusing to let him know how cute she really thought it was.
“And you went with an equally boring fucking name,” Negan reminded her, turning out the lamp. “June? After being named April May? Daniels is just as lame.”

“I had my reasons,” she murmured, an electric feeling passing over her body as she lay in the dark next to him. “You remember Daniel from the last place we stayed at?”

“Yeah.”

“He was an awesome old guy. He never judged me when I told him why I was running with you, and he told me I reminded him of his lost love. Said she was like an untamed stallion. Some wild thing that ran off to Hollywood to become an actress.”

“Did she?” he asked after a brief pause, shifting the mattress as he got closer, and she reached out with closed eyes, her body getting heavy with fatigue and relaxation. “Ever make it in Hollywood?”

“She did. He saw her one last time, and then she died in a plane crash. Her name was June.”

There was no answer as her brain finally gave out, and as she drifted off to sleep, she felt him put his arm around her to pull her closer, and somewhere deep down, where there had been no hope, the seeds of something new and hopeful started to bloom.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: more bonding and an uncomfortable breakup for April...
A soft, bristly kiss woke her the same time that the alarm did, and April opened her eyes, seeing a beard covered neck and smelling warm skin. She leaned her head back to peer up at tired brown eyes, and she started slightly, used to blue ones staring at her. Her exhausted mind reminded her that it was him, that he was still here, and she nuzzled the underside of his jaw as he jostled the bed, turning off the alarm, giving them about ten seconds peace and quiet before the dogs came bounding in, all yips and happy sounds.

“Are you up this early every goddamned morning?” he grumbled, holding her tighter as George nosed him in the back to move. “I may have to rethink this courtship.”

“Fuck you,” she said back in a sleepy voice, gripping his hip as Gracie jumped up behind her, settling next to her back and laying her head on April’s shoulder. “It gets your blood pumping and keeps you young.”

They held each other for a few seconds more, and with a deep sigh, Negan let her go, sitting up even though Gracie let out a warning sound, and April whistled softly to get her attention. “Stop it,” she chided the pup, scratching her ears. “Be nice.”

Gracie whined, licking her cheek, and when April dropped her hand, she gave Negan a half-hearted nudge with her nose before slinking off the bed. He stared at her with suspicion, petting George’s head until he too took off out the door. It was five to seven in the morning, and the two humans were a lot less refreshed than the dogs, but they both got out of the bed. Negan stretched, his fingers brushing the ceiling, and April walked to the bathroom, turning on the water to splash her face. Her hair was in poor shape, and she rummaged around in the cupboard for a new toothbrush, setting it on the sink for him to use. After her teeth were cleaned, she brushed her hair into a bun, coming out to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning back on his hands.

She felt nervous and excited as she stepped forward, placing herself between his legs, and he gazed up at her with a little smirk, turning his attention to her chest, since it was right near his lips. He used his index finger to lift her shirt up a few inches, and the smirk faded as he spied one of her scars, touching it softly.

“What happened, sugar? At the prison?”

April cradled the back of his head, placing a soft kiss to the top of it, and he buried his face in her midsection. It was the best feeling she’d had in a long time when he pulled her closer, breathing into her shirt, and she was tempted, so damned tempted to push him back onto the mattress so that she could straddle his waist. He must’ve felt the same because she felt herself starting to be tipped forward, but common sense won out before they made it all the way down, and she shook herself free as he gave her a frustrated look.

“We’ll talk, I promise,” she held out a hand to help him back up, pointing towards the bathroom so he could freshen up. “But I have shit I have to get done, and you have to work, I assume?”

Negan rolled his eyes, going into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. She could hear the toilet flush as she changed into her work clothes, and when he came out, she was already heading down the hall to let the dogs out to run the perimeter. “Get to work,” she said affectionately, their
signal to head out, and the two scrambled through the doggy door, barking.

She needed coffee, badly, and April went over to the coffee maker, turning it on and scooping a generous portion out, setting out two cups, fresh milk, and sugar, leaning against the counter to wait. Negan came down as the last few drops hit the pot, making a beeline for the stimulant. She poured him a cup, and he added a spoonful of sugar and a splash of milk, blowing on it twice before taking a big gulp. His eyes watered, and she blinked as he started to pant from the heat. “That’s hot.”

“Jesus.”

Negan grinned at her until the sound of another truck coming up the drive got their attention, and April went to the living room window, her stomach dropping when she saw that it wasn’t Fred, but Cal. She thought that he was going to wait for her to call, and a sick sweat started under her arms, the urge to vomit rising. He parked behind Negan’s truck, giving it a puzzled look as he started towards the house, and she stepped back unsteadily, retreating to the kitchen where Negan was still sipping at his coffee.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked quietly, scanning her face, and she nodded immediately. It didn’t mean it wasn’t upsetting her, though, and she took a deep breath to try to calm herself, the kitchen like a tomb as they waited for Cal to come in.

“Junebug?”

The front door opened, creaking ominously, and she had to clear her throat in order to speak. “I’m in the kitchen.”

The footsteps got louder as Cal crossed through, and he stopped short when he saw that she wasn’t alone. The air was thick with unease, and she tried to remain calm, waving him forward.

“I didn’t realize you had company,” Cal did a double-take, his head turning between the front entrance and Negan. “You’re the new guy at the garage, right?”

“Cal, this is Nega-“

“J.D.,” Negan interrupted her, reaching forward to shake Cal’s hand as April winced. She was a fucking idiot. “Nice to meet you.”

Cal was raised with manners, and he shook Negan’s hand, even as he looked at April in confusion. “Right.”

How the fuck was she going to explain this?

“Well, I should head out,” Negan gave her a pointed look, and she shook herself out of her trance, nodding in relief.

“I’ll show you to the door,” April murmured, gesturing as Negan started out of the kitchen, leaving Cal standing there awkwardly. He opened the front door, stepping onto the porch as she felt the blood pool in her cheeks.

“Do you want me to stay?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

He leaned forward like he wanted to kiss her, and she held her breath as he thought better of it, running a finger down her arm instead. “I’ll be back later.”
“Promise?”

The word was barely above a whisper, and he smiled, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “I promise. Call the shop if you need anything. Anything.”

It was a plea to let him know if Cal caused any trouble, and she felt the knot in her chest loosen slightly. “I will.”

Turning without a backward glance, Negan walked across the porch and down the steps, snagging the beer bottle that had fucked up his head and tossed it into the bed of his truck. April stood at the door watching as he left, and when she couldn’t hold off any longer, she went back to the kitchen where Cal was waiting with his arms crossed, a scrutinizing look as he studied her.

“Why was he here?”

Okay, then. Right to the point, not that she blamed him.

“Do you want some coffee?” she reached for a cup, but he curled his fingers around her wrist, holding her hand to his chest, and she avoided his eyes until she couldn’t anymore.

“June, what’s going on?”

“Cal, we need to talk. Let’s sit down,” she freed herself, going over to the table and taking a seat, perching at the edge of the chair. “Please, Cal,” April pleaded as he stayed where he was, his head shaking back and forth.

“Is this about yesterday?”

“Yes, it is, and I need you to really listen to me, okay?”

He came over, taking the seat next to her, and she took his left hand, holding it between hers, wondering how to start without sounding like a psycho. “So, N- that guy is J.D., Andrew’s new employee,” she clarified, pissed that she almost fucked up his name again. “He’s the one that I was being taken to be introduced to when I fainted.”

“Yeah,” Cal agreed, watching her with innocent blue eyes, having no idea where this conversation was going. “You wanted me when you came to.”

“I was…I passed out because seeing him shocked the hell out of me,” April said, swallowing hard. “I know him.”

“I don’t understand,” Cal told her after a second. “How do you know that guy?”

“Do you remember when we talked about why I left Seattle? Why I didn’t stick around there?”

He nodded, a wistful sort of smile forming as he placed his free hand on top of hers. She could recall how it felt to lay on his chest, thinking that her past was finally over, even if she still mourned Negan’s death. It seemed like ages ago, and a part of her wished that Cal could be enough for her. He was enough for June Daniels, but not April Brower.

“You said there was nothing there for you.”

“There wasn’t, not after he was gone.”

For the first time since she met him, sitting at her table with Cal wasn’t comfortable. It wasn’t easy and reassuring like it normally was. There was a barrier there, and communicating with him felt like
trying to cross the Grand Canyon by walking on a piece of string that had been erected. No matter
which way she leaned, it wasn’t safe. But she tried, anyway.

“J.D. and I were together for a short time,” she avoided his eyes, at least remembering the name
right. “It was very intense and so…important to me. Maybe the most important relationship I’d ever
had. But one day, he was just gone. And I never got to talk to him or deal with it. What we had and
him leaving, it changed everything about my life.”

“Why? Why did he leave?”

“Basically, someone from my past threatened him,” April said, thinking that it was close enough to
the truth to not really be an outright lie. “I was in a bad situation before he came along, and it…I was
brokenhearted, Cal. Just broken completely, and to lose him all of a sudden was so rough. I honestly
thought he was dead. There was just no sign of him anywhere, so when he showed up yesterday-“

“You fainted,” Cal removed his hands, sitting back in the chair and crossing his arms over his
chest, effectively closing himself off from her, and her own sat there empty on the table. “You were
never looking for me, were you?”

“I’m sorry. None of this makes any sense, I know. But he’s been searching for me since I left, and
I need…I need to find out what happened during that time.”

“What are you saying, June? That you want to be with this guy that left you with no explanation?”

“I’m saying it’s complicated, what happened, and him being here-“

“I thought you loved me,” Cal rose, backing away from her like she’d struck him, and her throat
started to hurt, trying to keep the tears at bay. She never wanted to hurt him, and that’s exactly what
she was doing.

“I love you, Cal,” she stood up, but not approaching him. “I do love you, but…”

“You love him, too, even though you haven’t seen him for years. That’s what you're saying?”

It hit too close to home, and she looked away, unable to verbalize the words at first, and Cal,
sensing that the was struggling, came over, placing himself in her line of vision.

“I deserve the truth, Junebug.”

“I love you, but I think I’m in love with him. I'm begging you to understand that I didn't plan for
this-“

“Wow,” was all he said, and she reached out to comfort him, maybe, but he reeled back from her,
stalking towards the door. “Message received.”

“Cal, please don’t walk away. I want to talk about this. I’m sorry-“

April trailed after him, but his long legs swept him away from her, and by the time she reached the
driveway, he was gunning the engine, turning in a tight circle as he covered her face with her hands,
feeling like shit. Fred must’ve passed him along the way, because he showed up just a minute later,
parking near her and standing there awkwardly as she wiped the wetness from her cheeks.

“Everything all right, June?” he asked, reaching for a handkerchief and passing it over. April
dabbed at her face, sniffling and handing it back to him.
“Not really, Fred.”

“You, uh, wanna talk about it?” He looked uncomfortable, as if she was about to start talking about ‘woman problems’ or something and it made her smile as she regained her composure.

“Thanks, Fred, but I’ll pass. It’s not anything that affects the girls, so, I’ll deal with it. But Cal and I broke up, just so you know.”

“Well, that’s a darned shame, missy,” he scratched at the back of his neck. “I sure hope everything works out for ya.”

“It’s, um, a little crazy, but I think it’s going to be okay,” she said, starting towards the closest barn as he kept time with her. She told him briefly about Negan so that he wasn’t surprised when he showed up, and Fred kept a straight face, nodding as they opened the doors to the barn, greeted with a song of moos. The great thing about having the animals was that they didn’t give a shit if your life was imploding around you. They just wanted to be fed and watered, and she cooed at the kids as she went to the first stall, leading Josie out and handing her off to Fred to take to the milking barn.

Since she didn’t really have to worry about money, she’d had top of the line equipment put in, along with a brand new rotating platform that moved the heifers around and a cleaning stall. It usually took Fred about sixty seconds to clean one of the heifers, sending it with a gentle pat down the aisle towards the parlor where hay was set up to feed each girl. April waited in the center to attach the hoses to their udders, and each cow got a scratch and a kiss as she fired up the machine.

She was able to forget about each man as they tended to the cattle, and she called for a pickup of the milk for pasteurization, the refrigerated ‘silos’ ready to be taken and replaced. In her humble opinion, happy cows made better milk, and Drake’s Ice Cream Company seemed to agree, since they were her sole customer. A local institution, Ivan Drake had been doing business with the Trotter’s for thirty years, but when April took over, he brokered a deal for exclusive rights to her supply.

By the time all the heifers that were producing from one barn were milked, it was time for lunch, and April fixed her and Fred some sandwiches, the two eating in front of the fan as Hershey begged for scraps. Fred tossed the cat some bread, and when they were done, they let the cattle out into the field with assistance from the dogs. Gracie, in particular, was wound up, and she barked incessantly at April until she finally followed the retriever over the hill, taking off at a run when she saw that Buttercup was delivering her calf.

“Good girl,” she praised her, keeping her distance as Buttercup lay on the grass, breathing loudly. “Fred! Call Dr. Lumlauer!”

Twenty minutes later, the good doctor came strolling through the field, taking a spot next to April as they waited, and when the legs poked through again, he bent down by her hindquarters, inspecting the birth canal. “Everything is looking good,” he announced as Gracie kept the neighboring heifers from getting too close. April’s insides hurt just watching, but Buttercup was a fucking trooper, expelling the calf just minutes later, the gooey little thing sprawled out on the grass.

Dr. Lumlauer gave the newborn a quick once-over as Buttercup delivered the afterbirth, and then momma and baby started to bond as she cleaned up the brand-new baby boy, settling next to him to keep watch. As always, April found it wonderous, and she cried yet again, this time with happy tears. Out of a shitty situation came rebirth, and after the doctor declared both healthy, he left with a good-natured wave, and she sat down on the warm grass, scratching Gracie’s ears and watching the calf struggle to stand.

It was a feeling she was quite familiar with at the moment, struggling to remain upright when your
entire world had shifted into something new and scary, and April headed back to work, ordering Gracie to keep an eye on the baby, her tail wagging in agreement.

“It’s a boy,” she announced to Fred and the boys, who’d showed up earlier to assist with the milking. Both Trent and Jack were happy, since they’d bet on it being male, and she fished twenty bucks out of the coffee can on her makeshift desk, handing them over with a smile.

“Ya going ta keep this one?”

“Yep,” April grinned, chuckling when Fred grunted, muttering about having to build a separate barn for the eventual bull. He had told her stories about dairy bulls before and how aggressive they could be, but the guys seemed excited to see him grow, and deep down, she was relieved, because now she wouldn’t have to make arrangements for Cal to bring one of his steers over for breeding.

“So, who gets to name him?”

April glanced at Trent before pointing at herself, and he groaned theatrically. “I let you name the last calf, Trent, and now we’re stuck raising a girl named Steve.”

“It’s cute,” he defended himself. “You call her Stevie, anyway.”

“Yeah, because I try to pretend that you named her after Stevie Nicks.”

“Who?”

She walked away, telling herself that he was just a kid and that she would go to jail if she punched him. But it took her mind off of her breakup, and by the time they got all of the cattle fed, washed, and settled for the evening, she watched the horizon anxiously for any sign of Negan. Part of her wanted him to come before Fred left so she could just rip that band-aid off, and the other part hoped he’d wait so they could just see each other in private. There was so much to do, but mostly, she wanted to see him and touch him to confirm that he was really here with her in the middle of a dairy farm in Iowa, terrified that she was going to wake up in a hotel somewhere in Texas, chained to a bedpost.

A quick check of her scars brought her back to reality, and by the time Fred drove away for the day, she was filled with nervous energy, throwing George’s ball out into the front yard for him to fetch as Gracie stayed by her feet, watching with her tongue poking out of her mouth. God, she was so cute, and April bent down, bopping the pink part, making her lick her lips before it came snaking back out.

When the rumble of an approaching vehicle finally sounded just after seven, she broke out into a cold sweat, standing helpless with the ball in her hand, watching him slow to a stop just next to the freesia that lined the drive near the house.

He stepped out to George circling the truck, and Negan scratched the top of his head, giving her a reserved smile. “Is it okay that I’m here?”

Seriously?

She took off at a run with Gracie trailing behind her, launching herself at him, and he grabbed her out of the air, stumbling back a few steps. Black hair, bruises, clean face. April planted a kiss on his lips, and he hugged her tight, pressing their bodies together. “You’re a moron.”

He bit the tip of her chin as he carried her towards the porch, setting her down on the first step, and
her smile faltered as she looked up at him. “What’s wrong?”

Negan steered towards the swing, and he waited for her to sit before squatting down in front of her, and her mouth dropped open when he spoke, sounding blue. It seemed her emotional roller coaster was cresting, yet again.

“Cal came to the shop to see me.”

Chapter End Notes

A breakup! A new calf!

Stay tuned for a Negan/Cal confrontation, and maybe the smuttiest smut I've ever written...
Chapter 24

Getting hit in the head with a bottle fucking hurt, and aspirin wasn’t going to take the swelling ache away. It wasn’t the worst physical injury he’d ever received. That would be the broken femur he got when he collared Devin ‘the Devil’ Rolston, who’d assaulted his wife and skipped town. Devin was part of the local motorcycle gang, and he had a good four inches in height over him, but Negan didn’t give a shit. When he’d tracked him down, they’d gotten in what his dad used to call a tussle, and he got cocky, thinking that he’d had the upper hand. Until Rolston pinned him to the ground, stomping on his left leg with as much force as he could, snapping the bone.

It was an audible sound, one that he still remembered to this day, and the pain had been slow to come, allowing him to roll away and reach his baton, sweeping Devin’s legs out from under him. By the time he had him cuffed, he was in agony, and he’d been forced to have a stranger call Ajax to send in assistance. Once in a blue moon, he would experience the phantom pain, and as he laid in the bed with April, watching her sleep, he could feel it.

The dull ache settled in his limb, and the throb hovered along his forehead, but what hurt the most was his heart. Looking down at April’s face in the dark was a mixed bag, despite the assuredness of his words just an hour ago. He did want to be with her. That was the God’s honest truth, but lying awake by himself gave him more than enough time to really think about how much he just fucked up her new existence.

When she spotted him at the Fourth of July celebration, there were so many emotions that crossed her face in a split second that it was like fast-forwarding some epic thriller/romance/tragic movie or something. Shock won out, and he’d watched in horror as she crumpled to the ground. His first instinct was to scoop her up, and he’d actually reached out to her, but he was pushed aside by the blonde farm boy that she was seeing, and he’d melted into the crowd, watching from a distance as Cal and Andrew helped her to her feet.

The rest of the afternoon, her eyes scanned the crowd, but he’d kept himself hidden, not wanting to have a huge confrontation in front of a thousand people, so when he saw her packing up her things, he took off, driving around and giving her some time to get home. Her farm was surrounded by so much open space that it made him feel like an ant, a speck in the universe, and it was a goddamned miracle that he was here and so was she, though Negan was ninety-nine percent sure that Michonne was the one to tip him off with the newspaper article.

Still, when she hit him with the bottle, he saw stars, followed by her face, contorted in rage, a hurt that he knew well. It was the same feeling he’d had when he found out that she’d taken off to turn herself in. At first, he thought she was going to tell him to leave, to get the hell out of her life permanently, and he was pissed, both at her and himself. But when he’d called her sugar, she kissed him, and he remembered why he’d spent two years searching an entire state for her. She was the one. From the moment she told him to go fuck himself as they drove away from Albuquerque, she was in there, scraping away at the shell he’d created, cocooning himself from life and love and normalcy.

His doubts were muted when she sighed in her sleep, reaching out unconsciously towards him, and Negan held his breath as fingers rose over his undershirt, brushing the coarse hair of his upper chest, stilling as they seemed to find what they were looking for, and he told himself to let go, that it was okay to be happy.

Even as he drove away, leaving her with another man, he was reasonably confident that he’d done the right thing, going back to his house in Centerville to shower and shave. Today was the first day of the rest of his life, and he headed to work at ten, pulling into Andrew’s shop with a busted fucking
face and a smile.

“Whoa, what happened?”

Andrew was in the garage, leaning against a Honda, staring at him openmouthed. His garage was smaller than Ron’s, only able to house four cars at a time, but there was never a lull in his jobs. Despite the fact that there were chain repair shops throughout the town, Andrew’s place was the most popular by far, and the lifts were already filled with vehicles that needed attention.

“Got a little drunk last night and walked into a door,” he blew it off, picking up the nearest car’s clipboard to see what needed done. “ Doesn’t even hurt.”

“Man, it looks bad. You sure you didn’t get jumped or something?”

Negan smirked at him, grabbing a jumpsuit off the hook and going to the bathroom to change. The first job was a simple tire rotation, and he was done in no time, moving on to the transmission on the Honda. Andrew was a good dude. He knew when to step in to help, and he had a nice disposition. After working there for just a couple of days, he thought he could see himself making it a long-term job. That line of thinking made his thoughts turn to April.

God fucking hated him, because as he was elbow deep in the guts of a station wagon when he heard the reception door open and Andrew called out, making him whack his head off of the underbelly of the car.

“Yo, J.D.! You have a visitor.”

Andrew sounded confused, and Negan tossed his wrench onto the ground, sliding out as he checked his forehead gingerly, wondering how many times someone could crack their skull before becoming a vegetable. He stood up, pasting a smile on his face as he saw that Andrew was standing with Cal, and he pondered just quitting and walking out. He didn’t need the money, and judging by the way the blonde was standing, the breakup was done.

Cal’s shoulders were rounded, his eyes blazing, and his hands clenched into fists. Negan’s face was open, his shoulders were back, and his head was steady as he walked forward, extending his hand in greeting. The other man glanced down at it but refused to touch him, instead turning his back and striding through the waiting room to the front parking lot.

“Mind if I take a quick break?”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders as he started towards his spot, and Negan took a deep breath, following Cal out to the parking lot for a probable fistfight. Indeed, Cal was pacing the lot, still with clenched fists, and Negan prepared himself, watching the other man warily.

“What can I help you with?”

He let out a short, barking laugh, still moving in circles until finally stopping right in front of Negan’s space. A twinge of unease started forming inside him, but he kept his mouth shut, waiting for the kid to talk first. There was no way he was going to offer up anything without knowing what April told him, and he kept a blank expression on his face, waiting.

“June broke up with me this morning.”

All he did was nod, offering a vague interest in the conversation, waiting for a cue.

“She told me you two have a history.”
“We do.”

Cal looked him up and down, his gaze lingering on the welt that swelled out from his forehead, and Negan offered an apologetic smile.

“She said you had a short, intense relationship, and then you up and disappeared.”

“It was unavoidable,” he admitted, giving nothing else, memorizing the guy’s face. He was younger than him by at least a decade, and they were roughly the same size, though Negan had at least twenty pounds on him, and he became distinctly aware that he’d let himself go a little. The blonde was built like a brick shithouse, kept in shape by all the hard work that running a farm offered him.

“I love her,” Cal said, standing up a little straighter, trying to intimidate him, but he maintained the same steady demeanor, even though his heart plummeted to his stomach.

“We were together for a year, longer than I’m guessing you were ever with her.”

“I couldn’t help what happened.”

“Do you know what her favorite movie is?”

“Huh?” Negan’s eyebrows rose.

“Her favorite movie. The one she’d watch over and over again.”

He refused to say anything, his stomach dropping even further down, hovering somewhere near his knees. They never got into any of that. There wasn’t time.

“How about the way she takes her coffee?”

Black with a touch of sugar. At least, that’s what he thought.

“Her favorite color? Type of music? What about her family?”

“What’s your point?” He was starting to unravel, and Cal knew it. Each question was a paper cut, a small graze of irritation and upset, and he locked his legs, the back of his head throbbing.

“You know what my point is, J.D. She had a life with me, for a long time, and you just come along and throw everything up in the air. Did you even once think about that before you showed up here and fucked up her life?”

“It’s my turn to ask you a question,” Negan floundered, needing to grasp at something to hang onto. “Does she still have nightmares?”

This time it was Cal whose eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. Negan could tell that he was surprised, and he seized the opportunity to let this fucker know that they had a connection that couldn’t ever be broken. “Do you even know why she has them?”

“She never told me,” he admitted, doubt creeping into his blue eyes, and Negan smiled. He leaned closer to deliver the final blow, wanting this shit to be over with. Cal may have lost a girlfriend, but he’d lost two years with her, twenty-four months of worry and wonder, and he wanted to make it up to her.

“Well, I do. And I’m the only one that can help June. I can take the fear away. You may have had her present, Cal, but I had her past, and I’m her future.”
“You arrogant fuck,” he recovered, his face turning red as Negan’s smile widened. “You think this is going to last? You think I’m not going to fight for her?”

“She chose me, corn husker. If she wanted you, she would’ve told me to fuck off, but she didn’t, did she?” he couldn’t help taunting the rival for April’s affections. “She picked me. She wants me. And if you fuck with that, I’ll stand my ground, man.”

The tension grew, and a part of him was just itching to knock this fucker out, to take out years of frustration on him. It had been so goddamned long since he’d gotten in a fight, and what better way to work off pent up rage and anger at what he’d given up. What she’d given up. Their lives, their friends. Everything.

“Break time’s over.”

The two men took a step back as Andrew approached, obviously trying to keep a brawl from happening in his parking lot. With a glance to Cal, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, a nonverbal order for Negan to head back, and he strolled away like he didn’t have a care in the world, internally seething. He didn’t need this shit. He didn’t even need this fucking job, and he almost quit on the spot, but after taking a few deep breaths, went back to work, trying to avoid thinking about the clusterfuck he’d created.

She was his. She wanted him. So, why did he feel like shit?

Andrew didn’t ask him what was going on, maybe because Cal probably spilled his guts, and when his shift was over, he waved half-heartedly, getting a cool look in response. He drove out of the lot, his thoughts all jumbled and disjointed, and when he pulled into April’s drive, the confusion only increased.

What was her favorite movie? What did she like? How could she care about him when he never bothered to learn more about her?

She was watching him with wide eyes as he stepped out, and he became afraid that she’d had second thoughts, forcing a smile onto his face. “Is it all right that I’m here?”

April ran towards him, leaping into his arms, and he hugged her tight to him, not even caring that she smelled like hay and animals. “You’re a fucking moron.”

He set her down on the porch steps, showing her to the swing, and he knelt down, setting his hands on her knees.

“Cal came to see me.”

April’s mouth dropped open, and he took the spot next to her, sending the swing back several inches as she turned her head to stare at him.

“You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

“Depends on how you mean.”

“Negan, I’m serious,” she gripped his arm, forcing him to swallow hard. “Did you do anything to him?”

“Don’t you fucking care what he did to me?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”
“It means he made me feel like fucking crap, April. He basically pointed out that I don’t know shit about you, because I never got the chance to. That blonde icicle knows your favorite movie, and how you take your coffee, and the most I know is that… I don’t fucking know shit.”

The words poured out of his mouth without permission, but once he started, he couldn’t stop, and he got to his feet, looking out at the dusk as the dogs sat in the yard staring at him like he’d lost his mind.

“I never got the normal shit with you, and he did. I told him that was his fucking problem, but maybe he’s right. You were doing just fine until I came along and messed everything up. You had a nice guy that you confided in and let see your true self, and I don’t— I feel like shit, like I just took something that didn’t belong to me.”

The silence hit his back like a thunderbolt, and he rubbed at his face, wincing as he put too much pressure on his forehead. Fuck that asshole for screwing with his mind.

“He’s a decent guy, and he loves you. He’s not going to just give up, and maybe I should step aside so that you can really be June Daniels. You can marry a farmer and raise giant yellow-haired babies with him, and I’ll go back to my house. Forget I ever came here and the fact that I represent everything shitty that ever happened to you.”

Fingers, the pressure softer than he deserved grasped his wrist, and he turned to see her looking up at him, unimpressed, which made him feel even worse, and she whistled, garnering the dogs' attention. Before he could say anything, she dragged him into the house, shoving him towards the couch, and he sat down heavily, refusing to make eye contact.

“Am I mentally incapable?”

“What?” Negan looked up to see her hands on her hips, and he blinked up at her, confused.

“Have I been deemed mentally incapable?” she repeated, over pronouncing each word as she took a step closer, kicking aside a squeaky toy.

“I don’t get it.”

“Am I stupid, you dumb fuck?” April snapped, losing her cool. “Do you think I’m a moron? ‘Cause I’m starting to wonder if you are.”

“I’m lost,” he admitted, spreading out his hands, and she started to laugh, the sound cutting through the air straight to his brain, and he gaped up at her, waiting for her to explain.

“Who the fuck are you, even?” April stared down at him like he was a piece of slime, and he slumped down in the chair. “I’m a fucking grown woman capable of making my own decisions, and for you to assume I’m too stupid or confused to know what I want makes me want to add about ten more holes in your head, since you obviously don’t have a brain rattling around in that fucking waste of space you call a skull.”

“I’m trying to tell you how I feel. I’m trying to be a fucking stand-up guy for once in my life.”

“No, you’re acting like a pussy.”

He shot out of his seat, towering over her, but she wasn’t fazed in the least, looking at him derisively. Negan didn’t see any affection whatsoever, no sympathy or empathy, only disgust, and he felt even worse.
“Cal is a good guy,” she conceded with a sigh, still not losing her anger. “But he only knows what I’ve shown him, asshole. I’m perfectly capable of figuring out what I want, but if this is your weaselly way of trying to back out again, just man the fuck up and say so. Don’t use him as an excuse to run away like a little bitch.”

“I’m not a bitch or a pussy,” he shot back, getting only one raised eyebrow and nothing else, just a set of crossed arms.

“Well, you’re not the fucking Negan I knew,” April started for the steps, snapping her fingers towards Gracie, who got up to follow her. “You’re some pathetic guy named J.D. that rolls over like a punk bitch.”

Negan started to follow her, and she turned back, dismissing him like he was nothing. “I’m getting a shower. Don’t follow me. Instead, think about how fucking shitty you just made me feel, J.D.”

He went back to the couch as he listened to her stomp up the steps, followed by the dog, and George plopped down in front of him, watching the ceiling as the sounds crossed over their heads, and when they stopped, he met wide brown eyes and a thumping tail. Reaching out, he pet the dog automatically as he absorbed everything she said, the anger and indignation finally spurring him to his feet and out the front door, slamming it loudly.

“Fuck this.”

April was standing naked in front of the shower when she heard the front door slam, and she turned on the water, staring blindly at the wall, wondering how Cal had gotten so far into Negan’s head. He fucking told her that he wanted her, and after a few words from Cal, he was acting like…like a martyr. Like he was making a sacrifice and giving himself and his happiness up for her, and it pissed her off.

Where was the fucking guy that beat death for her? That scoured an entire state looking for her? That promised her he’d save her?

No, he just fucking wussed out the second Cal claimed ownership over her inner self. Equally disappointed and frustrated, she stepped into the stream of water, letting it soak her completely before reaching for the shampoo, washing her hair and scrubbing viciously at her body, her nails scraping her scar accidentally, sending a sharp burn through her abdomen.

As she rinsed the conditioner from her hair, the shower curtain opened and Negan stepped in, naked, scaring the shit out of her, and she almost fell on her ass in the tub.

“Fuck?” she hissed, feeling vulnerable that he saw her naked without warning, but he gave her a look that could freeze the blood in her veins, picking her up and setting her at the far end of the shower, getting under the water. Unsure of what to do other than gawk at him, she shivered as he shut his eyes, wiping the excess moisture from his face, pouring some of the shampoo in his hand.

He’d gained a couple of pounds over the last few years, showing just the barest hint of a belly, and she found it oddly erotic. Still an amazing physical specimen, with arms that were bigger than anyone’s, even Cal’s, and narrow hips that blossomed out into muscular thighs. There was just that little rounded spot on his stomach, and her fingers were just itching to touch it and rub it.
To save her sanity, she climbed out of the shower, feeling off-kilter and exposed that he’d just come in after she told him to leave her alone, and she toweled off, going back to the bedroom to throw on a nightgown. Gracie was laying on the floor, and she shooed her out of the room, shutting the door.

She rifled around in her drawer, pulling out a plain, white gown, and the water shut off, the snap of the shower curtain making her move faster, not wanting to get into it again with him while she was still nude. But he strolled out, taking the clothes from her hand and pushing her back onto the bed as she swung out her fist to hit him. He blocked her easily, dropping the towel and pinning her down onto her back.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Negan licked his lips, drawing his gaze over her eyes, her nose, her chin, and down her neck, sending a ripple of arousal down her body. The blood rushed straight between her legs, and his stomach pressed against hers, that little rounded part, spurring her to spread her thighs beneath him, almost unwillingly.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he informed her, like they were negotiating a deal. “I’m going to lay on my back, and you’re going to sit on my face.”

“…what?”

“I need to know if I gave you the right nickname, sugar,” he rolled to the side, bringing her with him so that she was on top, slowly pulling her up his body, “and I’ll only know by actually tasting you.”

“You-“ her breath caught in her throat as her joints turned to jelly, allowing him to damned near lift her into the air, his eyes never breaking contact with hers until her knees hit the mattress above his shoulders. “I just fucking-“

“April, shut the fuck up,” he let her go, pulling her thighs apart and lifting his head to lick between her lips, and she reached out for the headboard, her core exploding with warmth as he pushed his tongue inside her. Holy shit. They’d only slept together a couple of times, and it was always just straight fucking. Her mind was a blur as he sucked on the nub, a deep sound of approval sending vibrations into her, and April started to move against his face, seeking more friction.

She couldn’t think straight when he started circling the opening, alternating slow licks with deep, penetrating nibbles, and her head dropped back on its own, the only thing she was able to control was her hips that were moving in a circle and her hands that were clinging to the metal frame to keep her up. She’d imagined this a hundred times, being with him again and knowing it was never going to happen because he was dead.

Out of nowhere, he slid out from under her, and she flopped down with a gasp, totally out of sorts and aching from the inside out. When she turned around, he was on his knees, his dick hard and glistening, and she reached out to grab his waist, unable to meet his eyes for some reason, so she shut hers as her lips touched the mound of flesh above his pelvis. It was slightly soft, though the muscles underneath were still there, and she focused on the spot, the smell of his skin and the Dial soap she had blending together.

An impatient moan and a hand on the top of her head pushed her down, so April felt blindly for his shaft, the girth moving in her palm towards her mouth. Soft, so soft it was, that tangy warmth hitting the outside of her lips, and she allowed him to force his way in, choking the air from her lungs, her eyes watering as he got himself as deep as he could go, touching the back of her throat. “I fucking
knew you’d take it all,” he growled, brushing the hair from her eyes, the throbbing pain of no reciprocal touch nearly killing her. His eyes were black, filled with lust and something else. Anger? Rage? Whatever it was, it was turning her on, turning her back into who she was two years ago, and April jerked her head free, eyeing him as she sucked one of his balls into her mouth.

It made his chest start to heave, and she moved to the other one, rolling it around, her tongue curling up over the sac, and she got a little bit of the control back. He sensed it as well, using his hand to pry her mouth open, and Negan switched his hold to the back of her neck, jerking her up so that their lips were almost touching, the combined panting between the two of them a symphony of want and need.

“Turn around,” he ordered, but she shook her head, pressing his shoulders to try to get him on his back. “No, lay down.”

April found herself on her hands and knees forcefully, facing the head of the bed, and he slapped her right ass cheek, the burn stoking the fire between her legs, and she whimpered without meaning to, making him laugh. The sound made her arch her back, and she was rewarded with a thick finger entering her as his thumb lazily pressed against her nub, warning her. Taunting her. Reminding her.

“That’s a good girl,” he praised her, crooking the finger and stretching her out. When he removed it, she inched back towards him until he clamped down on her waist, stilling her movements but brushing the head of his cock against her entrance, the promise of something good to come. Slowly, he worked himself inside her until he was fully sheathed, the bottom of his belly nudging her ass, and she let out a breath of relief. This was what she needed from him, and he began to work his pelvis, retreating halfway before shoving all of himself back in and she braced herself, feeling like she was in a trance.

“Does your little farmer fuck you like this, sugar?”

A gush of arousal pooled inside her, and they both felt the change with just a few words, a wet digit tracing the contours of her spine. “Does he?”

“Yes,” she said, jerking when he slapped her ass in the exact same spot, the sound reverberating through the room.

“Don’t lie to me,” Negan warned her, moving at the same steady pace, and she dropped her upper body, burying her face in the comforter as she moaned, the sound bubbling up without notice. “I can feel you getting wetter, April. Does he make you this wet?”

“No.”

“That’s right. He doesn’t.” Negan thrust two more times before pulling out completely, and he laid his hand flat between her shoulder blades directing her top half completely into the mattress, laying his body on hers. Soft lips nuzzled at her jaw, his stomach resting on the small of her back, and she tried to turn over underneath him, but he wouldn’t let her, licking the perspiration from her neck. “I have to taste you again, sugar. I need to see how sweet you are, now.”

The loss of his body heat was evident the second he moved, and she started to shake, her backside still high in the air, and he spread her cheeks, exposing every inch of her sex, burying his face and lapping at the entrance. Tears started to form under her eyelids, the torture so bad that she blindly fisted the comforter, begging for release. “Please.”

“So. Fucking. Good.”
She heard him smack his lips, and then he was inside her again, this time using his hands to massage her ass, her thighs, and finally her clit. The second he touched it, she exhaled soundly, covering her face as he finally started fucking her hard. Fast. Thick, long strokes that she’d feel in her sleep.

“Who fucks you the way you want, huh? Who do you want, sugar?”

The euphoria was building, a growing joy and pleasure that made it hard to breathe, and only another slap to her ass was able to break through, even though he kept up the thrusts that were responsible. “Tell me.”

“You,” she gasped.

“Say my name. Say it, April,” his voice was as slow and thick as molasses, spreading over her soul, and she reached the peak, teetering on the edge of insanity, of death by raw physical pleasure.

“Negan.”

“Again.”

“Negan.”

It was coming, the eruption, and she was helpless to stop it, not that she wanted to, but it was powerful, erasing all other sensations, all coherent thoughts and memories, everything reduced to a blur of color and heat, bright reds and oranges, and she cried out as the wave crested, the peak dropped, every piece of her body feeling the effect, and Negan pushed through, his finger never stopping, his hips never ceasing, and the heat increased when he came inside her, a grunt and groan delivered to her neck.

Neither moved at first, their skin melded together by sweat and other fluids, until April started to rouse from the sexual haze that she’d been under, blinking sleepily into the dark outside the house. Her legs were still bent underneath her, and Negan was still inside her, breathing heavily on her cheek, rising up with a low moan. Before she could turn over, he kissed two spots on her back, her scars, and she twisted around to see him giving her a guilty look.

“Did I take it too far?”

Every inch of her body was shaky from emotional and physical overload, and she smiled tenderly at him before lightly slapping his face.

“Welcome back, asshole. I knew you were in there.”

Blinding white teeth flashed before he used his nose to nudge her cheek, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, seeking his touch. “Now put that fucking beer belly all up on me, ‘cause I love it.”

His cheeks got redder than they already were, but he did, and she was happy.

She was safe.

She had Negan, the real Negan back in her life.

It was a good day.
“They put me in a cell with a woman named Leona,” April said, rolling up a piece of turkey breast and taking a bite. It was the first time she’d ever spoken about it out loud, and she chewed slowly, looking up at Negan’s face. Her head was on a pillow in his lap, and he was leaning up against the headboard, stroking her hair, one hand on her bent knee. “She was an Angel of Death.”

“Angel of Death?”

She handed him a piece along with a cube of cheese, and he cocked his head, confused.

“Leona used to be a nurse,” she explained. “And she killed six of her geriatric patients.”

“What the fuck?”

“Yeah,” she reached for another piece of meat, holding it between her thumb and forefinger, and he lifted the top of her shirt, exposing her scar. “I guess after I turned myself in, while I was in solitary, Warden Pritchett got a call from Michonne or someone in her office, informing him of the hit on my life and whatever the hell you had planned on your side.”

Negan smiled for about two seconds before reverting to a scowl, and she bit off a piece of the lunchmeat, using her free hand to still his finger. The stab wound was healed, if not lumpy, and she loved and hated it. The reminder of who she was, how she lived, and most importantly, that she survived it, with some complications. Negan had his own scar, a jagged, round protrusion on his upper chest, and she studied it instead of looking him in the eye.

“Anyway,” she sighed, launching back into her story, “he came back in the middle of the night, arranging for me to be put in with Leona. Between Pritchett and the FBI, they worked out a deal with her. The woman was serving a life sentence for murder, and they offered her a chance for parole in twenty if she’d help stage my death.”

“They’re putting her back on the street? That’s fucked up, sugar.”

“I doubt it,” April shrugged, tossing the remaining piece in her mouth. “But she was willing to do it, and she had knowledge of human anatomy, so she knew where to stab me without killing me. Got me in the abdomen and twice in the back.”

“Honey…”

“There, uh, was a lot of blood, and I passed out on the floor,” she laughed unsteadily, realizing that she wasn’t okay like she thought she was. “I remember hearing different women screaming and laughing, and someone called for the guard before I passed out.”

April felt his legs shift underneath her head, and she made eye contact with him, finding the strength that she needed, and she rolled to her side, nuzzling his stomach.

“When I regained consciousness, I was in some house on the outskirts of Virginia with a death certificate and the news that you were dead.”

“You’re giving me a fucking complex about my gut, sugar,” he grumbled, making her smile, and she sat up, pushing the plate of food to the side. When she turned to face him, he was smirking, and she kissed him softly, rubbing the spot.
“I wasn’t kidding when I said I loved it.”

“You’re into fat guys?”

“For one, you’re not fat,” she moved the pillow to straddle his waist, draping her arms across his shoulders, and he squeezed her ass, uncrossing his legs. “And even if you were, you’d still be handsome, no doubt accumulating Hooter’s ass like a collector.”

He huffed once, his face still fixed in a scowl, and she tilted his chin up, kissing his nose. “The second reason I dig it is because it means that this is real. That you’re real, Negan. We actually made it through this and time has passed. I’m not laying in a coma in some bed somewhere.”

The lines on his face grew more pronounced, and she rubbed her lips against his, using her thumbs to try and smooth them away. “Did you know that when Michonne went to tell my parents that I was dead, the only thing they asked was if I had an estate?”

She remembered the look on Michonne’s face when she told her, a combination of pity and sympathy, and Negan tightened his grip on her backside. The Browers were better left in her past, and she spent every day thankful that she was free of the name, even if it meant that she questioned her place in the world frequently.

“Like I didn’t feel low enough,” April chuckled, fighting the urge to cry. “You were gone, I was frightened of what was going to happen to me, and my fucking mom and dad only wanted what was left to feed their fucking addiction. Talk about being kicked when you were down.”

“You’re better than they ever deserved, sugar,” Negan forced her head down onto his shoulder, rocking her lightly back and forth. “How you ended up as normal as you did will never fucking cease to amaze me.”

“I…when Michonne told me about this place, I refused to come here at first,” she sniffled, shutting her eyes as his hands moved up and down her back. “But I’m so fucking thankful she insisted. I have a family here. They like me for me. They care about me, and make me feel so goddamned normal. I mean, by all rights, I should be dead, Negan, but I’m not. I love every fucking thing about this middle of nowhere, farming community. So, believe in the fact that I want your belly, your stubble, and your occasionally questionable personality. I want it all, right here in the middle of cow shit, okay?”

“Okay.”

After a few minutes, she sat upright, wiping her eyes, and she eased off him to take the plate downstairs, finding Gracie and George curled up on the couch. Negan came down a few seconds later holding a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, and she wrinkled her nose in disdain.

“You smoke now?”

“I’m quitting. Soon.”

“Well, when did you start?”

“Right before I went to meet with Salustri,” he opened the front door, stepping out onto the porch as she followed behind. “I only have a couple a day.”

April watched as he exhaled, the smoke floating up to dance around the porch light, and she bumped his shoulder with hers, leaning over the porch rail. “I hope you quit.”
“I’ll brush my fucking teeth. Jesus.”

“It’s not that. I just…don’t want you to get sick.”

He didn’t say anything, crossing his arm around his waist, and she finally leaned in, resting her forehead between his shoulder blades, remembering that he lost his wife to cancer. She clearly wasn’t a prude, and drank whenever she had the chance, but the cigarettes worried her, and he finally tossed the butt out into the yard. “I ain’t goin’ anywhere, sugar. You have to believe that.”

“What happened, Negan? I mean, I got the general story, but what went on up on that roof?”

She felt his frame lock into place, and she gently attempted to turn him around, but he wouldn’t budge, so she gave up, backing away towards the swing. Whatever occurred on his side of things wasn’t something she relished hearing, and she’d tried to avoid all news about Tisone and his crew since she left Alexandria. Obviously, it was national news for months, but April didn’t want to spend another second of her life letting that fucker live rent-free in her head. The flip side of that was supporting him if he told her, and she held her breath, waiting.

“Sal showed up for the meeting with Caleb and some ginormous douchebag,” he said, still looking out into the dark. “I was wired with a mike, and he smiled at me like he used to, back when we were kids. He used to be one of my best friends, and he literally held my future in his hands like it was nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Negan. We don’t have to talk about it.”

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, his face was half-lit by the security lamp, and she could tell that he was trying to appear nonchalant. The problem was, his hands were balled into fists, and his shoulders were straining with tension. If she didn’t know him, seeing him in this state would probably scare the shit out of her.

“I showed him the ledgers and the money, and he was so fucking casual about it, like people just walked around with five million dollars every day. Of course, being a fucking mobster, maybe he did see that kind of money all the time. It could’ve been fucking lit on fire, and I wouldn’t have cared, sugar. I just wanted him to call off the hit on you.”

As he started to step forward, a piercing mewl cut through the air, making the dogs start barking, and they took off through the door, leaping off the porch and heading straight towards the barn with the new calf. It was a distress call, and more heifers started to vocalize in response, prompting her to follow behind George and Gracie.

The closer they got towards the barns, the more distinct the sounds, and she started running towards Buttercup, positive that it was coming from her stall. The dogs were racing around barking and yipping as she moved barefoot over the gravel with Negan right behind her.

“April, what the fuck is happening?”

Slamming into the door, she told all of them to shut up, fumbling with the lock, finally turning and whistling to get the dogs’ attention. “No, go lay down,” she hissed, her heart beating faster as the moaning continued from inside. Negan slowed to a stop next to her, wincing as he lifted one foot, plucking out a stone and tossing it aside. “Let me,” he said, but she turned her back, lifting the handle and opening it carefully.

Gracie tried to burst in, but she blocked her with her knee, nudging her softly as she whined, trying to do her job. April didn’t know what was going on in there, but adding a dog to the mix wasn’t
smart, and she whistled again, pointing towards the house. “No.”

She was able to wedge herself through, with Negan close behind her, and she flipped on the light, starting towards the stalls as all the heifers paced back and forth, anxiously. Her steps came to a sudden stop as she spied the reason for all the uproar.

There, at the far end of the barn was a coyote, trying to wedge itself through the bars to get to the calf, and she wheeled around frantically, looking for her gun. Coyotes were uncommon, occasionally showing up once in a while, usually in a pack, but this one was jerky, shaky, and she realized in horror that it was rabid.

Buttercup was swaying back and forth, her head down as she pushed her nose into the bars, trying to keep the interloper at bay, and she was pushed aside as Negan started down the strip, snatching one of the pitchforks that were laying on a hay bale. “Hey,” he barked, trying to get its attention, but it was still head-first between the metal rails.

Negan slowed his approach, holding the pitchfork out in front of him, and when he got about ten feet away, he banged the wooden handle on the post, succeeding in startling the coyote.

Drooling from the mouth. Growling. With dazed eyes, it started towards Negan, taking stuttering steps before launching itself at him, and he swung the pitchfork in a wide arc, knocking it to the side. All the while, the cattle were mooing and pacing, and Negan took a step back as the coyote righted itself, limping forward. “Come at me,” he muttered, leading him back towards the entrance. “What do you want me to do, sugar? Do you want to trap it?”

“All…kill it,” she told him, taking a slow step to the side. If it was rabid, there was nothing they could do for it, and though she hated to hurt it, if it attacked her or any of the other animals, it would be a terrible clusterfuck, and Negan stepped forward, repositioning the pitchfork so that it was more like a trident, and he put himself horizontal with the diseased animal, piercing it in the side.

Unable to watch, the coyote’s cries of pain mixed in with the wails of the heifers, and she covered her eyes until the sound stopped. Negan was standing over the coyote’s body, the prongs of the pitchfork covered in blood, and she rushed past, skirting the mess to get to Buttercup. She was still riled up, banging against the gate, and April reached over with a shushing sound, patting her head. “It’s okay, mama. The coyote’s dead.”

The newborn was huddled between Buttercup’s legs, all trembling and afraid, and April bowed her head, feeling like crap. It was her job to check the barn before closing it up for the night, and she forgot, with everything else going on. If anything had happened, she’d be to blame, and she wiped her face, watching mother and calf as they moved restlessly through the pen.

“What do you want me to do with the body?” Negan closed in, holding a green tarp.

“Just…cover it up, please,” she choked out, avoiding his gaze as he looked at her strangely. “I’ll call the vet and Animal Control in the morning.”

“It’s okay, sugar,” he tried to reassure her. “The cattle are fine.”

“They’re not just ‘cattle’ to me,” she snapped, shooting him a dirty look as he held his hands up in confusion. “Fucking cover up the dog and go back to the house, okay?”

She stalked off, still barefoot to check out the rest of the barn, scanning the shadows for any sign of invaders. “Kitty, kitty,” she murmured, trying to locate Hershey. Her voice was starting to quaver, and April wedged herself between two five-foot high bales of hay, dropping to her knees when the
cat hissed at her from the corner, her tail raised straight and hair standing on end. “It’s safe,” she cooed, waiting until the cat came down from her defensive high. It took a few minutes, but Hershey scampered away, brushing her knees in the process.

God, she got lucky, and she sat alone for a while on the floor, scratching her legs and thinking absently as the heifers gradually settled down now that the threat had been dealt with. Every time she thought she was making progress in her personal growth, something came along to knock her back to reality, and she felt like shit for lashing out at Negan. He didn’t understand how important these animals were to her, and she owed him the truth.

After doing a thorough sweep of the rest of the barn, she locked up the windows and turned the fans on high for the remainder of the night, trudging back to the house on sore feet. Gracie was waiting for her on the porch, and she squatted down, nuzzling the top of her head. "You did good, girl.”

A light thump from her tail hitting the ground continued to break the moonlit silence, save for a few crickets that sang their summer song, and she took a deep breath, heading back into the house. Negan wasn’t on the ground floor, so she locked the door and turned off the downstairs lights, trailed by Gracie. He was sitting on the bed, dripping wet with a towel wrapped around his waist and George on the floor, licking his leg.

She avoided his penetrating look, snagging a nightgown as he sighed. April went in to clean herself up, showering again and brushing her teeth. The bottom of her feet were tender and red, with a few scrapes, but she left them bare, edging back out into the bedroom to see him dressed in a clean pair of boxers, his bag laying on the floor. Both dogs were next to him, and Gracie seemed to have warmed up a little more towards him, though he was still glaring at her as she came around to the other side of the bed, lifting the covers and sliding in.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured to his side, and he shut off the light, prompting the dogs to head downstairs to keep watch. Negan scooted down the bed, laying on his back, and she leaned over, resting her head on his chest. He didn’t react, nor did he put his arm around her, but she kept her spot, shutting her eyes. “They’re more than just animals to me, because they’re the only things I’ll ever raise and care for.”

“Sugar-“

“When Leona stabbed me in the abdomen, she grazed my uterus, and I guess it left scar tissue,” April used her index finger to make a circle around his nipple, feeling her way across his chest. “The doctor said it was highly improbable that I’d ever get pregnant, let alone carry a baby to term.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, bringing his arm to her waist, and she felt her eyes well up.

“Cal was always okay with this,” she told him, and his hold tightened, “and I should’ve told you off the bat.”

“What? You think my relationship with you is dependent on having little ankle biters running around?”

“It’s a big deal,” April let out a shuddering breath, “and I never planned on having kids, especially not with the way I grew up, but to be told that you can’t…”

“Look at me,” Negan tilted her head up so that she could see his face, and he looked more put out than disappointed. “I told you I wasn’t cut out for suburban life, sugar. I had no intentions of having kids, anyway. But if you want to talk about adoption, way down the fucking road, we’ll work it out.
I don’t give a fuck about having little snot makers running around that look like me, putting their dirty hands all over my shit and draining my energy.”

There was a smirk on his lips, and he smoothed her hair back, using his thumb to wipe away the moisture at the corner of her eyes. “If the damn cattle are your babies, then I’ll try to remember that, and not refer to them as just cattle, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, moving up so that she could kiss his cheek. “They’re not just business to me, and I don’t give a fuck about making money off of them. The settlement I got from the government for being fucked over by Tisone is more than enough to live on the rest of my life. I told Fred from the start that I’m doing this because I like it, and I like them.”

“I don’t know shit about cows, honey, so I’ll take your word for it.”

“They’re sweet, and they’re fun to cuddle.”

“You cuddle…cows?”

“Uh-huh,” April used her left hand to stroke his cheek, the weight of her secret lifting off her chest, though the unease from the incident at the barn remained. “When they chill in the field, it’s like snuggling with a really big dog.”

He chuckled low in his throat, stroking one of the scars on her back, lulling her into a sleepy state. It was only the second night they spent together, but it was surprisingly comfortable. It felt right, and she hugged him with a breathy hum, her hand finding its way to his midsection, that comforting little bulge, and as she slipped into unconsciousness, she heard him mutter, maybe to himself.

“So, I guess I’m a fucking farmer now.”

The words echoed throughout her dreams, visions of him in a pair of overalls making her smile in her sleep.
“You know, sugar, it’s been over six weeks.”

Negan lifted his head from between her thighs, resting his chin on April’s stomach as her eyes fluttered open. She was panting with her hand clutched in his hair, and she raised her head, seeming lost.

“What?”

Her legs were thrown over his shoulders, and he felt her curl her toes into his back as she tried to guide him back to the job at hand.

“We’ve been together for over six weeks,” he informed her as she stared at him in disbelief. “Are you sick of me yet?”

One of the things that she’d been on the money about when they met was the fact that he hadn’t been in a relationship that lasted longer than a month or so since Lucille, and the length of time they’d spent in Iowa surpassed that mark.

“Please stop stopping,” April moaned, moving one of her hands down to try and stimulate herself, and he caught her wrist, preventing her from doing his job. “Goddamnit, Negan.”

Her thighs started to tighten around his neck, and he grinned at her before moving back down, licking her opening and making her moan. He fucking loved this. He loved everything about the last few weeks, and it freaked him out at the same time. Since he’d sprouted his first chest hair, females were attracted to him, and he took advantage of it. But none of them, aside from Lucille and April, saw past his looks and liked it.

Negan was smart and cocky. He was obnoxious, with a big heart that he kept hidden from almost everyone. His sense of humor bordered on juvenile, but was never usually mocking, and the more women got to know him, the faster they seemed to run. But not her.

She spent every night talking to him. Seeking out information and sharing her own. She found strength in him. Comfort. And he fucking thrived in the middle of fucking nowhere with her.

“Oh, God,” she breathed, and he knew she was on the verge of true bliss. When she whimpered, it was the sign that things were enjoyable, but when she started calling out to God, he’d done everything right, and Negan rotated his tongue in a circular motion, fighting the tightness in his jaw as she used her heels to try to gain leverage, lifting her hips to gyrate against his stubble, the contractions resounding as he sucked every drop of moisture from her.

“Holy fuck,” April sighed, easing her grip on his scalp, her legs falling to the side. It allowed him
to crawl onto the bed, running his index finger along her cheek, tracing the pink sunburn that never seemed to go away. “What were you saying, now?”

“I said,” he rubbed his dick along her opening, using her own lubrication to slick him up, “it’s been six weeks since I found you. That’s usually when women start for the door.”

April placed one hand on his cheek and the other on his hip, and he growled as he entered her, entranced with the way she bit her lip and the warmth of her insides. Their sex life was better than good. It was healthy, and it wasn’t just because of the positions or how many times they did it. He craved her, and the feeling was mutual, based on more than his looks.

It wasn’t uncommon for women to hit on him, or proposition him, but it was superficial, predicated solely on a physical need. April, though, wanted him because she liked all of him. Every fucking good and bad thing, it was all okay with her, and he couldn’t deny the feeling deep in his gut that was always simmering there, making him feel like an idiot. One look from her could send his cock straight up, and she initiated physical interactions as often as he did.

More than that, he fucking liked to be around her. He just…liked it all, the whole fucking package, and not for the first goddamned time, he wondered how the fuck he didn’t see it from the moment she walked into his life.

“So, are you saying you’re ready to punch out and move on?” April smiled, ruffling his hair, and Negan began to thrust slowly, savoring every soft part of her, starting with her neck.

“And give up all this? Fuck no.”

Her laugh, oh, that laugh, all throaty and lush. He swore he was turning into some weepy, chick flick version of himself the way she was affecting him, and he shut his eyes so that he didn’t blow his load too soon. At least five times a week, they spent the night together, and he’d come late on this past Thursday, finishing up his final job with Andrew’s garage. It had been a mutual decision that he no longer work there since the awkwardness was only growing between the two men.

Andrew was close with Cal, and though he was out of the picture, for now, it didn’t mean he’d given up completely. Three days after she dumped his ass, he came by to pick up his things, and Negan had walked into the house, hearing him ask her for another chance.

“We’ve been together for a year,” he was saying, standing in the kitchen as April looked up at him, arms folded across her chest and a sad expression on her face. “Don’t throw it away for nothing. Not for a guy that you barely spent any time with.”

“He’s not nothing,” she’d replied, sounding tired but resolute. “I never wanted to hurt you, Cal, I really didn’t. But this is over. You can’t understand, and I accept that, but he’s important to me.”

“You’re important to me, too, sugar.”

Both of them turned to see him striding through the dining room, trailed by both dogs and wearing a cold grin. Cal looked like he wanted to clock him, and Negan parked himself next to April. A box of his shit was sitting on the kitchen table, waiting to be taken, and Cal’s jaw tightened as Negan stared him down. As much as he wanted to haul the motherfucker out by his balls, he knew that would only piss her off, so he remained silent, waiting for her to move the conversation along.

“Cal, you should go,” she straightened up, and he tore his gaze from Negan to her, his head shaking lightly. “I understand if you hate me, and I don’t blame you, really.”
“I love you, June. I always will,” he said, picking up the box and starting for the door. Negan went
to follow, but she held up her hand, giving him a look and following Cal out to the porch. There
were a few more words murmured between the two, but in the interest of looking mature, he kept his
spot at the counter, keeping his temper in check.

April walked back in as Cal’s truck roared to life, and she dumped some food into the dog’s bowls
before coming to greet him with a quick kiss. “I appreciate you letting me handle it.”

“It wasn’t easy,” he admitted. “I really wanted to knock that asshole out.”

She smiled, resting her head on his chest, and he hugged her to him, chancing another question and
getting a light tap to his balls as an answer. “No second thoughts?”

No, there weren’t.

Since then, he’d refrained from asking her that same question, until they hit that six-week mark. As
he turned her over so she was on her knees, kissing her spine before resuming his morning fuck, he
bit out a few words, aware that she might stop their little interlude, but needing to know, anyway.

“You happy, April? With me?”

“Yes,” she muttered, dropping her head when he started caressing her breasts and tweaking her
nipples roughly, the way she liked it. Picking up his pace, he started to pant when she righted herself,
hooking her arm around his neck and holding herself up. It allowed him to jackhammer into her, the
need to finish, to feel that rush when he came inside her. Six weeks. Six goddamned awesome
fucking weeks, and he lost it when she started clenching around his cock, dropping her head onto his
shoulder.

“Fuck yeah,” he groaned, letting her milk him, her hips moving up and down, and they both fell to
the side at the same time, breathing unsteadily.

He had a hard time meeting her eyes when she rolled over, focusing on her lips instead until she
tilted his chin up. There was a hardness in her eyes, maybe disappointment, and he tried to distract
her by kissing her. It didn’t work.

“What’s going on with you?” she reared back, looking like she was about to snap. “Why are you
quizzing me all of a sudden and focusing on the ‘six-week’ thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do,” she hauled herself onto his waist, his now-flat abs, and she dug her nails into his
pecs with her eyebrows raised. “Are you losing your shit on me?”

“No, sugar, I’m not. I’m just…fucking happy, all right?”

“Then why are you acting like I stole your fucking virginity and dropped you off on the corner to
walk home alone?”

“That was real damned specific,” he started to smile, tracing the scar on her abdomen, but she
wasn’t swayed.

“I’m serious, James Dean. What the fuck is going on?”

The word vomit was coming, he could feel it, and he stared up at the ceiling, letting the fuckery
spew out of his mouth, burning his throat and his heart at the same time. Emotional fucking
indigestion.

“I love you, all right? Jesus. I fucking love you, and I’m freaked the fuck out, because after six fucking weeks, I’m waiting for you to tell me to hit the fucking bricks.”

She laughed. She up and laughed, actually leaning down into his face to do so, and he bucked her off, pinning her down, feeling like a loser. “I love you, too, you asshole.”

“Stop calling me an asshole.”

“Not when you’re acting like one,” April taunted, kissing him. Wait, did she say she loved him?

“You love me?”

“Yes, I love you. I told Cal when I broke up with him, that I loved him,” he started to open his mouth, but she clapped her hand over it. “But I was in love with you.”

If he had fucking ovaries, this was the moment that they’d fucking burst, and he smiled down at her, at her pink cheeks and freckles. Her golden eyes and her scars. Her heart belonged to him, and he wanted to fucking throw her over his shoulder and parade her in front of Cal, covered in sweat and his seed, because he really was an asshole.

“I mean, I let you name the calf Nelson Moo-ndela, for fuck’s sake. How could you not know?”

“That’s a fucking awesome name and you know it,” Negan mentally patted himself on the back for coming up with it, getting a blank look in response, and he knotted his fingers in her hair, in no hurry to remove himself from between her legs. “Now that we’re officially in love, should I move my crap in here permanently?”

“Are you ready to give up your bachelor pad?”

He’d never actually taken her to see the house, only sleeping there a couple of nights a week so as not to get all up in each other’s shit right away. The only things in his fridge were beer and bologna, so it wasn’t like he was giving up much. Besides, he’d grown attached to all of the flotsam and jetsam of her life. Fred, the high-school kids that helped out. Even the damned animals. He’d finally breached Gracie’s walls, and she greeted him with a happy bark when he’d pull in, though she’d immediately return to April’s side.

George, though, George was his boy. The pup was like his own personal Velcro, stuck to his side from the moment he set foot on the farm, and he loved the little shit. Baby brown eyes, golden hair, and the sweetest damned disposition of any canine he’d ever come across. They were buddies, and he bought him a red bandana, tying it around his neck as April stared at him like he’d lost his fucking mind. She might have even called him a loser, but he didn’t give a shit.

The cattle he was still learning about, but now that he was done working for the garage, he was intent on pulling his weight around the farm, and his eyes strayed to a crack in the ceiling.

“I’ll move my shit in tomorrow if that’s all right with you.”
Negan was resting his full weight on top of her, though she didn’t really care, even though his pudgy stomach was long gone. Truthfully, she missed it, that little swell, and her hands went to the curve of his ass instead, kneading the fleshy spots as he eyeballed a crack in the ceiling, one that had been there since she’d arrived in Iowa.

“I’ll move my shit in tomorrow if that’s all right with you.”

She wasn’t sure what else he needed to bring to the farm since he’d pretty much filled one of the closets with his clothes, but she shrugged agreeably, unable to keep from smiling. He’d told her he loved her, and he did it first, which was a huge deal to her. April probably knew since she walked out of that shitty little motel to turn herself in that she cared about him deeply, and when he reemerged in her life, those feelings were nudged towards love.

So, over the last month and a half, getting to know him and see who he truly was when they weren’t fighting for their lives only cemented her emotional attachment to him. He made her laugh, and he made her feel passion, not just physically. When they argued, even about stupid things, he brought out a fierce response in her, whether it was a disagreement about the ending of a movie or bigger concerns, like her contract with the ice cream company.

Negan was smart. Street smart and book smart, a fact that she hadn’t really grasped when they were stuck in a car for twelve hours a day, on the lookout for mobsters, and it was attractive as hell. Why he’d kept it hidden, preferring to fall back on his looks or charm to make a mark in the world she’d never know, but when he’d laser in on an idea to improve the barns or help her calculate production rates, it made him even more irresistible.

Not to mention the sex. The man had moves that made her unable to walk the next day, and she made it her mission to leave him completely devoid of energy, too. They didn’t have sex every night, but they always ended up making out at least, all deep kisses and lightly roaming hands. Even now, after having a mindblowing orgasm, she still needed that closeness with him, to have him touching her somewhere on her body.

Yes, she was in deep, and she wasn’t even scared about it.

“I actually have a move-in present for you,” she said, garnering his attention once again, and he got a hopeful look on his face.

“Anal?”

“Oh, get the fuck off me,” April wriggled out from under him, sitting up. “No. Just get dressed.”

Negan laughed, hoisting himself off the bed, reaching into the top drawer for a pair of boxers, and they both headed into the bathroom to freshen up. “So, what’s the present?”

“You’ll see,” was all she said, handing him his toothbrush. She’d been holding onto this secret since he arrived back in her life, and she wasn’t really sure why she held off on it. Maybe a part of her was waiting for something to fuck up their reunion, or for him to decide she wasn’t worth the trouble, but he didn’t. He loved her, and a stupid smile made foamy toothpaste slide out of her mouth.
and down her chin, even as his eyebrow rose.

“Well, now I’m fucking nervous.”

“Just hurry up. I want to show you before Fred gets here to start our very long fucking day.”

April was used to getting up at the crack of dawn, and gradually, Negan accepted it as well. Life on her farm came with responsibilities that started early, and she loved it. The work, the feeling of accomplishment at the end of the day when her muscles were tired and her head was empty of thought. All of it was fulfilling, and she hoped that Negan would feel the same when he was there every day. There was enough to do on the twenty-odd acres that they wouldn’t have to be on top of each other all the time, and after throwing on her work clothes, she started down the steps, calling for the dogs.

George and Gracie came into the kitchen, both yawning and stretching, and she tossed them a few treats as the coffee brewed. Both wandered over to the steps as they heard Negan start to descend, and he gave them each a pat on the head as he passed, reaching for a mug to start the morning.

“So, the gift is in the little brown barn,” she said, grabbing the small key that hung on the side of the cabinet. It was the only spot on her farm that Negan had never seen, with good reason. The contents of the barn were going to knock his fucking socks off, she hoped, and she’d waited a long time for this reveal. It was enough to prompt him to try to suck down the coffee, and he took her hand, dragging her out the door impatiently.

The cattle were all to the left of her house, and the little brown barn was to the right, where the drive curved around the back of her home. Negan had pestered her several times, wanting to know what the small building was for, but she’d always just told him that they were some of Samuel Trotter’s things, and it seemed to be enough of an explanation.

Walking side by side, April tightened her fingers around his, suddenly nervous that he wouldn’t like it, and he sensed her hesitation, jerking her closer so that he could wrap his arm around her shoulder instead.

“As long as it’s not a dead body, I’m gonna love it, sugar.”

“I hope so.”

Handing him the key, April took a step back when he removed the padlock, wasting no time flinging the doors open to the wooden shack, and she heard him suck in a lungful of air as he stared into the dim space. “A car?”

“Take off the cover,” she told him, wiping the sweat from her palms on her pants, feeling like she was stripping bare in front of him, weirdly enough. Negan stepped over to the tan material, his fingers leaving marks on the dusty top as he touched it. With a sweep of his arms, the cover hit the ground, and he froze in place, not even breathing.

After a few seconds of total silence, she finally walked over to him so that she could see his face. An odd, stiff expression was on his face, and she started to panic, resting her hand on his arm.

“You don’t have to take it if you don’t want it,” she said, getting no reaction. “I know nothing will ever replace Lucille, but I thought that if you wanted a project, you know, something of your own that wasn’t cow-related, you could fix her up-“

Her words were choked off as he lifted her off her feet, holding her so tight that she actually grunted when the air was forced out of her lungs. “Oof.”
“Are you fucking kidding me? Is this fucking real?”

Fred had told her that the Triumph TR2 was a rare car, but she’d never heard of it, and it had certainly seen better days. The white paint was completely gone in spots, and the windshield was cracked. One of the headlights was missing, and the tires were totally flat. Who the fuck knew if the thing would even start, but he spun her around, and when he set her on the ground, she was dizzy.

“April, I don’t even fucking know what to say,” he shook his head, his eyes wide and almost afraid, and she smiled at him, tossing him the key.

“This is your barn, now. Whatever else is in here is yours. All I ask in return is that you take me to dinner tomorrow. Somewhere where the waitresses don’t wear orange hot pants.”

“I love you,” he kissed her, and she felt how unsteady his breath was, so she placed a hand on his chest, over his heart, feeling the accelerated beat against her skin.

“I love you, too, Negan.”

She left him there to go open the doors for the cattle, and she shoveled shit with a grin on her face, because life was fucking good.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 24, 1991

Negan

Reaching his arm up, Negan disconnected the brake line, tossing it out into the other pile of parts that he’d set on the sheet, adding them to the ever-growing pile that needed to be replaced. His foot tapped along with the radio, some old Doobie Brothers song, and the wrench made a squeaking sound as he loosened the bolts, one of them bouncing onto his chest.

He was so engrossed in the task that he didn’t notice boots approaching, and when they kicked his leg, it scared the shit out of him, making him slam his head upwards, seeing stars.

“Goddamn motherfucking fucker,” he shouted, sliding out to see April glaring at him with her hands on her hips. “What the fuck?”

“I’ve been calling you for twenty minutes. It’s already two o’clock.”

Negan rubbed the welt on his forehead, sitting up as she shut off the radio, extending her hand. He waved her off, getting to his feet, soaked in sweat from spending the better part of the day in with his new baby, Lucille the Second. She was a fucking beauty, or she would be once he tore her completely down and rebuilt her. The bones were good, though, and he’d barely slept the night before, making lists in his head of what he’d need and places he’d have to look to get info on the Triumph. It was a rare car, for sure, but with money, and lots of it, he’d have her up and running.

“Sorry, sugar,” he leaned down, kissing the tip of her nose as she glanced at the plethora of metal that lined the sheet, shaking her head slightly. “I’m ass-deep in taking parts out, and I need to study the owner’s manual.”

“You still have to drive to your house and pack up your stuff, plus go to the post office to have your mail forwarded. Unless,” she looked up at him, “you want to wait until next week.”

“Nope,” he tossed the wrench back into the toolbox, and she helped him put the cover back over the car. “I’ll go now, but have your ass in a slutty dress by the time I get back.”

April rolled her eyes skyward, but she backed away with a smile, heading towards the barn as he locked up his little area. Fred was puttering away on the tractor as he walked into the house, and George followed him up the steps, laying on the bathroom floor while he showered. Twenty minutes later, he and the dog were on the road, George’s head hanging out of the window of the truck.

The afternoon was overcast, with the threat of rain, but nothing could change the mood he was in.
For once in his life, he had everything he wanted, and he was content. A dog, a car, and a girl. Life was fucking aces, and he turned up the radio, singing along.

“Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels…”

The front yard looked like shit as he pulled in, overgrown and in desperate need of a good mowing. His neighbor, Mrs. Preston, came waddling out when she heard his truck pull up, wearing her usual pink housecoat. Before he could even step out of the vehicle, her mouth was moving a mile a minute, and he took a deep breath.

“Your lawn is blowing weeds into mine,” Virginia Preston accused, shaking her finger in his face. “A sloppy yard makes our street look like trash.”

“I know, Mrs. Preston,” he said, stepping aside so that George could jump out, and he ran around the truck, yipping happily and pissing on his bush. “I’ve been staying in Fairfield-“

“I don’t care. What I do care about is the maintenance of this house, and if your girl can’t help out while you’re gone, then tell her to stop hanging around here at all hours of the day.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Negan whistled sharply, startling the woman, and George came bounding up, all wriggling and excited, drawing Preston’s attention, allowing him to step away towards the front door. She had to be talking about Sandy, and he herded the dog inside, who took off to explore the new smells.

The day he saw April’s picture in the paper, he’d left the library with no explanation, making the drive to Fairfield to try and find her. Under the caption, they’d talked about an Evelyn Markham of the Fairfield Council, and a June Daniels of Trotter Farms. The idea of April being a councilwoman was pretty far-fetched, but he dutifully checked Evelyn’s address first, finding the middle-aged woman from the picture out watering her lawn.

Trotter Farms was easy enough to find, and Negan had parked his truck across the road, just in sight of the house, debating on whether or not to just fucking blow in there. But he knew that it would scare the shit out of her, and his training took over. He sat and waited. For hours, just watching the occasional car that would drive past. The house was set far enough away from the road that he couldn’t get a bead on how many people were on the property, not until a battered old truck came rumbling down the drive, and an old man made his way past, heading west.

Still, he sat until the sun was almost down, and like a fucking stalker, he crept up her driveway, hearing and smelling animals. It was enough to make him cover his nose at first, the scent so thick and musky that he wondered how the fuck she could stand it. As he got closer to the house, he heard the barks of the dogs inside the house, and he peered into the window, getting his first look at April Brower in two years.

She was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed as she tossed a ball in the living room for the pups, and her face was fucking glowing. Her hair, which had always been brown, was a soft, golden color, and it hung down in loose waves, framing her face. And the pink cheeks, they were still there, still calling out to him like a siren song. He wanted to reach through the window to touch her, to feel the warmth of her skin, and as he stood across from her, looking through her dining room window into the den, she glanced up.
He’d ducked back along the side of the house, waiting for her to come out and pop a cap in him, but when he’d chanced a look back, she was still on the floor, petting one of the dogs with a thoughtful look on her face, almost pensive, and he would’ve given anything to know what she was thinking about at that moment. He did find out later that she was, in fact, thinking about him, and even now, it sent an unsettling warmth through his chest.

When he was able to sneak back to his truck, it was after ten in the evening, but he still drove straight to Sandy’s house, finding her home reading a book. He was supposed to have taken her out that night, and she was sitting on her porch, dressed in a little blue number, maybe hoping that he’d show up anyway.

It sucked breaking up with her, because she was a nice girl, but he did it quickly, ripping off an emotional band-aid. He didn’t beat around the bush and do the usual ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ crap that he normally did. He just told her that he found his girl, the one that got away. Her tears were genuine, and she wished him well, because she was truly that sweet.

But sometime over the last few weeks, she started coming around and leaving letters and cards for him, and he just tossed them in the trash unread. Even now, his answering machine was lit up, and he pressed the button as he passed by, heading into the kitchen.

“J.D., it’s Sandy. Can you please call me?”

“It’s Sandy. I really need to talk to you, J.D. I don’t know why you’re not calling me back, but it’s important.”

“J.D., please call me-“

He walked back over and started deleting them, and George came trotting in, carrying a pair of his socks in his mouth, dropping them at his feet. “Thanks, buddy,” he searched his cupboard, finding some crackers and tossing one to him. It took all of ten minutes to clean out his fridge and cupboards, pitching the shit he didn’t need. The house was going to stay empty for a while so that he could figure out what he wanted to do with it, whether it be renting it or putting it on the market. It was in a decent neighborhood, but the population wasn’t exactly lighting the world on fire, and a small part of him thought about holding onto it, just in case.

April loved him, and he knew it, but people that you loved left, or died, and he didn’t want to be floundering six months from now if she told him to fuck off. He figured he had a fifty-fifty chance of that happening, but if he did keep the house, would it always mean he had one foot out the door? Was it really a commitment if he was nursing a contingency plan?

The doorbell rang as he was stuffing his clothes in a suitcase, and he peered out the bedroom window, spying Sandy’s little blue hatchback behind his truck. Well, so much for getting in and out, and he was pissed as he opened the door. Sandy was standing there in a white sundress and sandals, her arms wrapped around her waist as she stared her down.

“Sandy, what the hell are you doing here?”

“May I please come in?”

“I’m packing the last of my things up,” he shook his head, using his leg to keep George inside, and she glanced down at the dog, her lower lip trembling.

“Please, J.D. I need to talk to you.”
“You have five minutes,” he said, taking George by the collar so she could step in. “I don’t know why you’ve been trying to reach me, sweetheart, but I’m gone, soon. My girl is waiting on me.”

Sandy nodded, wiping her eyes, and he shut the door, hoping that this relationship recap didn’t take too long.

April glanced at the clock as she reached for her mascara. It was just after six, and Negan still wasn’t back. They were supposed to be at the restaurant at seven for their reservations, and it was going to take at least twenty minutes to get there. When she’d shown him his ‘move-in’ gift, the old car, he’d agreed to take her out to a nice dinner, the first time they’d ever gotten to do so in the short time that they’d been together.

When Negan reappeared back in her life, everything seemed to happen quickly. He’d blown in like a goddamned tornado, upsetting everything in her world, but in a good way. He was here almost every night, he was getting more involved with the cattle, and he’d ingratiated himself with Fred and the boys, to the point that they looked to him as her equal in the business, not that he was well-versed, and Negan seemed to love it. Now that he wasn’t working for Andrew anymore, he’d promised to pay more attention to the minutia of running the farm, and he was picking it up quickly.

Still, tonight wasn’t about the farm, it was a chance for them to just relax and enjoy a good meal, and maybe a little more. After he’d left, she snuck out to Quincy Mall, finding a dress, heels, and some kickass lingerie to surprise Negan with. Her cheeks were still sunburnt from the previous few days out in the field, but she was able to mute some of the color with coverup, adding eye shadow, liner, mascara, and a berry colored lip gloss.

April pushed a few strands of hair out of her face, the sight of herself made up still jarring. She hadn’t bothered to get done-up while she was on the run, and fourteen-hour days shoveling cow patties didn’t pair well with makeup, so it was weird to see herself looking somewhat feminine. The dress she’d picked out was fairly revealing, with a low-cut bodice, a slight flair around her hips, and spaghetti straps, all in black. She’d bought a simple pair of heels to match with an ankle strap, and she wore some of the Trotter costume jewelry, a diamond necklace and matching bracelet.

As she spritzed on a bit of perfume, she heard Negan’s truck pulling up, so she headed down the steps, a little pang of nervous excitement forming as she hit the bottom. He was just coming in with a box of supplies, and she reached out to help him, retracting her hands when she met his eyes. Something was wrong. He looked pale, a hard task to accomplish when he was so tan, and his eyes were quick to sweep down.

“What’s the matter?”
He finally glanced back at her, not seeming to see her at all, and he walked past her, dropping the box on the floor as George came trotting in, and Gracie got up from the couch to follow him into the kitchen.

“Negan, what’s wrong? You look like shit, and we’re supposed to be at the restaurant in thirty minutes.”

His back was turned towards her, and she finally walked over, tapping him on the shoulder when she didn’t get a response, making him jump. “Hey. Talk to me.”

“I…” he turned around, taking her hand. “Sit down, sugar.”

Well, that wasn’t good, and the nervous excitement turned to just nervousness, a jiggly softness forming in her joints that sent her onto the couch, and after a protracted silence, he sat down next to her, placing her hand on his knee. “While I was at the house, Sandy came to see me.”

“Sandy?”

“She’s pregnant.”

He dropped a fucking nuclear bomb on her, and he didn’t even have the decency to look her in the eye when he did.

“What?”

“She’s about two months along, which means that she got knocked up right before I broke up with her…”

Negan was still talking, but the words faded out as she stared at him, awash in so many conflicting and hurtful emotions that it was like being inundated with pain. Another woman was pregnant with his child.

April was upright without knowing how, and Negan stared up at her. “I’m so sorry, baby. I used protection. I don’t know how this happened.”

“I…I need to go,” she mumbled, taking a step back, and he rose, reaching out for her. “I have to go.”

“Please don’t walk away,” he pleaded, and she retreated into the dining room, grabbing her purse. “I’m so sorry, April.”

“It’s not your fault,” April told him, fumbling with her keys. “You should be with her.”

His head shot up and he planted himself in front of her.

“It’s not like that. I’m not leaving you. I already told her that I’ll support the kid, but that’s it. Nothing else has changed. I love you, April.”
She walked towards the door, sidestepping him and flinching when he tried to touch her, and she knew that she’d hurt him with her reaction, but it was all she had to give. There were no rational thoughts at that moment, just an automatic reaction, a need to run like she’d done all her life when everything got to be too much. April was running on empty, and she needed to get away.

It didn’t matter that she was still done up, she just headed for her truck, and she met Negan’s eyes as he stood outside, watching her through the window. She wanted to tell him that it was okay, and maybe she’d be able to, later. Right now, she needed to go, and she drove around in a circle, leaving him behind and heading for the bar.

Benny’s used to be her home away from home when she and Cal were dating, and she hadn’t been there in a few months, pulling into a spot just near the door. It was the very definition of a dive bar, and she felt comfortable here, at home. It wasn’t dangerous like the places she used to work at in Alexandria. It was more of a down-home kind of place, and most of the regulars were older guys, farmers that worked the fields like her. The inside was filled with old license plates, one for every state, including Hawaii, and other assorted memorabilia that clogged up the walls. It smelled of beer, peanuts, and smoke, and she strode towards the bar, setting down her purse with a thump.

Her only thought was to get shitfaced, and Benny came over, wiping her hands on a towel with a smile.

“She haven’t seen you in a while,” she greeted, tossing a coaster in front of her. “What can I get ya?”

“A glass of Jack and a Jack and Coke.”

“We’re bringing out the big guns,” Benny grabbed a tumbler, pouring a generous amount of whiskey before adding some Coke, and setting it down in front of her. “Bad dinner?”

April snorted, taking a big swig of the drink, and she set it back down as she waited for the straight glass. “Didn’t even get dinner, just blindsided.”

Benny went from amused to neutral, nodding once as she set down the shot. The mark of a good bartender was the ability to know when to keep one’s mouth shut, and Benny left her alone with her thoughts. Regrets, really.

Another woman was carrying Negan’s child. The reality hit her like a punch to the chest, and she sucked down the alcohol like it was water, hoping that it would burn and kill the pain that was festering inside her. She couldn’t hate him, so she hated herself instead. She was the one that couldn’t give him a child, and some stranger was going to have a piece of him for eternity. The thought alone made her eyes start to water, and she signaled Benny to bring her another.

Sandy.

She was probably really pretty, with big, bouncy tits like a Hooters waitress and really perfect features. Not like April, with her imperfect skin and shitty attitude. Self-pity was a bitch. It was always there, and she knew that he loved her, but when he saw this faceless, gorgeous woman in a hospital bed, glowing and holding his son or daughter, what hope would she have?

“How did you get the name Benny?” she asked in a froggy voice, watching as the bartender
poured her some more pain relief, and she smiled as if she’d answered this question countless times.

“My last name is Benson. Dad wanted a boy, so he started calling me Benny, and it stuck. Beats being called Celeste.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“I do,” she nodded, taking the twenty that April set down, making change and setting it to the right of her drink. “A girl. She’s ten.”

“So, you’re called Mom, too?” April observed with a sad smile. “I’ve been called Junebug and Sugar, but I’ll never be Mom.”

“Sweetie, do you want me to call someone for you?” Benny rested her elbows on the bar, fixing her with a serious look. April shook her head, stirring the Jack and Coke together.

“No, I need to wallow for a while.”

“Okay,” she sighed, leaving her alone, and April ignored the other patrons that came in went. She ignored the songs playing on the jukebox, and she avoided anything but the alcohol and the self-flagellation that continued inside her, overriding the voice of reason that told her to get up and go home and talk to Negan. But she couldn’t face him, not when she was so raw and exposed. She needed to grieve the ‘never-will’ of her life, and right now, peace was sitting at the bottom of a bottle of Jack Daniels.

“Junebug?”

April raised her head with unfocused eyes, and it took her a second to connect the face with the name.

“Cal?”

“What are you doing here?”

She was heavily drunk, that much she knew, and she bowed her head as he sat down next to her, tears dripping onto her hands. Christ, she’d even painted her nails. For nothing. It looked stupid on her rough, calloused fingers, all manly from two years of labor.

“Are you still a woman…if you can’t bear children, Cal?”

“Junebug, what happened? Can you look at me?”

“I don’t…I want to know. Are you still a woman if you can’t have kids?”

“Lots of women don’t have kids, June. It doesn’t make you any less of a woman.”

“No, women choose not to have them,” she slurred, finally looking up and wiping her eyes, hoping to see hate or disgust for how she treated him, but he only looked worried. “If you can’t, what’s the point?” April pointed to herself, swaying lightly. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, now.”
Cal’s eyes went from her face to just beyond her shoulder, and he shook his head to someone to back off. It had never bothered him that she wasn’t going to have a family someday. At least, that’s what he’d told her, but now he was free to marry and breed like a rabbit. She should get a rabbit, she thought, her eyebrows wrinkling. She had more than enough room on the farm, and maybe the dogs wouldn’t bother them-

“June,” he broke into her rambling thoughts, turning her chin. They were only a few inches apart, and she started to talk, just a stream of consciousness about how sad she was, eventually starting to sob, and she was vaguely aware of him hoisting her up and taking her outside into the night, with only a few people watching as they rounded the corner to the side of the bar.

“Neg-” she hiccuped, wiping her nose. “J.D. found out today that his ex is pregnant and it’s his. He’s having a baby without me.”

The dam broke, and she slumped to the ground, her knees landing on gravel, and it sent a dull pain through her legs. Cal crouched down next to her, rubbing her back as she told him how much it hurt, knowing that some stranger was giving him something she never could.

“I’m sorry, Cal,” she bent over, not wanting to see his face. “I’m sorry that I hurt you, and I’m sorry that you’re still so nice to me. I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“I love you, June,” the words went straight through her like a knife. It would’ve been less hurtful if he’d just told her to fuck off, and she moaned pitifully. “I’ll always love you, and I’d never wish any more pain on you. Hell, if you wanted me back right now, I’d jump at the chance. But you need to not make any rash decisions. Talk it out with J.D., and decide if this is something you can work through. But I’m here for you, Junebug. I’ll always be here for you.”

The sound of music increased as someone stepped outside, and she shuddered, sitting back up. Cal was hovering over her, and she felt the heat of another body at her back. When she turned to look, she saw that it was Andrew, and he bent down to check on her. “You okay?”

“Can you drive me home? I’m really drunk.”

Andrew snickered, and the two men got her to her feet, guiding her over to her truck. She had no clue what time it was, and the guys argued lightly about who should drive, with Cal finally telling Andrew to follow them back to her house. He sat her in the passenger’s seat, closing the door securely before getting in and taking her keys out of her purse. As soon as he started the truck, the air came blasting out, cooling her somewhat, and she leaned her head against the window, trying not to throw up. The alcohol was sloshing around inside her, and she knew she’d be hurting physically in the morning.

She must’ve fallen asleep, because her head snapped up when the dome light came on, and she looked around in confusion, seeing her house. Andrew left his truck running while Cal came around to help her out. He shouldn’t have bothered, because Negan shot out of the house like his ass was on fire, getting in Cal’s face.

“What the fucking fuck is going on here?”

“I’m drunk,” she mumbled, reaching for him to keep him from starting a fight, but he brushed her off, glaring at her former boyfriend.

“Nothing happened. I just drove her home to make sure she got there okay,” Cal replied. “She’s a
“I’m not-” April started towards the porch, weaving to the left and right. It was hard to concentrate, especially in her heels, and she yelped when her ankle twisted. It could’ve been her imagination, but she swore in her inebriated state that she heard Cal congratulate Negan, and she gripped the porch railing to climb up. The lights from Cal’s truck were shining on the house, and she stumbled inside, crawling on her hands and knees to the couch. Both dogs were all up in her face, and she waved them off as she rested her head on the cushion, groaning. The world was spinning, her head was swimming, and her heart was curiously dead for the moment.

Gentle hands grasped her ankle, and she turned over to see Negan unbuckling her heels, and she watched him dully. He was still in the same clothes from earlier, and once the shoes were off, he scooped her up in his arms, carrying her to her room. Their room, and he set her down gently on the bed. She rolled to the side, and he stood behind her like he was waiting for a cue on what to do, whether to join her or bunk in the guest room.

“You should be happy, Negan,” she sighed, shutting her eyes as she felt the bed dip, and he smoothed her hair back. “You should go to Sandy and be happy.”

“I am happy,” he murmured in her ear, and she started to cry again, clutching her pillow to her face. “I want you, April. I don’t care about Sandy. I never planned on…what happened, and I’m sorry for how much pain this is causing you. If I could do anything to change it, I would, you know that. I love you. I fucking love you so much-“ Negan’s voice caught in his throat, and she reached back for his hand, bringing it up to her chest and clutching it. “I hope we can get through this.”

Her last conscious thought was that she hoped so, too.

Chapter End Notes

So, it wasn't Cal that put a wrench in their lives, it was Sandy...
Chapter 28

August 25, 1991

Getting shitfaced was a stupid thing to do. Even before she opened her eyes, April was regretting her impulsive decision to go to Benny’s to drown her sorrows. Her head was throbbing, and she knew she was going to puke. Heavy drinking didn’t jibe with her life, because there wasn’t time to lay in bed and do nothing. She still had animals to tend to, and with it being Sunday, she’d be alone to do all of the work. It was Fred’s day off, and the boys didn’t work weekends.

She sighed, rolling onto her back and clamping her lips together, refusing to give in to the nausea that was bubbling in her gut. Surprisingly, she was alone in the bed, and for once, April was thankful. Negan must’ve gotten up before her, and as she glanced at the clock, she let out a groan. It was after ten in the morning, well past her usual get-up time, and she attempted to get to a sitting position. All she did was make herself dizzy, and she flopped back as her entire body became flush with heat.

Stupid. So stupid. Instead of just nursing an aching heart, she now had to deal with a battered body as well, and she shut her eyes, turning to the side to unzip her dress. The urge to cry was increasing, and she resolved to just do it in a cold shower, stumbling towards the bathroom. It sucked to look in the mirror and see how ugly she looked with smeared makeup and swollen eyes, and she puked in the toilet before turning on the shower.

Negan’s ex-girlfriend was pregnant. Every time she thought about it, it made her feel even sicker, and she ended up throwing up three more times, panting into the bowl until her eyes burned, finally flushing away the sick and sitting on her ass in the tub, still in her lingerie. It wasn’t his fault, and she honestly believed that he’d used protection, but their lives were totally fucked. And one of the worst parts of it was that Cal knew. Her pain and humiliation came at a price, and April let the cold water beat down on her until she started shivering, finally standing up and stripping off the bra and panties, dropping them onto the floor.

What was she going to say to Negan? How were they going to discuss this when even thinking about it made her weepy? He knew enough about her personality that he wasn’t sitting there waiting to ambush her, so she told herself to just take it one minute at a time. Wash, dress, coffee, painkillers. That was all she forced herself to think about, and it worked. She was able to make it downstairs fully clothed, taking three Tylenol with the coffee that was warming in the pot next to a plate of eggs and toast. Negan never made breakfast. He must’ve figured that she was going to be hurting, and she ate them quickly, wanting to coat her stomach for the long day and unwanted rehashing of the
newest heartache in her life.

George and Gracie were already outside when she deemed herself well enough to start her day, and it made her feel even more rejected. She was as good as she was going to get at this point, and she tied her boots on, walking out to a bright, sunny day. Her eyeballs were throbbing in time with her head, matched only by the sound of music coming from the furthest barn. It was the Police, and she started for the closest building instead, ashamed of herself but doing it anyway.

To her surprise, the barn was empty and the stalls were already cleaned, leaving her nothing to do in there. The middle one was already done as well, which meant he'd been hard at work for several hours, and she retreated to the equipment barn, starting up one of the ATVs and taking it out to the edge of her property, checking the fence for any loose posts or holes that could endanger the cattle. She’d argued with Fred when she first arrived about having an electric fence to protect and keep the heifers from wandering too far. April knew nothing about the animals, but she felt that the possibility of them being shocked was cruel, until two of her cattle broke through the barbed wire fence that had been erected previously and nearly got hit by a truck.

Now, the entirety of their grazing lands was electrified, and she checked it weekly for any spots that needed repairing. Plus, it gave her a chance to think, and she drove slowly towards the back gate, unlocking it and coming out the other side to her own private area. It was her favorite place on the farm, a little pond, surrounded by weeping willows and a tiny isle in the middle, with an arched bridge that connected it to the mainland. There wasn’t much in the pond, just a few fish, lots of frogs, and two fat, white ducks, but it was peaceful, and April went out to her private spot, sitting down on the bench in the warm sunlight, basking in the rays and praying to herself for some peace.

Despite what she’d said to him the previous night about him going back to Sandy, April steadfastly refused to let him go. He loved him, and they’d been through so much shit that she couldn’t fathom giving him up. He belonged to her, and he had since he walked into the Starlight Diner, whether he knew it or not. She could still remember seeing him for the first time, and how frightened she was. He was going to be the death of her, she’d assumed, with his dark aura and intimidating stature. But it was so deceiving. He was prone to maudlin thoughts, sure, but there was also an irrepressible side to him, a joie de vivre that she’d never experienced with any other man. In their short time together, he’d made things fun, even the drudgery of mucking stalls, and she smiled to herself, thinking about the weird voice he did when he was imitating the cows.

No, she couldn’t be without him, and the smile turned to tears as she watched the two ducks swim together, moving in time around the little body of water. April was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t see him approach until he touched down on the little patch of grass, and she wiped her eyes as he hovered near her, waiting for her to say something. She couldn’t speak yet, but she reached out her hand to him without looking, and he took it, sitting down next to her on the old bench and kissing her knuckles.

“Do you hate me, sugar?”

April shuddered, shaking her head as she looked down at her knees. “No, I don’t hate you. I love you.”

“I’m so sorry,” he kissed her hand again, rubbing his stubble across the skin, and she felt her throat close up in pain. It wasn’t his fault, and it wasn’t fair, but what part of her life had been easy up until now?

“I’m just…struggling, Negan, that’s all. I’ll learn to accept it at some point.”

“I don’t want this to be some big thing that we have to get through. I don’t want you to be upset,
and I know that’s fucking stupid and impossible, but I swear that I’ll do whatever I have to do to make you okay with this.”

That piqued her curiosity, and she glanced up at him, seeing how tired he looked. “How?”

“I’ll just pay child support,” he offered, and she snatched her hand away, making his mouth pop open, and she stood up, ignoring the residual headache that her hangover provided.

“So, you don’t want to see this kid? Is that what you’re saying, or are you trying to make me feel even worse by insinuating that I’d keep you from doing so?”

“What are you talking about? I told you before that I didn’t care about having kids, and I sure as shit didn’t want a baby with another woman-“

“And you’re going to act like it doesn’t exist?”

“Well, what do you want me to say?” Negan barked, his face turning red as she gaped at him in disbelief. “I’m trying to do the right thing by you, and I don’t want to make this worse.”

“You being a shitty parent is worse,” April shoved him, sending him sprawling back onto the bench. “The last thing I need is you resenting me when you don’t have a relationship with your son or daught-“ her words choked off as their significance hit her, and she buried her head in her hands, letting out a choked sob. Negan’s son. Negan’s daughter. And it wasn’t going to be hers. She was nothing.

“April,” he pulled her into his chest, and she fought to free herself, but he locked his arms around her, preventing her from getting away, letting her rage until she ran out of energy. She wasn’t sure how long she cried, mourned, actually, but when he finally let her go, there was a large wet spot on his shirt, and his eyes were red.

“Don’t be like my parents,” she whispered, and his jaw started to tremble. “Don’t check out of this kid’s life like mine did.”

Negan didn’t say anything, he just turned and watched the ducks make their slow swim around them, and they passed by twice before he responded. “I don’t know how to feel, other than shitty, sugar. I didn’t sleep last night, because I spent the majority of it watching you, wondering if you were going to just fucking tell me to go away, and I wouldn’t even blame you. This is a fucked-up situation, and I’m floundering. All I want to do is make you happy.”

She sat back down on the bench, her fingers linking and squeezing each other as she got her thoughts in order, and by the time he actually faced her again, she’d built herself up mentally, reaching for him again. He perched next to her, and she laid her head on his shoulder, allowing him to take her by the waist, pulling her as close as possible.

“I want to meet her.”

“What?”

“Sandy. I want to meet her.”

“Why? I don’t want you any more upset than you already are.”

“Because she’s going to be in my life for the next fifty years,” she told him, feeling him tighten his grip around her torso, and she edged her forehead into the crook of his neck. “I should probably get to know her.”
“Fifty years?”

“Well, I’m hoping to make it to my eighties.”

“You plan on being with my sorry ass for fifty years?”

He tried to frame it as a joke, but she could tell that he was unsure, probably thinking that she was going to give up at some point, the intrusion into their lives by another woman just too much, and she actually laughed, tilting her head back so she could see his face.

“I’m not going anywhere, Negan. I’ll be here even when your balls are hanging down to your knees. By the looks of them, that’ll be sooner rather than later.”

“Christ, I love you, Hooters.”

“I love you, too. I may have good days, and there will definitely be bad days, but this isn’t the worst thing we’ve ever been through. Still sucks, though,” she sniffed, letting him kiss the top of her head.

“I know, and we don’t have to figure out everything right this second.”

“Can you tell her I want to meet?”

“Yeah,” he sounded hesitant, and she sat up with a questioning look, seeing guilt in his eyes. “I didn’t really leave things on a good note yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“She fucking blindsided me, and I flipped the fuck out. I asked if she was keeping it, and she started bawling, like I’d screwed her over. I just told her I’d talk to her another time and rushed her out of my house.”

“Jesus, Negan. When’s she due?”

“I don’t know,” he snapped, the guilt turning to defensiveness, and April held her breath, counting to ten so that she didn’t bite his head off.

“Okay,” she said slowly, straightening up and starting towards the bridge. “You need to call her and set up a meeting with her this week so that we can get all the information.”

It wasn’t until she climbed onto the ATV that she noticed that he hadn’t moved from the bench, sitting with his arms crossed and a stout refusal to look her way. It pissed her off to no end, and she drove off through the fence, a lot more recklessly than she should have, which is why she ended up hitting a divot in the grass and flying off the ride, knocking the breath from her lungs and landing on a huge rock. The pain made her cry out, and she got to her hands and knees as Negan came running towards her.

“Fuck, are you okay?”

“No, I’m not all right. I think I broke my fucking leg.”

April picked up the rock, throwing it with a screech as she rolled onto her ass, and Negan slid her jeans up her shin, finding a huge jagged gash that had blood pouring out of it. The sight of so much coming out made her gag, and he swept her up, setting her on the ATV, climbing on behind her as he took charge. The motor was still running, and he drove quickly back towards the house, helping
her into his truck as she shut her eyes. He jumped in a few seconds later, pressing a towel into her hands to staunch the blood flow, and she held on for dear life as he drove her to the hospital, thinking that the only thing left to go wrong would be for a piece of the sky to fall on her head.

Chapter End Notes

Up next, an uncomfortable meeting with Sandy, and some surprising revelations...
Chapter 29

August 30th, 1991

Negan reached out, taking April’s hand as he drove past the Centerville town sign, and she looked around at the small town, since she’d never actually been there before. She was nervous, since they were here to meet with Sandy, and she knew her palm was sweaty. He didn’t seem to care, though, even when she extracted her hand, wiping it on her shorts before grasping his fingers again. It had been several days since their lives were thrown into turmoil with the news that Sandy was carrying his child, and she was alternately resigned and mournful, save for one thing: the shocking news that she herself may actually be able to get pregnant.

Wiping out in the field and wrecking her leg had actually been a blessing in disguise. After their mini fight about him not actually seeing the baby, she’d taken off on her ATV, hitting a hole in the grass and flying off, right onto a jagged rock. It had split her leg open from her knee almost to her ankle, and Negan had rushed her to the hospital to have it taken care of.

Dr. Montrose, the Emergency Room doctor, had ordered x-rays, finding that she had a fracture of the tibia. It took him a long while to stitch up the gash, and the entire time, Negan had stood over her bed like a statue. Any time she tried to meet his eyes, he’d immediately avert them, and she knew that he felt guilty. It wasn’t his fault that she’d taken off, even if he’d pissed her off, and when the doctor stepped out to get everything that was needed to cast up her leg, she finally tugged on his arm, clearing her throat.

“I’ll live, Negan. It’s not a big deal, I’ve broken bones before.”

“This is my fucking fault,” he shook his head, and his lips dropped down, turning his face into a sad expression that both upset and annoyed her. “I should’ve just fucking done whatever you wanted.”

“Oh, stop it,” April snapped, swatting his arm, and he blinked at her, his dimples growing deeper with every passing second. “Enough with the drama, James Dean. It happened, it’s over. Just let me get my cast, some pain pills, and then you can drive me home and wait on me hand and foot, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” he immediately backed down, dragging the chair over from the other side of the room, sitting down next to her head. They both looked down at the jagged line across her shin, and she lamented that she’d probably have a scar, another ugly mark on her body, and she bit her lip, hiding her hands under her leg. He picked up on it immediately, fishing her right arm out from under her, and she curled her fingers down, her self-esteem as low as it could be. “Don’t. You’re gorgeous, from your head to your toes, sugar.”

“How can you say that?” she expelled an unsteady breath, her eyes going from her leg to her hand. “Working the farm has made me ugly. I’m all rough and-“

Negan shushed her, taking by the chin and forcing her to look at him. She was thrown off by his smile, because he’d been so down since they first saw each other on the island, and her eyes got itchy, fighting the tears. “I don’t love ugly chicks. You’re fucking beautiful. You’re strong, and I love that you could probably rip my dick off.”
She laughed and whimpered at the same time, still not convinced, but he pursed his lips, running his thumb over hers, and she felt a tingle of affection, even as her own self-doubt tried to hang on. “I feel...undesirable,” she admitted, and the pace of his thumb increased. “I know you love me, but I hate myself right now.”

“No. No fucking way. I’m not letting you get like this, sugar. This situation with Sandy doesn’t make you any less of a woman. Have I ever fucking made you feel like I wasn’t attracted to you? That I don’t get hard for you at least a dozen times a day? I don’t give a shit about a few callouses on your fingers, and I surely don’t give a flying fuck if you have a scar on your leg,” he hissed, lowering his voice when a nurse walked by, and she felt shamed and small. “I don’t love you because you’re a supermodel. I love you because you’re perfect for me. To me, you’re just fucking perfect.”

It was the nicest, most beautiful thing he’d ever said to her, and her face crumpled before his eyes. She’d never felt more loved or cared for in her life, and she reached out blindly to hug him, kissing him several times over until they heard someone clear their throat, and she hid her face in his neck, wiping her tears away on his already stained shirt.

“Is everything all right?” Dr. Montrose asked, and she nodded mutely after a moment, hiding her face as Negan rubbed her back. “After going over your x-rays with the ortho on call, we’ve decided to put you in an air cast.”

It would be easier to hobble around, he explained to her, and she could even take it off to shower, which was a relief, and she watched him dully as he patched up the long gash, covering it with gauze and securing her leg in the cast. Her head was aching from her hangover, and now the rest of her body was as well. Dr. Montrose wished her good luck, and the nurse returned a few minutes later with her prescription, discharge instructions, and an appointment with her regular doctor on Monday morning.

She was mostly quiet as Negan drove them home, holding her pain pills in her fist, muting the sound of them rolling around in the plastic. Several thoughts were bouncing off of each other, and they all revolved around children. She was cursed not to have them, but Negan wasn’t, and she resolved to call her gynecologist in the morning to discuss her options. Negan seemed lost in his own head as well, and when they pulled up to the house, the dogs came rushing over, creating a mini-frenzy, and he ordered them to stand down. Now that he was around all of the time, they listened to his instructions, more or less, and Gracie backed off first, followed by George.

Negan came around to help her out, and she tested the leg again, only feeling an achy throb as they climbed the porch steps. She stopped suddenly, grasping his forearm as he looked at her curiously.

“I should call Fred to help you with the girls.”

“I can handle it, sugar. Just park your ass on the couch and get comfortable.”

April didn’t have much of a choice, going by the way he and the dogs were herding her into the house, and she sat down on the couch, leaving her leg stretched out in front of her as Negan walked into the kitchen. She heard the faucet turn on, and he was back in seconds with a glass of water, cupping the back of her head as she took it. The pills were large, and she swallowed it down, letting him prop up her leg under a pillow, covering her with the blanket that normally laid over the back of the sofa.

“I’ll be back in a bit.”

Whistling lightly, he took off with the dogs, leaving her alone in the house, and she stared up at the
ceiling fan, waiting for the pills to do their job. They kicked in, and it quieted her brain as well as her
pain receptors, leaving her floating on a cloud of neutrality. Dozing on and off, she woke up fully as
she felt her body swaying, because Negan was carrying her up the steps to her room. Letting out a
sleepy sigh, she held onto his neck when he set her down, and he ducked his head free, setting her
prescription on the nightstand.

“Don’t go,” she mumbled, reaching out for him, and he linked his hand with hers. She had no idea
what time it was, but the sun was dark orange as its rays stretched across the floor. It had to be after
seven in the evening, which meant that she slept away the afternoon, and she still felt tired. “Stay
with me.”

“Let me get a quick shower. I smell like shit.”

“No, you don’t.” He smelled delicious, like he always did, only now that he worked on the farm,
his spicy scent had the allure of fresh-cut grass and hay. She brought his fingers to her nose, taking a
deep inhale, and he muttered something about her having the good drugs. As soon as he was out of
sight, she fell back asleep, waking in the middle of the night with parched lips and a throbbing leg.
The cast was cumbersome, and she accidentally whacked his leg when she tried to roll over,
apologizing tiredly as the light flipped on.

“How’re you feeling?” he sat up, leaning over her for the water and her pills, taking one out and
holding it to her lips.

“Sorry,” she said, easing up to a sitting position so that she could take a long drink of water, and
she ran her index finger over the dark circles under his eyes. Negan was shirtless, and he sat up next
to her, kissing her shoulder and helping her off with her clothes, undoing the cast so that she could
ease out of her jeans. She felt better, being out of the confining clothes, and he laid his arm across her
waist, snuggling into her next as they both sat in contemplation. “I’m sorry for a lot of things.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, sugar. None of this is your fault.”

“I shouldn’t have just stormed off, and I’m an asshole for doing that,” she breathed, turning her
face to kiss his forehead, and he relaxed against her. “I haven’t even bothered to ask you how you’re
holding up with everything going on. How you feel. What you need.”

“Just you, April,” he murmured. “I just need you. I don’t want you to leave me.”

“I told you that wasn’t going to happen. But I’m here if you want to talk. I have no idea what this
feels like for you.”

“It fucking sucks,” Negan sat up and turned so that they were facing each other. His eyes raked
over her face, looking for any signs of distress, but she was simply tired.

“None of this was supposed to happen, and I’m pissed. Not at her, because I guess it just…the
condom didn’t work or something. I’m just angry in general, because every time I think we’re going
to be okay, something comes along to knock us back ten steps. I just wanted a life with you, and
now we’ve got a woman that I don’t love that’s going to be a part of it forever. It fucking blows.”

“We’ll meet with her,” she sat up so that their noses were almost touching, and she draped her arms
over his shoulders, kissing him softly. “We’ll come up with a plan, and we’ll see it through. If we
have a kid in our lives, we have a kid in our lives. It’s…it’s your child, and I’ll be there with you
every step we take, love.” His face melted, and he let out a shuddering breath, the heat from his
mouth splaying across her lips. “How can I not love something that came from you?”
She felt her eyes fill with tears, but they weren’t only pained ones. Her emotions were bubbling up, and no matter what, Negan would live on in this world. It wouldn’t be easy for her, but she’d get there, eventually.

“You are far fucking better than I deserve,” he kissed her, laying her back on the bed, and she fell asleep with his head on her chest.

The next morning, she felt like shit, even worse than the day before, but the first thing she did when he got up was head down the steps, slowly, to call her regular doctor and her gynecologist, Dr. Feldman. Her regular physician, Dr. Tellman, had already been notified about her leg break, and they told her they’d see her at 2 o’clock.

Parkway Obstetrics was just opening when she dialed the number, getting a chipper secretary that greeted her. “Hi,” she said, losing her train of thought briefly. “I wanted to know if I could set up an appointment with Dr. Feldman for as soon as possible.”

“Is this an emergency?” the girl asked.

“No, not an emergency, but I have some pressing issues and I need to discuss some treatment options with him.”

“Well, Dr. Feldman retired in June, and Dr. Frank Grossman is now running the practice,” she was told, making her frown. “We did send out letters to all of the patients, so I do apologize that you were unaware. Let me see if we have any openings for this week. The doctor will want to get all of your records updated, anyway.”

April was placed on hold, and while she waited, she shuffled over to the junk mail basket, rifling through the unopened mail that always seemed to pile up, sifting through credit card offers and envelopes that looked like greeting cards but were really marketing crap until she found one with Parkway O.B.Gyn on the return address. Using her fingernail, she sliced open the top, reading the form letter announcing Dr. Feldman’s retirement and the change over to Dr. Grossman, along with a request to set up an initial appointment.

She was reading through his biography when the receptionist came back on the line, telling her that they had an opening at 3 o’clock on Thursday, and April gave the girl her name, hanging up the phone as Negan came in with George, looking a little more rested. He seemed irritated that she was up, and she leaned against the counter as he loomed over her.

“What are you doing up? You should be resting.”

“I had to call to confirm my doctor’s appointment today.”

There was a box of cereal on the table, and she limped over to the cabinet, taking out her favorite bowl as he went to the fridge and got the milk. Her leg was hurting, but she didn’t want to take her pill again until she absolutely had to, preferring to wait it out, and the food would at least coat her stomach.

“Fred’s here, and he offered to show me how to do the milking,” he mused, smiling at her when her eyes widened. It was the only thing she hadn’t shown him yet because they had it down to a
science, and taking the time to explain the machinery and process would slow her down. Normally, Negan would just hop onto the tractor and mow the grass or cut down the wheat, but with her being incapacitated for at least a few weeks, he’d have to take over. The boys were headed to college in a few days, and she needed to find someone to fill in for them. Fuck, there was so much going on, she didn’t have time for an injury like this. “What? You don’t think I can do it?”

“I’m sure you can,” April smirked at him. “Who knows better about coaxing out a white substance from a long tube better than you?”

“Ouch.”

He kissed the top of her head before strolling back out, and she felt a little more optimism about their lives. The simple back and forth felt normal, and for the rest of the morning, she pattered around the house, dusting what she could and taking a shower after first doing a dry run to make sure she wouldn’t hurt herself. By the time he came in from the barn, she was clean and ready to go, holding the keys to her truck.

“What the fuck are you doing? You’re not driving yourself.”

“I can handle it. It’s my left leg, not my right.”

“April, just take it easy, all right? You’re one day out from a break and a shit ton of stitches. Let me drive you.”

If she wanted to be able to get herself to see the new gyno on Thursday, it was in her best interest to placate him, so she acquiesced, handing him the keys. Since he clearly didn’t trust her, he took them upstairs with him, and she waited with George, petting him as he rested his head in her lap. When he came down, he looked dashing, wearing a faded red t-shirt and jeans, his boots in hand, and she openly ogled him, wondering if it was possible to have sex with her cast on.

She could, and they did it that night, right before she took her pain pill, happy to know that the fracture wasn’t as bad as they thought originally. She was still going to have to keep the walking cast on, and Dr. Teller loaded her up with calcium supplements to speed up the healing process. As Negan came, he dug his fingers into her hips, groaning as he bit at her shoulder. Getting onto her back from her knees was decidedly unsexy, but since he was out of it, she managed to do it before his head popped up from the mattress.

“All good?”

“All good,” she confirmed, laying on her side. His hair was disheveled and his cheeks were flush, and she forgot about Sandy and her problems for the night, content just to lay next to him. It wouldn’t always be this way, but it was right then, and it was good.

By the time Thursday rolled around, Negan had backed off a little, and she was deemed well enough to drive herself into town. She’d told him that she needed to get out of the house, and he bought her excuse that she wanted to get her nails done. So, she headed out at one, first stopping at Ella’s Beauty Salon and getting her hands pampered.
They’d agreed that she needed some TLC, and they soaked her hands, scraping away the callouses and when she walked out with hot pink nails and much smoother skin, it did more for her psyche than any therapy could ever match. She felt feminine again, at least for her, and she signed in at the front desk, filling out new paperwork for Dr. Grossman.

When it got to the part about medical conditions, she checked infertility, though she wasn’t sure that was the right word. The doctor that treated her after the prison told her that she could get pregnant, but she wouldn’t be able to sustain the pregnancy. It was a cold slap in the face, acknowledging it in black and white because she and Dr. Feldman had never discussed it. When she moved to Fairfield, her medical records had accompanied her, and she’d been on birth control ever since. But maybe Dr. Grossman would be willing to consider just giving her a hysterectomy so that she didn’t have to worry about something that was never going to happen, anyway.

At five after three, the receptionist slid open the frosted glass window, calling her name, and April waited at the door to be buzzed in, admiring the new paint that coated the walls and the cheery pictures that lined the inner office. She was led over to the scale, groaning internally as she watched the number reveal itself, and a note was made in her chart.

The young girl brought her to the office with Dr. Grossman’s name, and she knocked once, waiting for him to grant them access. The man that opened the door wasn’t what she expected at all. Dr. Feldman was a man in his early sixties, with pillow white hair and tortoiseshell glasses. This guy was younger than her and drop-dead gorgeous, and she blinked in shock as he gave her a welcoming smile.

“Miss Daniels? I’m Dr. Frank Grossman,” he extended his hand, and she could swear that the receptionist sighed behind her. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, hi,” she breathed, greeting him and trying not to keep her jaw from dropping. He was quite possibly the finest looking person she’d ever seen. Tall, but not gangly. Fit but not overly muscled, with chocolate brown hair and green eyes, he had dimples like Negan, but a cleanly shaved face, and she looked down at his hand out of habit, searching for a ring and feeling guilty at once, mentally slapping herself across the face. “Nice to meet you.”

“Please, have a seat,” he gestured to one of the chairs after she remembered to let go of his hand, and she walked with as much dignity as she could muster, stretching her leg out under the desk, with no other options. “Seems like you had a bit of an accident, eh?”

Dr. Grossman shut the door, and she smiled as he sat across from her, her cheeks starting to get warm.

“I hit a huge divot in my pasture and landed on a rock. Twenty stitches and a minor fracture,” she said, sounding more like she’d chipped a nail, and he winced, making even that look attractive.

“So, Sarah mentioned you had some concerns you’d like to discuss with me.”

He had a file in front of him, and he opened it, flipping through a few sheets of paper as she tried to recall what she was doing here. “It looks like you haven’t been seen in about a year, yes?”

“Um, actually, I was wondering what the protocol is for getting a hysterectomy?”

Dr. Grossman’s head snapped up, and he studied her carefully before looking back down at her records, the slightest furrow taking shape between his brows, and she squirmed in her seat, choosing to stare at her nails. “Generally, hysterectomies are performed for medical reasons, and I don’t see anything in your file to indicate a reason to. What’s going on, June?”
It was pretty frank, much more so than her old doctor was, and she found herself smiling at his inquisitive look. He wasn’t judging her request, he was simply interested in finding out why. He was like Negan in that way, and she felt her smile disappear.

“Well, since I can’t carry a pregnancy, I figured it would be the easiest option, since I don’t want to be on birth control forever. It can be done, right?”

“It’s not recommended for that purpose at your age, and when it is, we typically need to have a written acknowledgment from your husband. It comes with serious health risks, and I’m not seeing in your file that you have any fertility issues,” Dr. Grossman was frowning as he flipped back and forth between several notes that looked like it came from her original file that she was given with her name change.

“Well, I was…attacked, a few years ago,” she weighed her words before speaking, and he stopped reading to give her his full attention. “I was stabbed, and one of the injuries did some damage to my uterus. The doctor that cared for me at the time told me that I’d never be able to sustain a pregnancy.”

“What sort of damage?” Dr. Grossman rose and came around to the other side of the desk, helping her to her feet, and she lifted the front of her shirt while pushing down the waistband to her jeans at the same time, showing him her scar. “A puncture?”

“Yes. He said it caused scarring on my uterus, and because of that, I’d never safely carry a child.”

“This doctor wasn’t a gynecologist, I’m guessing,” Dr. Grossman said gently, gesturing that she should lower her shirt, and she shook her head, confirming. “I can’t imagine what kind of physical and emotional trauma you were going through at that moment, June, but he’s wrong.”

Wrong? What?

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, I’d like to do a quick ultrasound to confirm, but scarring like that wouldn’t keep you from getting pregnant. Women that have Cesarean sections have their uteruses cut open, and they’re able to get pregnant again.”

She felt like a fool, and it showed in her face as he gave her a reassuring smile. Of course, they did, so why would she think any different?

“It’s easy to believe whatever our doctors tell us,” he said, resting against the edge of the desk as she covered her face in embarrassment, “and whoever was treating you clearly had no background with obstetrics. I don’t blame you in the least for believing what he was telling you, but I want to ease your fears, and the best way to do that is to do an examination.”

Dr. Grossman slapped his hands together like they’d just struck a deal, and he excused himself from the room to get her set up for an exam. While she was alone, she tried to get herself under control, but her hands were shaking at the information, the revelation that everything she’d thought she knew for sure was a lie, once again. How many times in her life was she going to be fooled?

She still didn’t even know if she wanted children, but she also knew if she did, it would be with Negan, and now…

“Right this way.”
“Come here, sexy thing.”

April set her purse on the dining room table, avoiding Negan’s face as she tromped through the room to where he was reclining on the couch, awash in several different emotions. After she’d left Dr. Grossman’s office with a better understanding of her own body, the definitive answer about her own fertility and the offer to set up counseling, her head was spinning.

His face was open and welcoming, and she wanted to immerse herself in him, crawling awkwardly on top of him and crushing him into the sofa, ignoring his grunt of discomfort. He was freshly showered, and she assumed that all of the cattle were milked and ready for the night in the barn. His skin was warm, and she pressed soft kisses to the side of his throat, wanting to tell him so badly but failing to come up with enough courage. He had enough to deal with, and she wasn’t ready to admit to being an idiot, so she asked him the other question that had been gnawing at her.

“Any word?”

“She agreed to meet with us tomorrow at five,” he mumbled, palming the back of her head as she sucked on his earlobe. April could feel him start to lift his hips against her thigh, and she sighed softly, wishing that she could stay in this moment forever, because he was hers and there weren’t any potential women or babies to steal him away. He belonged here with her, and she made her movements more urgent. He took the hint, and any talk of Sandy was shelved for the rest of the night.

After Negan fell asleep, she hobbled to the bathroom, taking out her birth control pills and holding them up in the moonlight, weighing whether or not she wanted to continue taking them. It was easier to pop a pill and not worry about any risks, but with the revelations from earlier in the day, combined with Sandy’s hold over their lives, unintentional or not, she couldn’t just throw away his trust in her, so she popped the day’s pill, swallowing it dry and tucking herself into his open arms, thinking that once they addressed the elephant in the room, they’d be able to figure out a way to move around it.

“Sugar, we’re here.”

April snapped out of her inertia, looking around at the pleasant, tree-lined street. Negan had parked along the curb in front of a little white Cape Cod. There were planters hanging down on the porch, and the lawn was meticulously manicured. Green shutters framed the front windows, and two rocking chairs sat on either side of the front door.

She found herself gripping Negan’s hand harder than she’d intended to, and he carefully pulled free, giving her a smile. “You ready?”
“Yes,” she murmured, shaking her head at the same time. Who was ever ready to meet their true love’s pregnant ex? How many people had to do something so weird?

Together they walked up the drive, and he helped her up the porch steps as she wondered how many times he’d sat with her on one of the rocking chairs. The glass door was decorated with a lavender wreath, and Negan knocked twice, holding her hand as they waited.

April didn’t know what to expect, but she sure as shit didn’t think the girl would be so...normal looking. She wasn’t some six-foot Amazon with exaggerated Hooters features and a pinup smile. Sandy was just...a librarian. A regular looking woman with brown hair and light eyes, who wasn’t ugly, but wasn’t the mythical beauty that she’d conjured up in his head. She wasn’t sure if it was better or worse, and she jerked lightly when Negan cleared his throat.

_Get it together, moron._

The only way she was going to get through this was to adopt her bartender persona. Interested, but not too much. Friendly, but not fake. Observant, but discreet about it, and she smiled softly, meeting the other woman’s eyes.

“Sandy, thanks for meeting with us. This is my June,” she wanted to elbow Negan in the side for the unctuous tone he was using, but she peered up at him with a sickly simper, and he got the hint.

Sandy, for her part, appeared nervous, and April offered her a hand. “I know this is an...odd introduction, and certainly under difficult circumstances, but I appreciate that you’re taking the time to meet with me.”

“Oh...sure,” she took April’s hand, and her grip was soft, almost submissive. “Please come in.”

They stepped inside, and it was like Vera Bradley had a baby and the baby threw up flowers everywhere. Vases of fresh flowers, a patterned couch, sickly sweet pale green. “Your place is lovely.” April lied, taking a good look around as Sandy folded her hands in front of her stomach. She was wearing a pair of green shorts and a white, sleeveless blouse, the very picture of domesticity. The only thing that was imperfect was the slight disgust in her eyes as she watched April and Negan continue to hold hands.

“Thank you. We can talk in the kitchen if you like. I made some iced tea, and I have cookies.”

April followed behind her, and Negan brought up the rear, the three of them crowding into the bright white kitchen. Sandy opened the fridge door, and April got an up-close view of a sonogram, the picture of a little bean nearly brushing her nose. In a split second, everything clicked into place, and she pasted a fake smile on her lips as she fought to keep from screaming.

This baby probably wasn’t Negan’s, and she didn’t know what to do.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?

The ultrasound was smack dab in front of her face, and she stared at the due date as Sandy took out a pitcher of iced tea, closing the fridge, and April calculated the amount of time over and over again, seemingly in seconds, though it felt like an eternity to her. After Negan found her, he’d told her that he’d broken up with Sandy, and the date was etched into her brain, a memory that she’d never forget. Their lives had changed on June 28th, though she hadn’t known it then. To her, it was just another day on the farm, but to him, it was the start of everything.

And with a due date of April first, it was highly unlikely that Negan was the father if her college anatomy class was to be believed. Only she couldn’t just blurt it out. She didn’t know anything about this woman, and with Negan already tensed up next to her, she found herself scrambling for how to proceed. She couldn’t just blurt out her suspicions, because Negan would just lose his shit, and if she was wrong…

“My head whipped around to glare at her, but she kept her own eyes on Sandy, who looked stricken for a moment. Her face blanched lightly, then she seemed to regain control of it, nodding faintly with a grimace. “That would be fine.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, setting the glass in front of her and laying her hand on top of Negan’s just to reassure herself. “Again, I appreciate you taking the time to meet with us. I’m sure the last few weeks have been crazy for you, but if you’re all right with it, could we maybe talk alone, just the two of us?”

Negan’s head whipped around to glare at her, but she kept her own eyes on Sandy, who looked stricken for a moment. Her face blanched lightly, then she seemed to regain control of it, nodding faintly with a grimace. “That would be fine.”

“So, what? I’m supposed to just stand outside with my thumb up my ass?”

“Please,” April cautioned him quietly, squeezing his hand. “I just need a few minutes.”

He stared at her, searching her eyes, and his face softened before he turned and nodded at Sandy, who gave him a reserved look. Standing up, he strode out of the kitchen, and a second later, the front door opened and closed. The kitchen was very quiet, with only the ticking of the clock overhead to mark the passing of the seconds, and April shifted in her seat so that she could face Sandy.

“So… I wanted to say a few things,” April began, dropping her eyes to the table, where Sandy’s hands were folded neatly. “My thoughts aren’t going in a linear direction, so forgive me if I go off onto random tangents.” Her nerves were off-kilter, and she was trying not to just blab out her suspicions, and she took a deep breath. “Firstly, I just wanted to say that I was sorry.”
“Sorry?”

She shrugged her shoulders, running her index finger over her lips as she gathered her thoughts. “Sorry for the fact that Neg- J.D. finding me put an abrupt end to your relationship. I imagine it was hard for you, even though you only dated for a month or so.”

“It was a surprise,” she confirmed, still sounding formal and cool. “I didn’t even know he was looking for you.”

“I know he didn’t really tell you the details of our relationship, but we were together for a small window of time, and there were horrible circumstances that drove us apart.”

“Horrible circumstances?” Sandy wrinkled her nose, studying her, and April’s panicky feelings swirled around her heart as she tried to smile.

“Threats of violence—”

“J.D. threatened you?”

“No, not between us,” she clarified. “To us, and it resulted in him leaving suddenly and me ending up here, at the farm. It belonged to some distant family members, and I was…lost. Lost without him. I didn’t know where he was or what happened to him, or even if he was safe, and I had no idea that he was looking for me, but when he came back into my life, it was everything, Sandy, and I’m sorry you got hurt in the process, I really am. My love for him is monstrous. It’s wonderful and terrible and infinite, and there’s nothing I won’t do for him.”

Sandy’s mouth opened, and she looked aghast, so April shook her head back and forth, reaching out and taking her hand. “Oh, no, I’m not trying to intimidate you, I’m just trying to make you understand that I’ll support him through this. He’s a good man, and I know you still care about him. But I couldn’t stand to see him hurt.”

It was there between the lines, and they both knew it. She still wanted him, and it was as plain as the day was long. April could see the truth from the moment Sandy opened the door. The way her eyes would flit back to Negan in just seconds. The distaste when she saw him and April holding hands. A woman could always tell, and the fact that Sandy didn’t deny it showed her everything she needed to know. Taking a deep breath, she held tight to the other woman’s hand, even as she tried to extract it from her grip. “He’ll be there for you, Sandy, and so will I, because we’re a package deal. Whatever you need, you’ll have, but if there’s a chance he’s not the father, I’m begging you to tell him now. Don’t let him spend the next several months thinking he is if it’s someone else’s.”

She jerked free of April’s hold, her cheeks turning red and immediately going pale. “What?”

“You’re due April first,” she said, her voice dropping to almost a whisper.

“And? I don’t know what you’re implying.”

“I’m not implying anything,” April felt her eyes watering, and she gave the other woman a pleading look. “I’m stating a fact. The timeline just doesn’t add up, Sandy. I’m not saying he’s not the dad, but there’s someone else in the picture, isn’t there? You didn’t sleep with J.D. after June twenty-sixth. That’s what he told me, and with that due date, it’s not…it’s just too far out to make it his, definitively. Not impossible, but not probable.”

Sandy started to cry, covering her face in her hands as April scooted her chair over to place a comforting hand on her back. She’d wanted to rage at this woman, to call her a liar and an asshole, but it wouldn’t come out of her mouth. The hate and anger were there, but underneath a rare feeling
of sympathy for a woman who was just trying to hang onto something that she cared about. But it wasn’t hers to try to keep, it was April’s, and she wasn’t going to allow it. If he was the dad, she’d be there for him, and she meant it when she said she’d be there for Sandy, too.

“It was only the one time,” the words came out muffled, and April felt the supreme relief of having her suspicions validated, so much so that she choked back a sob of her own, continuing to rest her hand on Sandy’s shoulder. “I was just…sad and it didn't take the pain away. But, it just happened that once, and J.D. and I…”

Okay, she didn’t want to hear that, and she closed her eyes, wanting to run down the street, shouting to everyone that it wasn’t Negan’s, but until they did a paternity test, she still didn’t know for sure. But this was like a lifeline that was tossed, and she wasn’t drowning in sadness, letting it take her under. It was something to cling to, and she let the woman ramble and cry for several minutes, the air between them lightening as she finally wiped her face with her napkin.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled, looking at April with pained eyes. “I don’t know how to feel or what to do. I never meant to hurt him. I was just so heartbroken when he ended it, and then when I didn’t get my period, I thought-”

“He needs the truth. He deserves it, and as I said, he’ll be a stand-up guy.”

April rose up and walked towards the front door with a trembling heart and unsteady legs, opening it and stepping out onto the porch. Negan jumped up from his seat, taking her by the elbows and scanning her face.

“Are you all right?”

“Go ahead in,” she managed to spit out, kissing him quickly. “She’s waiting for you.”

He hesitated, finally walking in after she took his spot, staring out into the street in shock. She’d gone through every emotional high and low over the past week, and she attempted to take stock of her situation. Whatever she felt, it probably paled in comparison to what the other two were going through, but all she had to go on was own part in this developing nuttiness. There was another guy in the mix, some one-night stand that happened days after Negan broke up with Sandy. She started to laugh and cry at the same time, staring out blindly into the sunset as she asked for one favor from God, just one. She’d never begged him for her life when she was waiting to die by Tisone’s hand, so she felt she deserved this, wrongly or not. She just hoped that her prayers were answered.

“What?”

“I’m sorry-“

“What?” Negan hissed, reeling back as Sandy leveled him, cutting down both his masculinity and
his prowess. “You fucking slept with someone else right after we broke up?”

“It was just the once, and I was upset.”

“You told me you were pregnant. You told me it was mine, and you wrecked my fucking life,” he raged, standing up and towering over her. “You hurt my girl and made her feel like shit, and it’s not even mine?”

“I don’t know,” she cried, shaking from head to toe. “It happened so soon after you broke up with me, and you were both wearing condoms. I just…assumed it was yours.”

“You mean hoped.”

It was cruel. Crueler than he needed to be, but he was raging inside at the sleazy way she made him believe that he was going to be a father, and for causing such pain to April. What the fuck was going to happen now? And how were they going to see the next nine months through when he couldn’t even look at her?

“Who’s the other guy? And does he even know, or were you just going to pass off some strange baby as mine for the rest of your life?”

“I…it was Paul Bradley,” she gave him a pathetic look, and he laughed.

“Paul Bradley? He’s like, fifty. And practically an albino. No wonder you were trying to pin this on me.”

“Oh, God,” she cried, her shoulders shaking as she took staggered, heaving breaths, and she doubled over, clutching her stomach. It took him longer than he was proud of to sit back down, and he sighed deeply, feeling like an asshole.

“All right, calm the hell down.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Sandy whimpered. “I don’t know what to do. I didn’t think it could be his and I never meant to hurt you. I just got so lost and sad. I didn’t think about what this would do to you, or her.”

“Listen, Sandy. I’m fucking irate right now, don’t get me wrong, and if the kid is mine, I’ll do the right thing. But I need time to process this fucking atom bomb of betrayal, and I can’t promise you that I’ll be able to deal with seeing you any time soon, but if anything needs done, just call. Right now, June is my priority, and if we do a paternity test and it confirms my involvement, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

She avoided his gaze, still clutching her midsection, and her voice was cracking when she finally dared to speak.

“If…if you hadn’t found her, do you think we would’ve worked out? That it could’ve been different?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say something cutting, but common sense won out, seeing as he might have to deal with her for the rest of his life, and he waited until she made eye contact with him, searching for something that wasn’t there. He couldn’t lie to her, but his words were soft when he replied.

“No. It was only ever gonna be her. She’s it for me, and if I hadn’t found her, I would’ve ended up alone.”
She let out a strangled sound, but she nodded her head, and he studied her as she tried to put herself together, smoothing her hair and wiping the mascara that had trailed down her cheeks. “It almost makes me feel better to know that.”

“When’s the due date?”

“April first.”

“Then give me some time and space, and I’ll talk to you when I’m ready.”

Negan’s brain was addled as he walked out of her house, and he damned near forgot that April was sitting on the porch waiting. It took her standing up and clomping behind him with her cast for him to remember, and he turned to see that her eyes were red, and he knew that she knew. The thought shamed him for some reason, and he took her hand, helping her down the steps as they started for the truck. What a fucking fucked-up nightmare.

Once he got her settled in the passenger’s seat, he started up the engine, pulling out like he was on a deadline, and she kept quiet, leaving him to his thoughts. The only thing she did was to reach for his hand, and she held it between hers, letting him stew in the knowledge that not only had she been hurt, that it had maybe been for nothing.

They were halfway between Centerville and Fairfield when he finally turned on the hazard lights, pulling off to the side of the road in the dark, and he turned on the overhead lights, wanting to tell her how sorry he was for bringing her so much pain, but she scooted herself close to him, cradling his cheeks as she kissed him softly, and she whispered into his lips.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetheart. Whichever way it ends up, it’s meant to be.”

“You figured it out, didn’t you? She never even told you, you just knew.”

April smiled, and he leaned in, resting his forehead against hers, aching to just get into their bed and hold her until everything was normal again.

“The due date tipped me off. It just didn’t add up.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, April. I should’ve found that shit out right away. She just freaked out, and…”

“I didn’t yell at her, Negan and I didn’t threaten her. I just begged her to do the right thing, that’s all.”

“You shouldn’t have had to do any of it. This is all on me, not you. She just fucking got it in her head that if it was mine, that I’d come back to her or some shit. But that was never going to happen. I hope you know that,” he pulled her closer, turning his head to kiss her cheek and then her neck. “I told her that you were it for me. Besides, I would’ve been a shitty dad, anyway.”

She stiffened in his arms, and he leaned back to see that she was ready to cry, and he shushed her, assuming that she felt like she stole parenthood away from him. “Hey, sugar, it’s okay. I didn’t want to have a kid. Not with her. The only woman I’d want to knock up is you, and I don’t need it, I already told you.”

“Negan,” she looked like she was about to faint, and he held her securely along her back. Something was threatening to change the fragile peace that they were experiencing in the truck, and he didn’t want to lose it, so he guided his lips to hers, quieting her.
“I don’t want to talk anymore, sugar. I just want to take you home.”

April broke their embrace, sliding back over towards the window, and he caught her sniffling twice as he drove, his thoughts circling back over and over, the same words repeating themselves on a loop. You were going to be a dad. You were never going to be a dad. You might still be a dad.

If the next eight months didn’t put him in the nuthouse, nothing would, and he helped April in on auto-pilot, feeding the dogs and double-checking the barns to make sure that they were locked up for the night. She was already upstairs by the time he came back inside, and he went to the fridge, cracking a beer and chugging it down as George stood next to him, leaning his body against Negan’s legs as if to tell him that he wasn’t alone.

“You’ll never be a daddy either, huh, boy?” he planted his ass on the couch as George sat next to him, resting his chin on a jeans-clad leg. “She had your balls snipped off, didn’t she?”

George sighed, looking up at him with big, brown eyes, and he cursed himself internally for being such a prick and not appreciating what he already had. He didn’t want a kid. So, why was he feeling so disappointed?

Chapter End Notes

Poor guy, he needs a hug.
Fuck, it felt good. Negan smiled as April kissed his thigh, using her tongue to lap at the soft skin as he gave into the exquisite pleasure. She always knew just how to touch him, and he waited impatiently for her to move closer to his dick. He wanted her soft, wet mouth to slide around the head, and he could feel the heat of her breath as she edged toward it-

A loud bark woke him up, scaring the fuck out of him, and he sat up as George skittered back, clutching his chest. “What the fuck, Georgie?”

His thigh, which was sticking out of the covers was covered in dog spit, and he wiped at it sleepily as he flopped back onto the pillow. So much for the wet dream, he was inching closer to, and he reached out to scratch George’s head, glancing at the clock. It was almost ten in the morning, and he picked up the little note that was leaning against a glass of water.

_Hey babe,_

_I let you sleep in, and all the girls are out in the field. Fred and I are going to the auction, so enjoy your day off. Maybe you can find some parts for Lucille and just have a quiet day._

_2883 Burgess Road._

_See you tonight._

_AJ_

Negan ran his hands over the initials. It wasn’t the first time she’d used them, and at some point they were going to have to stop going by their old names. More than once April had started to call him Negan, and he’d had to talk over her to get her to shut the fuck up. It was the one thing that they argued about occasionally, and she’d jut her chin out at him defiantly, her eyes sparking with anger when he’d tell her to watch her mouth.

“Like I’m doing it on purpose,” she’d snap at him, giving him a heated look. “You act as if I’m trying to confuse the entire world.”

“Honey, someone’s going to figure it out sooner or later if you keep doing it.”

“Really? How?”

“Read the newspapers sometime,” he’d say just about every time, making her cheeks go flush. “Technology is changing, and the world is starting to put information on computers. Someday, everything that’s ever been known about a person will be at the click of a mouse. If anyone figures out the name Negan and does some research, who knows what they’ll find?”

“Yeah, right.”
Sometimes it was hard to be the only one thinking both ahead and behind, and he scratched his ass as he walked into the bathroom, draining the snake and cleaning up. George was downstairs by the door when he came down dressed and holding the address for some car parts place that April had looked into for him. He didn’t know when she’d done it since she was already asleep when he’d come to bed after tossing back a few beers after their powwow with Sandy.

They’d only shared a few words in the truck when they’d found out that he probably wasn’t the father of her unborn baby, and he thought that they’d need to hash it out in the light of day, but she must’ve shut off the alarm, and he’d slept right through morning chores, leaving him some rare free time alone. It wasn’t like she was up his ass all the time, but after getting the surprise of Lucille the Second, he’d thought he’d have a little more done on her. Thanks to April’s broken leg, he’d picked up more of the responsibility around the farm, and it was fucking exhausting. It wasn’t her fault, obviously, but he found himself getting a little jazzed about just hunting for metal treasure, and he poured the remaining coffee from the pot into a thermos, whistling for his boy to come along.

Gracie was already outside keeping watch over the cattle, and George gave her a quick look before jumping into the truck, panting and wagging his tail before Negan straightened his handkerchief, starting up the old girl and checking his map to locate the address.

It was a good half hour away, and when they got to Brighton, he stopped at a gas station, getting a few final directions to Balley’s Exotic Imports and Parts. He arrived ten minutes later with the user manual and a buzz of hope, leaving George in the truck with the windows down. Balley’s was a medium-sized building with two Corvette Stingrays in the showroom and an Aston Martin that appeared to be in pristine condition. How the fuck did he not know about this place? His mouth was practically watering at all of the automotive beauty in one place, and he stepped over to the Aston, wondering if April would kick his ass if it just showed up at the house one day. They’d never discussed combining their finances, and she was aware that he’d been given a hefty amount of money as well after the Tisone debacle, but they still discussed major purchases with each other.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

Negan turned to see a guy about his age stepping out from behind the counter with a smile. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt and black slacks, a gold watch glittering on his wrist, with hands that looked like they hadn’t done an honest day’s work in their lives.

“Gorgeous,” Negan agreed, giving her one last look before extending his own hand to greet the man.

“Jake Balley. Pleasure to meet you.”

“J.D. Clark.”

“So, J.D., how can I help you today?”

“Well, I’ve recently acquired a very special, yet run-down car, and I’m hoping you’d be able to help me procure the parts I need to get her up and running again.”

Jake’s eyes drifted down to the manual he was holding, and he nodded intently, gesturing at the book. “A Triumph?”

“The TR2.”

“That’s a damned fine pickup if I do say so myself,” Jake seemed impressed, and Negan handed him the manual, watching as he studied it intensely. “There were roughly eighteen hundred in the
States, and I’ve only seen two of them, myself. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. She’s in pretty bad shape, but the first thing I want to work on is the engine. Do you have the parts, or can you order them?”

“Come with me,” Jake carried the booklet against his chest, and Negan trailed him behind the counter and into an office that was nicely decorated with various posters of famous autos and racecar drivers. He had a polished wood desk and two leather chairs, and Negan sat down as he took two large binders off of the shelf, opening up the first one and scanning a few invoices. “So, most of my stock is American, but I deal with a few other places that would be able to hook you up with what you need. Let me reach out to a few of them.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

He listened with interest as Jake made a few phone calls, and Negan excused himself as he waited on hold for a third guy, checking on George to make sure he wasn’t getting overheated. Thankfully, he was in the shade and Negan gave him some of the bottled water that he always made sure to have handy, wiping his hand on his jeans when George was satiated.

When he went back to the office, Jake was writing furiously as a voice on the other line spoke. “Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And how fast could the parts be shipped?”

Oh, fuck yeah.

“Okay, let me discuss it with my client and I’ll call you back.”

“Great news,” Jake said, handing him the piece of paper with a number on it. “Reynold’s Salvage and Classic Cars in Bridgeport has an engine that will work for you. He rebuilt it for another client who ended up passing away, and the widow didn’t want to keep the car. He was going to purchase the Triumph, but he’s willing to sell for that number.”

It was a lot. A whole lot more than he thought it would be, but as he did a quick calculation of the time he’d have to spend rebuilding the engine by hand, the price was justifiable, and he nodded once. “I can work with this.”

“Great, let me call him back.”

His checkbook was in the glove compartment, and he ducked back out to grab it, finding the dog sitting with his head out the window, sniffing the breeze. “Almost done, boy, then I’ll take you for ice cream.”

George whined softly, and he kissed the top of his head since no one was looking, hightailing it back into the dealership to the counter, where Jake was writing up a receipt.

“I’ll transfer the money to Bill, then notify you when the engine arrives if you give me your number, unless you want it shipped to your house.”

“I’ll pick it up here,” Negan offered. “It’ll give me a chance to come here and drool over your fine inventory.”

After they complete the transaction, he shook Jake’s hand, feeling like he was finally getting somewhere with Lucille, and the other man walked him out, telling him to touch base when he figured out what other supplies he’d need. He was smiling when he got back in the truck. It wasn’t even noon, and he’d already had one hell of a day, so much so that he drove back to Fairfield in a great mood, stopping off at the Dairy Queen like he’d promised, holding a baby vanilla cone as George licked at it with gusto, not spilling a drop. “Who’s my good boy?” he cooed in a soft voice
like he always did when April wasn’t around. He’d rather cut his dick off than ever let her hear him act like such an idiot, but hell if he didn’t love this damned dog.

“What do you think, buddy? Should we go home and work on Lucille?”

George barked in agreement, and he turned up the radio, thinking that if he could just stay in his little bubble, he’d be all right. April still wasn’t back, so he grabbed some water, heading out to the brown barn after scanning the pasture to make sure the girls were okay. Nelson, the little calf was prancing around the hill, doing little kicks and jumps, and George took off to keep watch, leaving him alone as he opened the barn doors, greeted with hot, musty air.

In just minutes, he was covered in sweat, and he pawed through the parts that were scattered around losing himself in the task. He didn’t brood over Sandy’s current situation, he didn’t think about the fact that she’d let him think that he was going to be a father for over a week before tossing an ice-cold bucket of ‘you’re not the only dude I fucked’ over his head. He didn’t even think about April, he just took out parts and put them back together until the sun was almost down, breaking him out of his trance.

By the time he walked back towards the cattle barns, he was parched, the water he’d brought with him to keep him hydrated was long gone, and he felt a tickle of apprehension when he spied April just inside the red doors tossing in some sawdust for a new heifer. She was moving pretty well for being in an air cast, and her hair was pulled up into a loose bun, a few strands brushing her shoulders. He knew they had to talk, but he just didn’t want to get into it yet, and he slowed his pace to a crawl, picking up speed only when she turned around and spotted him.

He expected a stricken look, but she just smiled, crooking her finger for him to come in, and he placed a kiss to her warm cheek, eyeing the new cow that was chewing lazily in the corner. In the adjacent stall, another one, chocolate brown and pretty fat, was also feeding, but her ass was facing them so he didn’t get a good look at her, but April seemed happy with the new additions. They’d retired two other heifers who were moved to the white barn, and he vaguely recalled that she’d reached out to a few non-Cal farmers for breeding.

“Hey, sugar.”

“Hey,” she said back to him, leaning her arms on the pen. “I got two, obviously.”

“They look…healthy.”

“I already named one,” April nudged his chest with a slight smirk, avoiding his eyes, and he positioned himself next to her, resting his chin on his forearm as he tried to figure out what she’d christened the heifer.

“Let me guess,” he couldn’t help chuckling as his eyebrows met and he squinted at the black and white one. “Pepper?”

“Nope.”

“Spot?”

“Get real.”

He offered up a few more, and she shot each one down, her lips curling up higher each time until he finally gave up, and she turned towards him with a look that he didn’t quite know yet, but his belly filled with warmth when she told him. God, he fucking loved her.
“Marilyn. Marilyn Moo-nroe.”

Negan pulled her into a hug, breathing into her hair, wanting to tell her a hundred different things, but unable to verbalize even one of them. “You can name the other one,” she said into his neck. “But you won’t top that.”

“Give me time, sugar, and I’ll knock your socks off.”

They finished up for the night, walking back to the house, and when they reached the porch, he could smell fried chicken, and he didn’t think he could love her more. Even though he was sticky and sweaty, Negan went right to the dining room, and April came in with a platter of food. Chicken, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, and gravy, and he loaded up his plate as she poured them each a glass of tea. “Fuck, is this a breakup meal? ‘Cause even if it is, I can’t be mad. I’m so fucking hungry, sugar.”

“No, it’s not a breakup meal,” she said, taking the spot next to him, though she didn’t take any food of her own. “But we should probably talk.”

Talking was goddamned overrated, but as much as he wanted to just put the whole Sandy situation on ice for about six months, it wasn’t fair to April. She had a right to express how she felt about the situation, and he reminded himself that everything that was going to happen affected her, too.

“So, how are you feeling?”

The question sounded formal, and he bristled slightly at the way she was looking at him, like she wasn’t going to believe what he said either way, and he shrugged, shoveling a large mouthful of potatoes into his mouth. “I’m fine. Relieved to know that I might not be the father of a bastard.”

April winced, inching her hand away from his, and he set down his fork, forcing the food down his throat since it lodged itself on the back of his tongue. He was such an insensitive prick. “I’m sorry, sugar. I didn’t mean to be crass. I’m okay, I guess. It would’ve sucked to find out when the kid came out looking like Casper the Friendly Ghost.”

“Huh?”

“The dude she slept with is practically an albino,” he rolled his eyes. “There’s no way she’d be able to pass it off as coming from my loins if comes out with white hair and pasty skin.”

“But, how do you feel about maybe not being a father? Does it bother you? I want you to be honest with me.”

“April, honey, what’s the difference? I told you that I’d do my part if it is, and if it’s not, I’m cool. I told you that I didn’t care about having kids.”

“Please don’t lie to me, Negan, not right now.”

“Why the fuck do you think I’m lying?”

“Because I slept next to you last night. Or, I laid in bed next to you last night as you tossed and turned, and if it was a complete relief, you would’ve slept like a baby,” April said honestly. “You slept better when we were hiding from mobsters, so forgive me if I think that this maybe wasn’t the great news that you hoped it would be.”

Taking a mental step back, he let himself absorb her words instead of rushing to deny them, and she placed one finger on top of his hand, gently smoothing the skin as he watched. It was stupid to
lie to her, and to himself.

“Lucille and I tried for years to get pregnant,” he admitted, and the finger stilled suddenly. “Every month, we waited for that little blue line, and we never got it. It fucking wrecked her, and we just stopped talking about it. When she got sick, having kids wasn’t my thing, anymore, and I meant it. I told myself that it wasn’t in the cards for me, and it was fine, April. It *is* fine.”

“But you had a week to get used to the idea,” she supplied and he forced a half-shrug, adamantly turning the admission into not a big deal. “And it hurts to know that you might be back to where you were before.”

“I love you,” Negan reached out, dragging her chair closer to him, and she nearly fell off to the side. “I love you, April or June, whatever the fuck you want me to call you, so I’ll get over it. It’s not as big a deal as you’re making it out to be. I may have started to think about the kid in terms of possibly being mine, but it’s better that it might not be. I don’t want to be tied to anyone else, and I don’t need to have a kid, and I don’t need to have some…thing that has half of my genes. I just need you.”

He believed what he was saying, he really did, even though the sting was still leaving phantom throbs in his heart, but he’d gotten over it before, a long time ago. April was more important to him than some kid, some faceless, nameless idea of a child. She was real and living and warm and here.

The dogs came shuffling in, sensing the emotional environment, and for once, Gracie came over to him instead of April, nudging his elbow until he put his arm around her neck, hugging her to his side. She may not love him as much as April, but he’d wormed his way into her heart just the same, and he resolved to take her in the truck the next time he took a ride.

“There’s something we need to talk about,” she said, watching him and the dog, and her cheeks started to pink up. That wasn’t a good sign, and he pulled Gracie a bit closer, his mind going to a dark, dark place. ‘We need to talk’ was always the catalyst for massive crap in his life, and he could tell by the way that she drew back that he was putting off some really unattractive vibes, so he swallowed heavily and forcibly eased his facial muscles, but she wasn’t swayed. “Can you let go of the dog, please?”

Fuck. Was she going to escort him out, or something? Was this really a break-up dinner?

“Sugar, whatever I did, we can work it out-“

“Negan, you didn’t do anything,” April blanched, and she shooed Gracie away, scooting closer to him and gripping his hand. “This is about me. Well, us.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better. The last time we talked about us was a week ago, and we’re still fucking spiraling.”

“Will you just shut the fuck up and let me think about what I have to say?”

His heart started to pound, and for one wild moment, he thought that she was going to tell him that she was pregnant, and it was enough to send his pulse into a frenzy, tunneling his vision and drowning out all other sounds for a split second.

“So, on Thursday, when I went for my manicure, I also went to see my gynecologist,” she said, gauging his mental state, and he had no idea how he appeared to her as he tried not to interrupt. “After finding out about Sandy, I’d done a lot of thinking, and I wanted to talk to my doctor about maybe just getting a hysterectomy.”
"What? Why? How could you not discuss this with me-"

"Negan, shut the fuck up, or I’m leaving and drinking myself into a coma at the bar," she screeched, bringing George up into the fray.

So, not pregnant, then, and he glared at her, getting the same look back tenfold. The last fucking thing he needed was her getting shitfaced and running into Cal again. The fact that he knew about the Sandy situation was still gnawing at him, but that was a conversation for another day. “I’m sorry,” he finally spat out, and she took a cleansing breath.

“Anyway, when I called to make the appointment, they told me that my regular doctor had retired, and there was a new guy that took over the practice. So, I decided to go, and I figured I could at least ask him about it, what the protocol was and how it would affect me. I wasn’t going to just go in and do it, you fuckwad. I just wanted to know, because what’s the fucking point of having woman parts when I can’t do anything with them?”

“April, the fucking-“

“I can still have kids, dick,” she shoved him roughly as she stood up, and if there was a knife anywhere nearby, he was pretty sure she would be ready to shank him.

“What?” he stuttered when the news finally reached his brain, staring up at her in shock. “What?”

“I explained to the doctor what I was told, and it was a fucking lie. He did a bunch of tests and basically confirmed the fact that I’m a fucking idiot who listened to a physician who didn’t have a clue as to what he was talking about.”

She walked over to the steps, leaving him sitting there, stunned. “Thanks for making this so easy for me, Negan. I appreciate it.”

Both dogs followed her, leaving him with a plate full of food, a guilty conscience, and the faint hope that she’d let him sleep in bed with her tonight. He ate mechanically, spearing the chicken and inhaling the corn, taking everything into the kitchen and putting into Tupperware containers and placing it in the fridge like the domestic fuck he was now, waiting until he thought she’d at least cooled down enough to let him get a shower.

Moving like he was walking through a haunted house, Negan edged his way into the bedroom, finding her laying on her side facing the window, but she’d left the lights on, her casted leg hanging outside the covers. She was in a tank top, and he tried to act like the man he was instead of a naughty little boy, striding over to his dresser with false confidence and taking out a pair of boxers, tossing them onto the sink. He needed to fix this and fast. April could hold a grudge like no one he’d ever known outside of himself, and she’d definitely freeze him out. They weren’t out of the woods on the Sandy thing, and she didn’t explicitly say that she wanted kids, just that she was able to.

When he came out, she was still in the exact same spot, but her eyes were closed, and he decided to just do it, crawling onto the bed behind her, leaving a few inches between them.

“I’m sorry, sugar. I don’t mean to be a dick, and I apologize for not just sitting there and listening to what you were trying to say. Please talk to me.”

Nothing. Not even an elbow to his gut.

“April, please. Don’t shut me out. Tell me what you want.”

She never so much as even flinched. It was like laying next to a statue, and he knew when to hold
them and when to fold them, so he folded, rolling away and turning off the lamp. It was barely dark out, and he didn’t have the energy to go downstairs to brood, choosing to do it next to her. Amazingly, he was asleep in seconds, one of those deep slumbers that not even worries and troubles could penetrate. It was just dreams of random bits of his life, both before Tisone and after. Snapshots of Lucille, looking beautiful and alive. Simon and Sal flanking him as they scoured the drive-in for available girls. His father helping him knot his tie before his wedding. April’s hair shining in the sunlight as they stood in the field watching the cows. Looking up at him as he made love to her, losing himself in her smell, her smile, her freckles.

“Negan?”

He started awake, blinking into the sudden light, and he saw the time over her shoulder. Three in the morning. A very ugly snort worked its way out of his throat as he sat up, rubbing his face. April looked tired, like it was her turn to spend the night ruminating, and he leaned up against the headboard. She did the same, the two sitting in silence in the middle of the night.

“I don’t know what I want,” she said, crossing her arms over her waist. “I swore that I’d never have a child, because of the way that I grew up. I wanted to break the cycle of shitty family dynamics. The Brower name is synonymous with white trash. Even when my identity changed, it just seemed to be ingrained in me, and I never really thought about it with Cal. We’d talked about moving in together, but he knew that I couldn’t have kids, and it was okay. You said it was okay, and then Sandy…”

She only saw herself through the lens of her upbringing, not that he didn’t understand. But he saw her through the lens of love, and how nurturing and smart she was, and if it was in his power, he’d make her see it, too.

“We don’t have to have kids, Negan. I could live the rest of my life with you and the animals, and it would be enough. I think it would be enough.”

“Do you wanna know what I think?” he asked when she didn’t continue, and she nodded once, blinking rapidly to keep the tears from spilling out onto her cheeks. “I think that if you wanted to just be with me and only me, you wouldn’t be ready to cry. I also think that we don’t have to make any decisions tonight. I’m open to leaving it open.”

She dropped her head, and he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling into his chest. “I’m in no rush, sugar, and for the record, I know in my heart that you’d be a fucking awesome mother.” The words sent her into a crying jag, and he held her, quietly and without adding anything but a shoulder to cry on. It wasn’t just about him and their relationship. She was mourning the childhood she should’ve had and the parents that failed her. Fear was still ruling her, and the pain of abandonment was there. But he couldn’t stop the images that were flooding him as she gradually cried herself to sleep.

Goddamn, would they make beautiful babies.
Negan shrugged out of his jacket, hanging it on the hook by the door as he kicked off his boots. It was much cooler lately, and he’d traded his leather coat for a shearling one that kept him warm when he was out in the field or cleaning out the barn. Fall in Iowa was beautiful, he had to admit. He’d never been a huge nature guy, but the trees were gorgeous, lit up with bright orange, yellow and red, and it made the fading green pasture even more stunning.

He and April had worked hard to get the farm ready for winter, and the barns were all updated with new heaters to keep the girls and Nelson warm for the upcoming season change. The past few months had been so busy that they barely had time to think about anything else, thankfully. Right now, everything was quiet, and he hoped in vain that this stupid fucking Halloween party that she was dragging him to was done early.

April fucking loved Halloween, whereas he couldn’t care less. Costumes, chintzy music, candy. All a fucking snoozefest, but she’d been going to the Fairfield Annual Costume Contest and Fundraiser for the past two years, and she told him in no uncertain terms that they were dressing up, and they were going to win. If the fact that he agreed to wear a dumbass costume didn’t prove that he loved her, nothing would, and he fed the dogs as he heard her milling around upstairs.

“Can I fucking come up now?” he shouted, dreading whatever stupid thing she’d picked out to dress them up as. He’d asked at least twenty times what they were going to wear, and she’d refused to answer, telling him it was a surprise. “I gotta take a shower.”

She didn’t answer, but he did register the clomp of her walking down the hall, and he parked his ass at the base of the steps to see what she was dressed as, saying a pitiful prayer that it wasn’t the front end of a horse or some shit. There was no fucking way in hell he’d be wearing a joint costume, and he held his breath as she got closer.

He couldn’t have been more wrong if he tried, and he sucked in a breath as painted toes in heels came slowly into view, followed by a blue-green dress. Gradually, her right leg showed itself briefly as the material moved back and forth, and he swallowed hard when her hips began to sway, mesmerized as her chest and then neck caught his attention.

“Oh, God,” he moaned when she stopped in front of him, holding her arms out for inspection. April was wearing a dress that barely covered her tits, a slit that went all the way to her hip bone, and a blonde, shoulder-length wig with bangs. Was he dead? Was this heaven?

Batting her eyes, she licked her lips, stained the color of raspberries and as shiny as patent leather, and he found himself reaching out to her without thinking, blinking suddenly when she slapped his hand away. “Don’t touch.”

“Well, fuck me raw,” he growled, looking her up and down as he lasered in on her braless tits. The material was edged with rhinestones, and April’s eyes were lined with heavy makeup, complementing the color of the dress. He was honestly awestruck, and when she twirled around, he caught a flash of her ass, completely bare because she was wearing a white thong. It was absolutely
stunning, the complete metamorphosis of his girl, yet it was still her.

“Figure it out, yet?” April backed up a step as he kept pace with her, watching her breasts bounce with each movement, and he nodded, licking his lips. “Who am I?”

“Can I plow you first before I tell you?”

Lifting the dress so she didn’t trip, she kept moving back up until they were on the second floor, and she skirted his fingers with a shake of her head. “If you want to fuck, you’d better be on your best behavior tonight.”

“Sugar, I can’t even think straight,” he growled, watching goosebumps criss-cross her arms and chest. “I’m so fucking horny right now.”

“Who am I, Negan?” April grinned, cupping her breasts as he backed her into the corner, ignoring George and Gracie’s warning barks.

“Fucking Elvira.”

Her tongue brushed his mouth, and he dug his hips into her before she placed her hand to his chest, looking at him with approval. She was an exact replica of Michelle Pfeiffer in Scarface, right down to the wig, and he wanted her spread-eagle on the bed, forgetting why she was even dressed that way. “Good boy,” she purred, directing him back towards their room. “I figured since you told me I looked like her, we’d dress up like them for the party.”

“Baby, come on,” he whined, glancing at the clothes she’d laid out for him. A white suit, crimson dress shirt with matching pocket square, loafers, a gold chain, and a cigar.

“Please.”

“Get ready,” April grabbed her purse, “and I’ll suck your cock at the party.” She gave him a flirtatious wink before shutting the door, and he stared at the empty spot in a daze.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled up the white pants over his painful hard-on, and it had taken a massive dose of self-discipline to keep from jacking off in the shower. It was so bad that he’d made the water ice-cold, and his lips were still discolored as he buttoned up the shirt, studying himself in the mirror. God, she was so fucking beautiful.

Playful. Smart. Sexy as fuck, and she was fulfilling an old masturbation fantasy of his that she didn’t even know about, so he added the jacket, mussing up his hair to look like Pacino’s. The gold chain lay across his collarbone, and with the stubble from not shaving, he had to admit that he looked pretty fucking good.

Holding the cigar between his fingertips, he spritzed on some cologne and headed back down to find her leaning against the door with a hungry look on her face, and he gave her his best seductive smile.

“See anything you like?”

April pushed herself up gracefully, stepping around George as she laid one painted nail on his cheek, dragging it towards his lips and he nibbled it softly, watching her cheeks pink up. As far gone
as he was, she wasn’t much better, and it was going to be torture. Hours of foreplay, and he wasn’t sure he was going to be able to handle it, but he was game to try.

“You ready, Tony?”

Negan tilted his body to the side, grabbing her jacket and placing it around her shoulders, nudging her cheek with the tip of his nose, inhaling deeply. “Let’s fucking go, beautiful.”

Holding one finger up, he left April on the porch in the dark, pulling up in Lucille after just a few seconds, and he escorted her to the passenger’s side, taking liberties with her ass as he helped her in. She’d gotten her cast off the week before, and other than a thin, red scar on her shin, there was no other memento from her tumble in the pasture. He’d never tell her so, but Negan was glad the incident happened. It led to a meetup with Sandy and the declaration that he might not be the father of her kid, and also the revelation that April herself was still capable of becoming pregnant.

After he’d royally fucked up in his reaction to the news, they’d agreed to table any kid talk until after the Sandy situation was settled, and though it took some time, they were operating on the same wavelength again. April was still on birth control for the time being, but she’d admitted she didn’t want to be on it forever, even if they didn’t wind up trying for a family. Negan held even more appreciation for her now, watching her with fresh eyes in everything she did. Her childhood had fucked up her experiences with family life, but in everything she encountered, there was a gentleness, even when she was reading him the riot act. It was borne from a place of love and care, and he was honest with himself that he’d like to have a kid with her if she agreed.

He loved her. He desired her. He wanted to make her laugh and he sometimes even liked to make her mad, because it juiced his balls when she yelled at him or lightly shoved him. Though her grudge-holding abilities were strong, she couldn’t stay mad at him forever, and the makeup sex was the stuff of pornos. Beyond that, he felt appreciated by April. When he got the flu in September, she sent him to their room to recover, making him chicken soup and laying with him after the chores were finished, brushing his hair from his sweaty forehead and laying cool cloths there instead.

Not since Lucille had he felt so connected to someone, and April just…got him. She didn’t take it personally when he spent days in the barn finishing his car. If he was in a pissy mood, she either told him to get over it or just ignore him. When he woke occasionally, short of breath and reaching out for his dead wife, she wasn’t hurt or jealous. She’d just listen to him as he poured out a laundry list of regrets, both for how he’d treated her, and how he didn’t feel worthy of being happy again.

“Of course you are,” April would soothe him, bringing his head onto her chest as he fought with his demons. “You’re a good man. You saved me, sweetheart.”

Now, they were driving to a Halloween party to socialize with people when all he wanted to do was strip her bare and ravish her body. His eyes kept going back to her exposed thigh, and picturing it resting up against his neck when he was eating her out later made him smile. April knew what he was thinking about, because she let her leg fall to the side, and it brushed his fingers that were resting on the gear shift. The Triumph was just a two-seater, so with his large frame, they were almost on top of each other, increasing the sexual tension in the car, and he bit his lip to keep from saying something crass.

Henderson Hall was decorated like a high school dance, replete with black and orange crepe paper, balloons, and hand-painted ghouls. He led April by the hand through the doors, greeting a few
people that he knew casually from town while they checked-in, and they headed over towards the makeshift bar, each grabbing a drink. He took a beer, and she chose the white wine, chatting with Andrew. He’d finally gotten over the Cal breakup and accepted that Negan was a permanent addition to April’s life, and he figured out who they were supposed to be right away. He and his date, Amanda, were dressed as Batman and Catwoman.

Negan thought they looked cheap, and April excused herself to say hello to the woman that owned the bar, Benny or something. The crowd was mostly younger, and he watched April move through the crowd, her back bare except for the little spaghetti straps that criss-crossed, barely holding the dress together.

"Hey!"

Turning his head without actually looking at Andrew, he heard the other man laugh. “Huh?”

“Tuck it back in your pants, man.”

Amanda punched him in the shoulder, giving Negan a wink. “It would be nice if you ogled me like that once in a while, asshole.”

"That’s not fair,” he shot back. “Wear a dress like that and I will.”

The duo began to lightheartedly bicker, and Negan tuned them out along with the Monster Mash playing at an obnoxiously loud volume, sipping his beer as April continued to talk to the bar girl across the hall. It was only when he was tapped on the shoulder about ten minutes later that he completely turned away, breaking out into a smile.

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

Jake Balley, the guy that helped him get Lucille up and running was fast becoming a good friend, and he’d mentioned the Halloween Party/Fundraiser to him the week before. Negan hadn’t expected the guy to actually show up, but it was nice to have a non-farmer friend, one that he had more in common with than Andrew, or Fred, bless his heart. Jeff liked the finer things in life, and was fun to shoot the shit with. And apparently, he had a smoking hot wife.

Draped over his shoulders was a woman with long, red hair and assets that were practically falling out of a red, sequined dress. She looked him up and down with an eager glint in her eyes, whispering into Jake’s ear as he gave her a cool look. She may be built like Jessica Rabbit, but he wasn’t going to screw around with anyone that wasn’t April.

“Later,” Jeff muttered over the music, shaking Negan’s hand. “This is my wife, Felicia. Felicia, this is J.D.”

“Pleasure,” she purred, leaning forward to make her curves more apparent, and he kept his eyes up.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Where’s your lady?”

“Right here.”

It made him jump when April appeared to his right, and he edged her in front of him as Felicia looked her up and down, mentally comparing herself to his woman. Jake, on the other hand, seemed very appreciative of her outfit, and he kissed the top of her hand when Negan introduced her. She wedged her other hand in between their bodies, and he suppressed a moan when she cupped his
dick, squeezing it with just a touch too much pressure.

“It’s nice to put a face with the name of the man who’s taking my fella’s attention away from me,” she said in a joking manner, and Jake laughed in response.

“And it’s my pleasure to meet you,” he said, cupping her hand with both of his as Felicia switched her gaze to Negan. “J.D. told me you were beautiful, but…wow.”

“I’m Felicia,” the redhead pouted, giving April a passing look, though she offered her hand to be greeted. “Cute costume.”

“Thanks,” April used her fake voice as she continued to massage his dick, and he felt himself getting warm. “Yours is, too. Very original.” There were at least three other Jessica Rabbits in attendance, and he placed his hands on her shoulder in a warning to let go and be nice.

“I saw the Triumph in the lot, and it looks just perfect,” Jake said. “The red makes it really pop.”

Lucille had originally been white, but Negan figured that red on a lady was much better.

“Oh, shoot,” April hissed, letting go of him to grab her face, cutting off his rambling thoughts. “I think I have an eyelash in my eye. Help me, hon?”

She glanced up at him with a half-covered face, and he hastily excused them to take her to the bathroom, knocking once before opening the door to the men’s room. As soon as they were inside the small room, she rolled her eyes, locking the door as he gave her a ‘what the fuck?’ look.

“That wife is a bitch,” she muttered, pushing him back against the wall. Her hands were on his pants before he even had time to understand what was happening, and she dropped to her knees on the tiled floor, looking up at him with a smirk.

“Sugar, what are you doing?”

“Exactly what I told you I’d do,” April unzipped the trousers, pulling them down with his boxers at the same time, and she curled her index finger and thumb around the base of his dick. “Sucking your cock at the party. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Oh fuck, she was filthy, and he loved it, watching with half-opened eyes as she wasted no time, bringing the head to her lips and blowing on the tip before opening wide and swallowing him down. Her mouth was feverishly warm, and he thrust into the back of her throat, attempting to grip her hair, but she slapped him away. “Wig,” she reminded him around his dick, and he braced his hands against the wall as she continued sucking on him like he was a straw. He’d been so ramped up all night that it only took a couple of minutes until he breached the back of her throat, eyes clenched shut as he came.

“Holy shit,” he panted, hunching over her as she swallowed with a satisfied sound, licking her lips. “That was fucking fast.”

“You look so hot tonight, Negan,” she said, wiping the corners of her lips as he helped her to her feet, his dick still hanging out and his pants bunched up at his feet. “I’ve never seen you dressed up so fine.”

He stood there in a daze as she turned around, checking her reflection in the mirror, and Negan finally bent down to pull up his pants as she reapplied her lipstick. There were some red marks on his dick, and he went to wipe them off but she whistled, catching it attention. “Leave it. I want to see that lipstick still there when we get home.”
“Why?”

“Because I know it’s there, and so do you. I want you to walk around with it the rest of the night and think of me.”

The only sound in the bathroom was him zipping up his pants, and he stepped up behind her, hugging her to his chest as they stared at each other in the mirror. “You know, sugar, when I’m eighty and I can’t get it up anymore, I’m gonna remember this night. You are so fucking amazing.”

April smiled at him, tucking her tube of gloss back into her purse, and he slipped a hand between her legs, using his fingers to tease her, finding her slicker than an oil spill, and she sighed, trying to dislodge him. “Negan…”

“Oh, honey, I owe you, and you’re so fucking wet that I guaran-damned-tee that I can get you off as fast as you did me.”

He circled her nub, and her head fell back onto his shoulder, watching his reflection as he held her up by the waist, stroking hard and fast, enjoying the power that he had. April was coming undone, and he had a unique view of it, watching almost as if he was someone else, the two looking so unlike their regular selves. Their own little roleplay, a costume to spice up their love life, not that it needed it, but he was thankful that she made them come to this party, and she tilted her head, burying her face in his neck. “Oh, God, Negan. I can’t…”

“I want to see your face, sugar. Look at me.”

As soon as he inserted two fingers, she started to quake, and he clapped his free hand over her mouth as she cried out, their eyes meeting, and it was the sweetest thing he’d ever see. The pure joy and pleasure in her face and how she struggled to stay vertical. The way her breasts bounced up and down as she moved. The deep inhales as she came down from her high, all pink and warm. The feel of wetness on his fingers when he pulled them free, and she gripped the sink as her dress fell back into place while he licked them clean, enjoying the mixture of tangy and sweet. “Hmm. Finger licking good.”

“I’ll…I’ll go out first,” she slipped past him, infinitely more subdued than she was before, and he fixed his shirt, tucking it back into his pants as she went out. He counted to twenty, following her lead, and when he got back into the party hall, no one seemed suspicious. Jake and Felicia were still over by the bar, so he grabbed one more beer, shooting the shit with him as Felicia looked around, bored as hell.

When the next song faded out, Mayor Burbridge stepped onstage to a round of applause. He was dressed as Dracula, some sort of old movie version, and he thanked the attendees for coming, announcing that the party raised over five thousand dollars for the Fairfield Big Brothers and Sisters Club. Everyone raised their drinks in a toast to the news, and the mayor downed his in appreciation.

“Okay, before we get back to the music, we’d like to announce the finalists for best costume. In third place, Cal Draper and Penny Fortner as Zeus and the goddess Athena.”

The crowd clapped as asshole Cal and his bucktoothed date joined the mayor on stage, accepting their prize of a gift certificate to the Waterford Restaurant. Negan thought they looked like they were wearing bedsheets, but everyone else seemed to like it.

“In second place, J.D. Clark and June Daniels as memorable movie couple Tony Montana and Elvira Hancock. Come on up!”
Well, shit. Baby got them second place, and Jake slapped him on the back as he made his way across the dancefloor, snagging April by the steps and climbing up to heartier cheers than Cal received. Her ex was openly staring at her chest as they crossed the stage, shaking the mayor’s hand and accepting their win, an overnight stay at Hawthorne Bed and Breakfast. Pshh. Boring.

They stood next to Cal as Mayor Burbridge called out the big winner, Joe and Jane Muster, who were a scarily good version of Beetlejuice and the teenaged girl, Lydia, dressed in a red wedding dress and veil. The couple won a two hundred fifty dollar cash prize, and they donated it back to the charity, which was nice. The mayor thanked them, telling everyone to have a great time, and the DJ fired up the music again.

Cal nodded politely at April, and he gave Negan the stink-eye as he passed, but Negan ignored him, guiding his girl back down to the floor. “Great job, sugar. You’re a costume master.”

April kissed his cheek, disappearing into the crowd to dance, and he watched in amusement as she barely swayed, engaging in an animated conversation with a few different women. That changed, though, when the tunes flipped from Halloween themed to just regular dance songs, and his mouth dropped open when she eased to the middle of the floor, moving in a way he’d never seen her do before.

Little Red Corvette started to play, and her eyes closed as a happy smile formed on her lips. He stared at her as she started to swivel her hips, the slit in her dress swaying back and forth, exposing her leg. April’s arms were above her head as she mouthed the words, and his eighteen-year-old self roared inside him with unbridled lust. This is what he spent his whole life looking for. Someone to quench that uncontainable fire inside him, and he was marginally aware of several other men watching her, a beacon of feminine beauty.

Then she opened her eyes, locating him in the crowd with ease, her smile turning to sheer delight as she mouthed the words to him.

A body like yours
Oughta be in jail
’Cause it's on the verge of bein' obscene
Move over baby
Gimme the keys
I'm gonna try to tame your little red love machine

His thirteen-year-old self began to poke at his brain, his heart and his stomach with fiery fingers, mixing in pure love with that desire, and he pushed through the crowd towards her. Past horny ghosts and lecherous pirates, towards the only thing that mattered in his life that were fixated on her, and he kissed her with all the love and passion that he felt in the middle of the dancefloor, not giving a shit who was watching.

“You heading out?”
Negan shook Jake’s hand as they retreated to the coat check, ending up beside him and his wife. He grinned at the look on Jake’s face, and even his wife was watching April in a new light. The vague air of competition seemed to be gone, and she shared a longing look with her husband, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“We have another party to hit,” Jake told him, handing Felicia her mink coat. “Maybe you want to come with us next time? We know a lot of fun couples.”

“Give me a call, man.”

He and Jake slapped each other on the shoulder, and Felicia leaned in, kissing April on the cheek and lingering there, whispering something in her ear. It was a fucking hot sight, and he watched her cheeks get bright red. April looped her arm around his, and she practically dragged him out into the night.

“What did she say to you?”

“Nothing. Let’s just go.”

Okay, then.

Negan had only had two beers, but it was still hard to keep his eyes on the road as April kissed his neck, threading her fingers through his hair, and when he stopped at the only light between Fairfield and their house, she jerked his face to hers, forcing his mouth open with her tongue, flooding him with the taste of sweet wine, making his balls ache. They made out like horny teenagers until a car started honking behind them to tell them to get moving, and he drove like a maniac to get them home.

The dogs didn’t even bother to get up from the couch when he carried her through the door and right up the steps, sucking on her earlobe. They bounced off the doorframe, and he landed on the bed with her straddling his waist, and she ripped his shirt open, scraping his chest with her nails. He was always up for a no-holds barred fuck, but April was far more jacked up than he was, if that was possible, and she pushed him down onto his back, swinging her leg over so she could undo his pants.

“Fuck, April,” he sighed when she ripped the thong in two pieces and jumped on him like a pogo stick. The wetness between her legs coated his thighs, and he sat back up, easing the straps of her pretty little dress off to bare her chest so he could watch her tits bounce with each movement. Her nipples were already erect, and he stuck out his tongue, enjoying her little squeaks when one of them would brush against it. She was still wearing the wig, and he took it off, her hair tumbling down in a wave of peachy smelling goodness. “Keep going, sugar.”

She linked her fingers together around his neck, moving back and forth, up and down, and Negan used his thumb to smear the raspberry gloss around the outside of her lips. She was a sexy, fuckable mess, and he flipped their positions, hiking her leg over his shoulder so that he could hit her G-Spot, angling his hips and moving at a frenetic pace.

“Oh God, Negan. Oh, right there.”

Let it never be said that he couldn’t follow directions. Negan doubled his efforts, ignoring the cramp that was beginning in his side, and she started to tighten up, digging her nails into the back of his neck as she pulled him down to her lips, biting his bottom one to stifle a scream. It only took him a few thrusts after that to blow his load, riding it out with a jagged breath.
Neither one seemed inclined to move until April let out a tired chuckle, looking like she’d been ridden hard and put away wet, and he mentally congratulated himself on a job well done. “You never mentioned that Jake was a swinger.”

“Huh?”

“Jake and his wife are swingers,” she gave him a disbelieving head shake, easing her leg down to get more comfortable. “That Felicia chick hit on me.”

“You’re shitting me,” Negan was both curious and reticent to believe it, turning them so that she was back on top, and she leaned down into his face, letting him wipe away some of the lipstick. “You must have misunderstood.”

“She bent down and kissed me and told me she’d love to play with you and me sometime,” she snorted, watching a volley of emotions cross his face. He’d be a liar if the fantasy of fucking that hot little redhead didn’t flash through his mind for about five seconds, but it was followed by the nightmare of Jake putting his dick inside April, and he snarled angrily, biting her neck as she laughed.

“No fucking way in fucking hell is anyone fucking your sweet little snatch but me, sugar. You’re all mine, forever and ever.”

April put her head down over his heart, and he left her soft movements calm him, his muscles relaxing and softening, lulling him to sleep.

“Marry me.”

The words were said in a sleepy voice, and it took him a beat to connect them in his tired brain, opening his eyes to see her watching him with loving eyes.

“Did you just propose to me, April?”

Jimmy Regenti stood up from the guard desk, stretching his arms and giving his partner a nod as he watched the security camera. “Gotta hit the head.”

“Jesus, Jimmy, I don’t need a play by play. Just fucking go.”

Paul watched as the young dipshit walked out, waiting until he heard the bathroom door open and shut before standing up himself, grabbing his nightstick and keys, walking down the hall to the
security door. He tried not to do the walk-throughs for Cell Block B very often, but he’d been sitting on a bombshell for a few days, and he couldn’t hold off any longer. If anyone told the big boss before he did, it would be a fucking nightmare, and Paul wanted full credit for it.

The lights were off in all of the rooms, and he took soft steps down the hall and around the corner, back to the solitary cell that housed Mickey Tisone. Jimmy would be in the bathroom for at least ten minutes, and he wanted to be back in time to erase the footage of him standing in front of his cell, talking to him.

Peering into the dim area, Paul knocked on the bars twice, alerting Mr. Tisone that he was there. “Sir?”

“Speak.”

The voice was lightly accented, and coming from the left corner of the room, so Paul turned his head towards the general direction, straightening his shoulders.

“I have some news, sir.”

There was a slight creak, and then Mickey Tisone was standing in front of him, six inches away. Even locked away, he carried as much power as when he was free. The fucking law didn’t stop him, they just made him immobile. He still ran Cosa Nostra remotely, and everyone who was anyone reported to him, though not directly. Word always came and went through guys like Paul, or other prisoners, and he passed messages back to his lieutenants that were still on the streets or locked up in different facilities.

“My buddy in the FBI was able to get brief access to the witness protection files, sir. You were right. The girl is alive.”

The air felt like it was being sucked out of the room as Mickey Tisone grabbed him by the collar, jerking him forward. He started to wheeze, thinking that he was going to die, but the capo patted him on the cheek with an oily smile that could send shivers up even the most hardened criminal’s spine.

“Tell me, kid. Where is she?”

“He- he couldn’t find that out, sir. He only had a few minutes to look through the file. They blacked out her last name, but she’s living somewhere in the States under the first name June.”

Fuck, why did he come down here to tell Mickey fuckin’ Tisone incomplete information? He was going to have to quit this job and go on the run. Shit, shit, shit-

“Listen to me,” Tisone ordered in a soft voice, pulling him even closer to the bars, close enough that he could feel the man’s breath on his cheek. “You did good, son. But I want you to get the word out. I don’t care if it takes two days or ten years, I want every family looking into any woman alive by the name of June. This cunt can’t hide forever, and I’m putting another bounty on her head. I want her, and I’m going to get her. Understand?”

Paul nodded, taking a step back when Tisone released his shirt, knowing that he’d jumped into a stinking pile of quicksand that he’d never get out of, and he hustled back to the guard station, wiping his forehead of sweat when Jimmy came walking back in.

“You all right, man? You look like you’re gonna be sick.”

Ignoring him, he stared at the television monitor, lost in thought. As fucked as he was, this April chick was even worse off, because whatever Tisone wanted, he got. She had no idea what was
coming for her.
Chapter 33

December 21, 1991

“Hon?”

“Yeah?”

Negan kept shoveling as he waited for April to tell him what she wanted, his breath billowing out in a white cloud as he tossed bull turds over the door, the cold little fuckers rattling against the metal of the wheelbarrow. He was freezing, he was annoyed, and he was sick of winter already.

Iowa was colder than a witches tit, and every time he stepped outside, his balls shrunk a little further into him. They’d gotten so much snow that it was going to still be there in May, and there was another blizzard on the way.

“Hon!”

“WHAT’??!”

“I need you to come in here, now!”

The fucking fuck. Slamming the pitchfork down, he peeled off his gloves, turning his back on Nelson and getting headbutted into the ass for his trouble. The force sent him down to one knee, and he groaned loudly. The young bull was always fucking trying to knock him down, and he thought about what he’d taste like as a steak, struggling to get upright as his knee screamed in protest.

“Goddamnit, Nelson. Enough!”

Nelson pawed at the fresh sawdust, and Negan hurriedly exited the stall, narrowly missing another ass pounding, and he grudgingly accepted that the little juvenile was going to need his own barn in the spring. With every passing week, he was getting more and more brazen, and he needed to be separated from the heifers to keep him from injuring them, even his momma.

Striking a lonely figure, he trudged through the snow, shaking his head when he reached the porch, the warm glow from the lights failing to improve his mood. As soon as he stepped inside, April appeared out of nowhere, dragging him across the living room to the kitchen, and he slid across the floor, nearly taking her down with him.

“What the fuck are you pulling me for? I’m gonna break my fucking leg.”

April glared at him and then down at her own scarred shin, hidden by her pants, and he shrugged, not even caring that he was being a dickhead. “I have to get these measurements over to the seamstress by five, so your suit is ready by Friday,” she pulled at his jacket, reaching for the measuring tape that was sitting on the counter. “The flowers aren’t going to be done until right before the ceremony, Fred’s suit is on backorder, and I’m still waiting for you to try the cake samples so that we can place the order.”
Holding his arms out, he stood there like a scarecrow as she measured him for the fourth fucking time, scribbling down numbers and dropping to her knees to do his inseam. April didn’t even give him a pity grope, muttering under her breath about chicken and fish, and he finally snapped, his winter mood and underlying worries reaching dickhead proportions.

“There’s only going to be twenty people there. Who the fuck cares?”

She cared, clearly, and he watched as her shoulders slumped, dropping her hands from his legs, standing up with her head down. Writing one more time, she kept her back to him, and he sighed, knowing that he took it too far.

“Sugar, I’m sorry,” he reached for her shoulder, but she brushed him off, gripping the pencil.

“Go away.”

“April, I know I’m acting like a jerk-“

“Just go, Negan. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

Her voice was overloaded with sadness, and he backed up, snagging his coat from the floor as he retreated, heading back out into the snow to finish with the cattle. She'd proposed to him on Halloween night, throwing him completely off balance, and ever since,

Negan could feel the weight of it rubbing him raw inside. Not the commitment. He loved her and wanted to be with her for the rest of his life. It was just the fucking wedding and marriage part, and he kept pushing the anxiety down, smiling when she talked about the ceremony and nodding when she asked his opinion on cookies and who they should invite.

Every time he looked at the engagement ring on her finger, he felt a shiver of unease up his spine, prickling the base of his skull. A mature person would talk to their partner, telling that person their concerns and fears. But when had he ever been emotionally mature?

A line of snot was frozen on his upper lip when he finally finished the stalls, and he cranked up the heater before locking the barn for the night. Living in a farmhouse had its perks, and one of them was having a lot of fireplaces. The Christmas lights were on and twinkling on the porch, and April had turned on the Christmas tree as well. But she wasn’t on the lower level when he came in. All he had to keep him company were the dogs and beer, and he kicked off his wet boots, adding a few logs to the living room blaze before sitting down on the couch, letting George curl up against him.

It’s a Wonderful Life was playing, and he watched it passively, identifying with George Bailey in ways he never quite imagined. He was happy, and he was certainly grateful for everything he had, he truly was, but as he looked around at the decorations, pretty red bows and jolly snowmen, the ache of what he wanted and what he feared getting kept poking around his head.

He hadn’t had anything like this in years. Every Christmas since Lucille died had been spent drinking at a bar, or laying on his couch, eating two-day-old pizza. There weren’t any Christmas decorations or dogs with candy cane bandanas, and the homey atmosphere made him feel even worse, so he turned off the television, leaving his half-full bottle of Bud on the table and turning off all of the normal lights, leaving George and Gracie with the crackle of the fire and the tree.

April was changing her clothes when he walked into the bedroom, and he stood in the doorway, watching as she dressed in an oversized football jersey and cashmere, cable-knit socks that just brushed her knees. Despite how much he wanted to go to her, he forced himself to stay in the same spot, trying not to encroach her space. She kept her back to him as she went into the bathroom, and
he heard the faucet turn on.

Negan stripped off his clothes, passing by her without engaging in conversation and jumping into the empty shower, biting back a whimper when the water came out of the tap ice-cold. There wasn’t any warmth radiating from April either, and he shivered under the spray, cleaning himself as fast as he could. He didn’t want to be pissed and wary, anymore. He wanted the warmth and comfort that his current life brought him, but doing so meant letting go of the past, and he didn’t know how to do that.

She wasn’t in the bedroom when he came out, soaking wet and with his toothbrush between his lips, but there was a notepad on the bed, and he picked it up, his stomach clenching uncomfortably as he read it. The caterer’s name, the seamstress, the flower shop, along with everyone they’d invited to the wedding. All their numbers were listed next to their names, and underneath in big bold letters was a request:

‘CALL MONDAY AND CANCEL EVERYTHING. I. AM. DONE!’

April was on the couch downstairs, and he stood behind her silently as she stared into the fire, Gracie sitting on her legs and Georgie on the floor next to her waist. His tail thumped slowly against the floor, and it was the only sound in the room until he came walking over, squatting on the ground next to him and scratching his head, setting the paper back on her lap.

“You breakin’ up with me, sugar?”

She continued to stare straight ahead, and he watched her eyes fill with tears, prompting him to shoo Gracie off the couch and lift April’s legs, setting them on his lap. She flinched but didn’t move them, and he remained silent, waiting for her to explode. It was brewing like a summer storm, and her cheeks were as rosy as they’d ever been.

“I honestly don’t even give a fuck what happens right now, Negan,” she told him in the quietest voice he’d ever heard. “I’m over all of this. Ever since I asked you to marry me, you’ve been a dick. So, I waited for you to tell me that you were having second thoughts, or that you thought marriage to me was a mistake. But, you didn’t, and I let you try to muddle your way through whatever is bothering you, and during that time, I’ve done this by myself. I’ve planned every facet of something you clearly don’t give a fuck about, and I’m tired. I don’t need this shit.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to marry you, April…”

She finally looked him in the eyes, and a chill ran down his spine. This was bad, and he needed to explain why he was being such a douchebag.

“I fucking suck at marriage,” he tried to fumble his way through the hell of being him. “I did this before, sugar, and I failed so spectacularly that it scars me to this day. I fell in love and had the big, white wedding, and I ended up hurting her so badly with my affair that I think it was partly responsible for her death. I don’t want to fuck things up with you, because I love you.”

“What part of marriage do you find so confining? Please enlighten me,” April was still dead-voiced, though there was a spark of fire in her eyes, which kind of made it worse.

“It’s not… I didn’t say it was confining,” Negan dropped his gaze as he remembered the look on Lucille’s face when she found out about the affair with Karen. “I don’t make people happy, April, don’t you think I know that? I never lived up to Lucille’s expectations of me. I wasn’t the husband
she’d hoped I’d be, and I don’t want to disappoint you, either. I don’t want you to think that you’re getting something that you’re not.”

She huffed, sounding amused, and heshrunk further into the couch, grasping her ankles underneath the blanket that covered them. He knew he was pathetic, and he was positive that he didn’t deserve a woman that believed he was a good guy. He’d spent his life so selfishly, feeding his own ego and base wants, never once thinking about the consequences of his choices and how they affected the people that he loved. He didn’t want to officially tie her to a boat that had clearly sprung a leak a long time ago.

“Why do you always think that I’m a moron?”

“I don’t, April, I just think you believe in me, and you’ll end up hurt, no matter how hard I try.”

“Yeah, we’re definitely done,” she threw the covers off her legs, shocking the fuck out of him, and she stood up, backing away from him. “You disappoint me, Negan, and I’m not spending the rest of my life with someone that has so little faith in himself, or me.”

“You’re serious? You’re fucking seriously dumping me?”

“You dumped yourself, asshole. In fact, you’ve done me a favor. You saved me from tying myself to you forever because you obviously aren’t in it for the long haul. Instead of trying to work through your issues with me, you let me run around like an asshole, planning a commitment ceremony that you were never going to go through with.”

“That’s not true,” Negan stood up, following her up the steps, pulling her to a stop when they reached the top. “This isn’t about my love for you.”

“Oh, it is,” she jerked her arm free, stalking towards their room. “If you gave a shit about me, you would’ve told me that night that marriage isn’t your bag. Instead, I’m getting humiliated, and everyone will know. So, thanks, Negan. Thanks for saving my life, and thanks for everything you’ve done for me thus far. But you’re on your own, now. Go fucking hook back up with Sandy, or any one of the other women that you’ve spent the last two years screwing and screwing over, too. You sat here and lied to my face, and you lied to yourself. You’re not in it for the long haul. You never were.”

The door slammed in his face, and he whipped it open, stalking towards her and knocking her onto the bed face first. He was wounded, far more than he ever thought he would be, because she’d cut him down to size, rightly.

“Get the fuck off me,” she screeched, but he turned her over, thrust back into a warm, summer day two and a half years earlier. Back to a shitty hotel room in Albuquerque, when he had her in the exact same position, thinking that she was a murderer and a thief.

And she was, just not in the way he’d believed. She’d stolen his fucking heart and she’d killed his pride, and he was terrified down to his soul that he’d hurt her so badly with his ongoing issues that she’d never forgive him.

“No. I’m not letting you go, April. I know I’m a fuckup, and I know I get scared, but it’s because I love you so much,” he pinned her arms above her head, narrowly missing a headbutt. “Don’t toss away what we have because I’m trying to deal with my past.”

“What we have? We don’t have shit,” she hissed, giving up all pretense of a fight, and he let her go, though he remained on top of her. “It’s a fucking joke. We’re two people that just happened to
meet, and we don’t have anything special. You’re a bounty hunter that tracked me down. This isn’t some epic romance, it’s just two idiots that tried to turn a spark of attraction into something it’s not, and I’m done.”

“Stop fucking saying that. It’s not true.”

“It is and you know it, deep down, Negan,” she slid out from under him as he stayed rooted to the spot. “I don’t want you here after tomorrow. We’re too fucked up to live a normal life together, and I want normal. I finally figured it out, and I want a husband and a family and holidays, and you don’t.”

“April, stop. I know I screwed up, but don’t do this.”

“It would’ve happened eventually. I know that I love you,” she wiped her eyes, rising and starting towards the bathroom, setting the engagement ring on the dresser, “but it’s not enough, and I can’t… I can’t do this with you.”

The door shut with a click, and he sat on the edge of the bed, unable to move or process everything that happened since he opened his fat fucking mouth and screwed up. The muffled cries were what spurred him from his spot, and he headed down the steps to the living room, looking around with watery eyes. He couldn’t leave. He loved her, and he loved George, and Gracie and all the other living things on this farm. This was the life he wanted.

So, why was he so afraid to get it?

Chapter End Notes

I swear, I'm not torturing them on purpose...

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