Two Tickets For The Long Way 'Round

by Bennyhatter

Summary

Rick is a lawyer, and Daryl is a homeless man with so much talent and emotional pain that it makes him want to fall to his knees and weep.

He falls in love instead.

Notes

You guys no I cannot afford to do this. Why am I doing this? I HAVE TOO MUCH OTHER SHIT TO FINISH WHY AM I DOING THIS.

I saw a prompt a while ago when I was lurking on tumblr about Businessman/CEO!Rick Grimes and homeless!violinist!Daryl Dixon, and I thought it sounded really, really fucking beautiful. And now this is happening.

I don't remember who the original prompter was, so if you do know them, or the OP is reading this right now, this is for you. All credit for the original idea goes to you.

Disclaimer: I do not own The Walking Dead, its characters, or anything else affiliated with it. I'm just borrowing them, because Rickyl.
Title is from Anna Kendrick's song "Cups/Long Way 'Round"
Long Way Round

Rick is striding down the sidewalk—a briefcase in one hand and his phone pressed so tightly against his ear that it hurts—when he hears it.

“I’ve got two tickets for th’ long way ‘round;  
Two bottles’a whiskey for th’ way;  
An’ I sure would like some sweet company;  
An’ I’m leavin’ tomorrow, whaddya say?”

The voice singing is low and masculine, sweet like honey and rumbling in a way that makes Rick think of mountain springs and waterfalls. The rhythmic thumping of a drum accompanies the song, sending shivers down his spine as he finds himself drawing closer to the music.

“I got my tickets for th’ long way ‘round;  
Th’ one with th’ prettiest’a views;  
It’s got mountains, it’s got rivers;  
It’s got sights ta give ya shivers;  
But it sure would be prettier with you.”

He hangs up on Andrea in the middle of her saying something about the Jones case, tucking his phone into the pocket of his trousers and never more grateful than right now that he always keeps it on vibrate.

The voice belongs to a young man with long, dark brown hair. He’s leaning against the grimy brick wall behind him, a dirty five-gallon bucket at home between his knees as he drums on it. His eyes are closed, his face tilted up toward the sun while he sings. He’s wearing a pair of worn, ratty jeans and a shirt that looks like he ripped the sleeves off of it himself. On the ground beside him is a leather vest with angel wings that look like they’ve seen better days.

“When I’m gone;  
When I’m gone;  
Yer gonna miss me when I’m gone;  
Yer gonna miss me by my walk;
Yer gonna miss me by my talk;
Oh, yer gonna miss me when I’m gone.”

He’s gorgeous.

His singing isn’t perfect, his southern drawl slurring some of the words together, but Rick’s not sure he’s ever heard such a soulful voice; his pitch is spot-on. If he hasn’t had some kind of vocal lessons before, then that’s just unfair. No one should be able to sing like that without years of training and practice.

Rick must make some kind of noise, because suddenly he finds himself pinned in place by the bluest eyes he’s ever seen, the lips that had just been singing to the angels twisting into a mean sneer. The man tightens his knees around his bucket like he thinks Rick is going to try and take it from him, and when the hell did he grab that knife?

“The fuck you want?” he snarls, the honey bled from his voice and replaced by sharp gravel that cuts like thorns. “Ain’t a fuckin’ concert, asshole. Get gone. Got nothin’ a rich bitch like you’d want anyway.”

“Where did you learn to sing like that?” Rick asks, stepping closer despite the blade. His mother always did say he was a foolish soul; had shaken her head and patted his curls fondly on more than one occasion while saying it, even after he was taller than her.

“Tol’ ya t’ beat it. Ain’t yer goddamn lunch entertainment.” The man is getting up quickly, his knife gone as suddenly as it had appeared. He flips his bucket to grab the rim; snags his vest with his other and stuffs it into the bucket as he backs away. “You want music to eat to, go find it on YouTube. Or hell, slide yer ass into yer fancy car. Bet you’d get all the good stations, then. Leave me alone.”

And then he’s gone, leaving Rick smarting from his harsh words and feeling like he’s done something horribly wrong, even though all he did was listen and try to pay the man a compliment. It wasn’t like the guy was being quiet anyway, and he was just off the main road. Anyone could have heard him.

Frowning, feeling sad and put-out, he pulls his buzzing phone out of his pocket and tries to soothe Andrea’s angry words as he heads toward the office again. He can barely focus on what she’s saying, too busy thinking of glittering blue eyes and lyrics that had held too much sorrow for such a happy song.

He wonders if he’ll see the man again. He hopes he does, so he can try to apologize for upsetting him. Maybe he can even coax him into singing something else. He smiles at the thought, promising Andrea that yes, he’s listening, and yes, he’s almost there. The sun seems brighter all of the sudden, the air warmer. He strolls along with a smile on his face and doesn’t realize he’s humming the song the man had sung until his colleague points it out.

“Did you hear a good song on the radio, Grimes?”

“Something like that,” he chuckles, remembering thin lips and a low voice; the beat of sure fingers against the bottom of a grimy bucket. “It’s a catchy tune.”

“Sure. Anyway, the trial date is set for…”

Rick lets her talk as the steel-and-glass structure of Horvath & Walsh looms ahead of him, forty
stories of posh interior and cutthroat business rivals; not an inch of it sweet like honey or rumbling like waterfalls. Not a single person with blue eyes that rival the color of the sky and a voice that resonates in a way that’s magnetic and draws others closer. Sighing, he pushes open the door and steps into the pristine lobby.

“I’ll be there soon, Andrea. Headed for the elevator now.” He hangs up quickly and looks over his shoulder, watching the traffic roll by. Atlanta is full of life and noise as usual, and he fancies he can hear the muted sounds of drumming beneath the roar of the traffic.

In his defense, he wasn’t actually looking for the man when he got the idea to go to the park near his apartment the Saturday after their first encounter. He has the day off, and he just wants to enjoy the spring weather while he reads over a few cases that have court dates approaching. He’s strolling down the main path, looking for a spot to sit, when he hears the strum of a guitar and catches the faint sound of singing that shivers down his spine and makes him smile. Turning, he heads in the direction it’s coming from until he sees a small cluster of people gathered around a park bench. He drifts along the outer edges of the crowd, trying to find a better angle so he can see the singer.

He never knew Nicki Minaj’s “Starships” could sound so emotional and heart-wrenching.

The man is wearing the same pants from Tuesday, although his shirt is a button-down number today. The sleeves are missing on this one too, and it’s in desperate need of a wash. He is, too; dirt on his face and arms and his hair greasy, his goatee unkempt. Beneath the curtain of his bangs, Rick can see the dark shadow of a bruise around his eyes and feels his fist clench around the handle of his briefcase.

Just like the first time, the man is lost in the music, captivating all of them as he turns a song that should be fast-paced and upbeat into something that is slow and so painfully beautiful that a few of the people watching him have tears in their eyes. Rick feels his own eyes stinging, his throat tight, because he’s never heard anything this awe-inspiring before.

When the song is over, the last mournful notes dispersing on the breeze, the clapping of a few people jolts the musician out of whatever place he’s sunken into. He looks at the crowd, wary and shy, and manages a quick nod before fiddling with the strings and worrying his split lower lip.

“Can you play somethin’ else, mister?” a little girl asks, looking hopeful and clinging to her mother’s hand with both of her own. The man looks at her, tilting his head slightly, and the smile he gives that little girl is so small and sweet that Rick feels his heart thump painfully and his breath catch in his throat.

“Sure can. Whatchu wanna hear?”

She takes a moment to think about it, and then she breaks into a wide smile. There’s a gap in her upper gums where her front two teeth are missing. It’s adorable. “Can you play “You Are My Sunshine?” Please? That’s my favorite song that my Mommy sings.”

He closes his eyes, and Rick can see him going back into the mindset he’d been in before. Every muscle relaxes, his expression easing as he strums a few chords before he begins to play.
“You are my sunshine;
My only sunshine;
You make me happy when skies are gray.
You’ll never know, dear;
How much I love ya;
So please, don’t take my sunshine away.”

God, the emotion he puts into the song just for that little girl, his words light like spun sugar and just as sweet, is indescribable. And yet, there’s still an edge of sadness to his words, like he’s singing to someone who isn’t there, as well as his captivated audience. Rick has never seen anything like him in his life.

When it’s over, the man lays his guitar in the worn-out case at his feet. Rick hadn’t noticed it at first, but he sees that it’s got quite a few bills in it. As he watches, some of the people gathered around toss in more cash and coins before wandering away.

“Thank you, mister!”

Rick watches the girl leave with her mother, looking back over her shoulder and waving emphatically as she goes.

“Anytime, kid.” Those blue eyes land on him, pinning him in place just like they did the last time.

“You make a habit of stalking people?”

“Just came to enjoy the day,” Rick promises as he approaches slowly, knowing that every move is being watched and feeling like he’s trying to coax a feral dog closer, wary of getting bitten but willing to take the risk if the reward is getting to touch. “Saw the crowd and came to see who was playin’. You really are good.”

“Hnn.” Clipping the case shut, the musician turns without sitting up and grabs his bucket from behind the bench. “Ain’t doin’ nothin’ wrong. Just playin’ music. Didn’t tell ‘em t’ throw me the cash.”

“You do realize that I’m not a cop, right?” He can’t help but smile, and even if the man’s answering smirk isn’t exactly friendly, it’s not a knife, so he considers it an improvement.

“Yeah. You ain’t in uniform.” Closing those captivating baby blues, the man sets the bucket upside-down on the bench, cradling it with his knees and angling it away from his torso as he begins a fast, heavy beat. He alternates between his fingers in his palms—even raps out certain notes using his knuckles as well as the backs and sides of his hands.

“How long have you been playing instruments and singing?”

“This an interrogation? Ain’t even read me my rights, man.”

It feels like playful banter, so Rick shifts to stand mostly on his right leg and tilts his head with a grin.

“How long have you been playing instruments and singing?”

“Yeah, but yer a lawyer, ain’t ya.” A sliver of blue regards him, the beat never faltering. “Ain’t a man
alive walks around with a case like that unless he’s got th’ money for it. So lawyer, or maybe accountant. You ain’t no pencil pusher, though, are you, Mr. Bigshot?”

Rick blinks in surprise. Five minutes of conversation, and not a hint of the knife. Maybe the other day was just a bad day. Maybe the man bobbing his head to his own beat, humming low and deep, just doesn’t like being startled. “Yeah, I’m a lawyer. You’re pretty good at reading people, aren’t you?”

“Gotta be. Man’s gotta know if a smile means a friend or a knife in the guts, where I come from.”

“And where would that be?”

Apparently, this is the wrong question, because the man stops mid-song and opens his eyes to deliver the full force of his glare. “The fuck’s it matter to you? Done told you before, fucker, I ain’t yer lunchtime entertainment. The hell you want with me?”

“I just wanted to know how you got so good at this.”

A derisive snort from the musician is followed by him rolling his eyes. “Getcher ears checked. Can’t sing worth shit.”

Rick looks pointedly at the closed guitar case. He’s pretty sure he’d seen a fifty dollar bill or two in there before it had closed. “That haul would say differently.”

“Just a bunch of rich fuckers who feel sorry for the ‘less fortunate’. Ain’t asked ‘em for their charity, an’ I don’ want their fuckin’ pity.”

“But you’ll take their money anyway.” He doesn’t say it condescendingly, and he’s pretty sure he sounds more curious than anything, but his words are not received well.

“Fuck you!” the man shouts, surging to his feet and gripping the rim of his bucket so tightly his knuckles are white. “What, you think yer better’n me, rich bitch? Yer just as bad as them. Why don’t you get gone back to your *ivory tower* and leave us peasants to toil in the dirt, where we belong.”

Just like the first time, Rick is left opening his mouth to defend himself to nothing but air, because the man is gone. Looking around, he sees broad shoulders that slope into a narrow waist, the dirty angel wings on his back a beacon that he tries desperately to follow. He loses the musician, though, and stands in the center of the park cursing to himself while people eye him and hurry past. Either he’s much better at putting his foot in his mouth—which he’s not so eager to believe, considering he’s one of the best up-and-coming lawyers in Atlanta right now—or the man he’s trying to get a read on is too quick to jump to the wrong conclusions.

Defeated, he gives up and goes home. Now he has *two* separate incidents to apologize for, because he didn’t even get to say sorry for screwing up the first time he ran into the musician. Hopefully he manages to find the man a third time. Isn’t there a saying about third luck being the charm?

He certainly hopes so, because if this happens again, he doesn’t know what he’s going to do.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Rick runs into his wayward musician again.

Chapter Notes

Jfc you guys, I’m having a hard time of late. I crawled through this, and I’m still a few pages away from being done with the original fic I’m working on as well. Been halfway to panicky and twitchy as fuck. Tryin’ to stay calm, but it hasn’t been working too well.

Anyway, here’s the second chapter, and I swear I’ll try to write faster from now on. I don’t work half of next week, so I’ll have plenty of fuckin’ time aside from a few appointments.

Songs appear in the following order:

"The Blood of Cu Chulainn" by Jeff Danna
"Believe" by Hollywood Undead
"Hey Jude" by The Beatles
"Hate Me Today” by Blue October (squint-and-you-miss-it)

The jaunty cadence of a violin draws Rick to his window on Sunday afternoon. He peers out between the blinds, already hoping, and grins widely when he sees his flighty musician sitting beneath a tree across the street from his apartment building. The man is mostly hidden by the shade of the leaves hanging above him, but there’s no mistaking that hair, or those broad shoulders and torn sleeves. Rick is already heading for the door when he hears the sweet laughter of a child.

“Gonna run again?” he calls by way of greeting as soon as he’s outside and waiting to cross the road. He is exceedingly happy that he picked an apartment on the outskirts of Atlanta, rather than spending and exorbitant amount on a loft closer to work.

“Don’ give me a reason, an’ I won’t,” the drifter snorts. He hardly raises his voice to be heard above the merry tune he’s still playing—something Celtic, it sounds like. His blue, blue eyes are watching a little girl who is frolicking—there is no more fitting word—through the flowers nearby. Rick looks at her too, smiling in response to her joy. She’s clearly dancing to the music, her blonde hair streaming behind her as she skips and twirls.

“Your daughter seems to feel the same way I do about your music.”

“Ain’t mine.”

Rick winces. “Sorry, just assumed, ’cause it’s just you and her out here.”
The song draws to a close, the notes shuddering sweetly and the musician’s fingers making them seem to echo with how he moves them up and down the strings, going from note to note with a surety and effortlessness that only comes from years of practice.

“Yeah, well, she ain’t mine.”

“Are you babysitting her?” He can’t help his curiosity, and he’s trying to choose his words carefully so the flighty man doesn’t take off again before he can make things right.

“Sure, let’s go with that.” There’s a sharp warning in those words, so Rick backs off and watches the man tweak the knobs of his violin before drawing his bow across the strings and looking satisfied. It sounds the same to Rick, but he’s not the expert. He’s lucky he can even sing.

“My name is Rick Grimes. Figured I should tell you that, so you know who to curse the next time I stick my foot in my mouth.”

Rather than reacting negatively, the other man huffs in amusement and resettles his violin between his chin and his shoulder, where it looks completely natural as well as lengthening the long, graceful line of his neck. Rick swallows and tries not to stare at the way his long, dark hair curls and brushes against his pale skin and his strong jaw.

“What’s your name?”

“Don’t matter.”

“Yes, it does.”

Wary blue eyes regard him, narrow and suspicious. “Why? Whatchu want with a bum like me?”

“To get to know you. Is that a crime?”

“Could be, depending on what you want. Ain’t a whore.”

Rick Chokes and sputters, horrified that the man would even think he’s that kind of person. “That’s not it at all!”

“The hell you want then, if it ain’t that? Ain’t exactly been that friendly with you, and yet you keep comin’ back. You some kind’a masochist?”

“You’re the one playing a violin outside of my apartment,” he feels the need to point out. “I just wanted to apologize for how our last few meetings went. It was never my intention to upset or offend you in any way.”

“Hnn.” Those watchful eyes close as the musician settles back against the tree behind him with a soft, deep sigh. He draws his bow across the strings again, his brow furrowing, and then he begins to play. Rick finds himself captivated instantly, just like every other time. He closes his eyes as well, listening to the mournful notes and feeling them resonate within his chest, bringing emotions that aren’t even his own to the surface. When the man begins to sing, he finds himself drowning in the painful words.

“If I went out the back door, nobody would stop me;

But where would I go;
'Cause I ain’t ever had a real home;

So what do I know?”

Rick’s eyes are burning, his emotions welling up and threatening to bring tears with them. Jesus, it’s not fair for someone to sound that raw and hurting while they’re playing and singing so perfectly.

“So I could keep runnin’;

Hide until they find me;

But what would that do;

If they could only know what I knew;

What would it prove?”

Before he can break Rick’s heart any further, the melody is interrupted by the little girl he’s almost completely forgotten about when she comes running over and flops inelegantly onto the grass beside the musician, rubbing her eyes and looking like she’s ready for a nap.

“Ya tired, Li’l Asskicker?” the man asks, his violin still raised, the bow still poised. There’s something like tenderness on his face when she nods; a sweet softness in his eyes when he looks at her. “Want yer song?”

“You hafta. Can’t sleep ‘les you sing it,” she mumbles. Her eyes are already closed when she turns onto her side and curls up, using his thigh as her pillow. Blue eyes flick toward Rick, assessing, but he’s not going anywhere. He wants to see this.

While the child snuggles close, he watches the man close his eyes and let everything but the music fall away. Rick recognizes the song after the first few strains and closes his eyes as well, letting the notes swirl around him, sinking into quiet words and a voice that’s as sweet as honey and as smooth and deep as a river.

“Hey, Jude;

Don’ make it bad;

Take a sad song an’ make it better;

Remember i’ let ‘er into yer heart;

Then y’ can start t’ make it better.”

He sings the whole song, even though the girl is asleep after the first stanza. By the end of it, Rick is singing along softly, his own voice lighter, his rumble not as low and pronounced. He thinks they
harmonize pretty well, all things considered. He doesn’t get yelled at, either, so he figures he hasn’t
overstepped any boundaries.

“Her name is Judith.”

It’s mumbled so quietly that he almost doesn’t hear it at first. “That’s a beautiful name,” he says
earnestly, because it is. “Do you have to take her back to her mother now?” The thought of the
drifter leaving dampens his happiness, but at least the departure won’t be because he’s said
something wrong this time.

Out of all of the responses he’s expecting, the scathing snort is not one of them. “Ain’t got a mom.
Ain’t got a daddy, neither. None that wanted her, anyway. Found her inna dumpster when she was
jus’ a baby, bawlin’ her head off. Thought she was gonna fuckin’ die, ’cause it was cold as shit out.
Figured I could take care’a her jus’ fine, if they wasn’t gonna. Better’n they could, even, ’cause I
wasn’t gonna throw her out with th’ garbage.”

“You could have taken her somewhere, handed her over to people who would have made sure she
was okay.” Jesus Christ, why would anyone want to just discard a life like that? All life is precious,
especially children. It speaks more of the man in front of him that he would take on the responsibility
of an infant that wasn’t even his, just so he didn’t have to see her die.

“Why, so she could end up as some beaten, unloved kid in the system? Nah, we do just fine. Ain’t a
hard kid t’ deal with, anyway. She’s a sweet li’l thing.” A look is sent his way, and he can’t even
really argue with the words, because he knows of too many cases, has seen too many battered
children, to protest. Not all foster families are that way, but the chances of her ending up in a home
like that are statistically possible.

“You just amaze me more’n more every time I see you,” he says honestly, and to his surprise the
musician ducks his head and looks away shyly, chewing on his lower lip. He very carefully sets his
violin to the side and starts to stroke Judith’s hair. Rick hadn’t noticed that her little face was starting
to scrunch up in distress. Does she have nightmares? The touch soothes her quickly, and she lets out
a soft, sweet little sigh as she curls just a bit closer.

“Ain’t nothin’ special,” the man mutters. “Jus’ some no-good trash with a curse for a last name.”

Blinking, Rick tilts his head slightly. “What do you mean by that? And you’re not trash. You really
have an amazing talent for music.”

“Pfft. You keep tellin’ yourself that.” Once he’s made sure Judith is resting peacefully, the musician
picks up his instrument again and begins to play a sorrowful, haunting melody. Rick has an idea
where this is going, and he reaches out slowly—narrowed blue eyes watching him—and gently, so
gently, curls his fingers around a strong wrist.

“You are,” he insists, trying not to come off as too strong, but at the same time, trying to stress his
words in a way that will be heard and accepted. “Whoever told you otherwise isn’t the kind of
person you need to be around.”

Those blue eyes darken slightly, and Rick waits, swallowing. Has he overstepped his boundaries
again? He has a bad habit of doing that around this man. Luckily, Judith wakes up at that point,
coming to consciousness a little violently in the way she jerks upright with a whine that immediately
defuses the tension.

“Hey, hey, you’re okay, Li’l Asskicker.” The violin is set aside again, rough-looking hands so
carefully calming the girl’s distress. Rick watches on, feeling his heart clench at the tears sparkling in
the child’s big blue eyes. He’s never been good at seeing children upset. He may not have any kids of his own, but he’s always gotten along well with his friend Lori’s son, Carl. Sometimes he wishes that boy was his—sometimes he feels like he is, because they do share a few similarities. Blue eyes glance his way before they’re flicking back to the child. “You have a nightmare, kid?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, pressing her face against her guardian’s chest and letting him coax her into breathing easier. “The bad one again.”

“Ain’t never gonna happen, Judy,” the man swears, petting her hair and resting his scruffy cheek against the wavy strands. “Ain’t ever gonna abandon ya.”

“I know, Daryl,” she whispers, and Rick twitches, lifting his head sharply.

Daryl. His name is Daryl. He tries it out, rolling the name around in his mind and smiling, because that name is perfect. It’s not a name he hears very often, and it fits the gruff musician in a way he doesn’t think any other name would ever come close to. Daryl is looking at him, chewing on his lower lip as he eyes the lawyer as if he’s waiting for some kind of derision or disgust that’s never going to happen.

Rick holds out his hand, smiling even though it’s being looked at like it’s a cobra about to strike. “Glad to finally meet you, Daryl.”

The hand is there for him to take or stare at, whatever he chooses, but it’s hard to suppress his delight when a rough, calloused hand warily grips his and shakes once firmly before it’s being snatched away.

It’s progress, and he’ll take it.

McDonald’s is surprisingly busy for two o’clock in the afternoon. Daryl is rocking onto the balls of his feet, looking pissed and ready to bolt. The only reason he’s here is because Judith had said something about being hungry, and Rick had stepped in before the man could reply, saying he knew of a wonderful place to get the best chicken nuggets ever. Her eyes had gotten so big and hopeful, and Daryl had tried to say he didn’t have any money for it, but Rick’s a lawyer. He can afford chicken nuggets from a fast food place.

“Tol’ ya I don’t need yer fuckin’ charity,” the man growls angrily, chewing at his cuticle in a way that’s bound to draw blood if he keeps going like that. Rick watches his surprisingly white canine dig into soft, fragile flesh and winces at the way the area around it turns white.

“Then don’t get anything. This isn’t for you, though. It’s for her.”

Judith is looking at the menu like she’s never seen so many food options in her life. That very well may be true, and the thought sends a pang of sadness through him, that such a sweet young soul could know the cruelties of the world at just a handful of years old. When the girl looks at them uncertainly, Daryl reaches out and rests his hand on her head.

“Want some nuggets, Li’l Asskicker?” he asks gruffly. “Can get ya some apples’n juice, too, if ya want.”
“Yeah,” she says quietly, but she’s smiling, her eyes sparkling. Looking up at Rick, she holds out her hand, looking far more mature than her years. “Thank ya for lunch, Mr. Rick.”

God, she’s too precious. Nodding solemnly, he shakes her hand and then grins, unable to help himself. He ruffles her hair and chuckles. “Please, Judith, just Rick. And you have no need to thank me. I’ve got nothing else to do today, so I’m more than happy to sit here and eat with you two. Otherwise my day will just be boring.”

Daryl eyes him, clearly searching for any deception, but he’s not going to find it. When the person in front of them has gotten their food and it’s their turn, the three of them step up to the counter. He motions for the musician to order first, but the look Daryl gives him clearly states that that’s not going to happen, so the lawyer turns to smile at the slightly frazzled looking teenager waiting to take their order. Her eyes keep flicking between him and the man at his side, before they drop to look at Judith, who is barely able to see over the counter. She coos immediately.

“Oh my gosh, she’s so cute!”

Judith smiles shyly, still looking a little overwhelmed until Daryl’s hand finds its way to her head again, giving her a comforting touch. Before either of them can decide what they might want, Rick steps forward and draws the teenager’s attention to him.

“Two large Big Mac meals, please,” he starts off, ignoring the glare burning into the side of his skull and not even giving the man a chance to argue. “And one ten piece McNugget meal, small. One of every sauce, please. And can we have apple slices instead of fries, and apple juice?”

“Sure thing, hon. God, you guys are all so adorable.” The young woman is gushing, beaming like she’s won a marathon as she rings in their order and accepts Rick’s cash when he hands it over. She keeps going on and on about how cute Judith is, and then she says the wrong thing and Daryl freezes, looking like he’s two seconds from bolting.

“You two are the cutest dads in the whole world.”

“Oh, no, we’re not together.” Rick smiles bashfully at her, managing to keep himself from blushing too badly and reaching out without thinking about it to grip the musician’s elbow in a way that’s meant to be comforting. He’s expecting to be punched, but Daryl lets out a shuddering breath and relaxes slowly, his head tilted forward so that his hair covers his face to hide his expression from view.

“I’m so sorry!” The girl—Tina, her nametag says—blushes even worse, putting a hand over her mouth and thrusting the change at him with the other one. He takes it, pocketing the cash and dropping the coins into the charity bin. Then he thinks about it, and tucks a ten in along with it. “I am so, so sorry.”

“You’re fine,” he promises, taking one of the large cups and letting go of Daryl’s elbow to nudge him with it. It’s snatched away quickly, and then the drifter is gone, making a beeline for the soda machine and thankfully not the door. Judith trails after him, reaching out to hold onto the hem of his vest so she doesn’t get lost in the crowd of people bustling around them.

“I’m so sorry,” Tina whispers again, looking meek and dejected as she hands over the tray their food is piled on. “I didn’t mean to offend him.”

“You’re fine. Have a lovely day, Tina.”

She offers him a wobbly smile, and Rick gets out of the way to let the next people in line order. He
gets himself a sprite and looks around until he spots Daryl tucked away in a corner booth, huddling against the wall and chewing on his thumbnail. The expression on his face is a toss-up between panicked and pissed, so the lawyer hurries over and sets the tray down, sliding into the seat across from the man and Judith and pushing her nuggets toward her.

“Got every kind of sauce they have, so you can try ‘em all and see which one you like,” he says, smiling at the girl as her eyes go wide and round when she looks at the meal in front of her. Her awe and enthusiasm melt some of the ice Daryl’s encased himself in, enough that the musician smiles at the girl before his baby blues flick to Rick’s face and narrow.

“Thought y’ told me not ta get anythin’,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, well, I figured it wouldn’t be fair to have to sit and watch us eat, and not have anything for yourself. At least have some fries. They look good today.” He eats one for emphasis and mmm’s in the back of his throat, smiling when Daryl’s eyes snap away. Then he remembers Tina’s assumption and tries not to wince. “It’s okay if you don’t want to eat it, Daryl, but you don’t owe me anything for the meal. Consider it a thank you.”

“Ain’t done nothin’ t’ be thanked for,” the drifter grunts, but there’s a fry slowly inching toward his mouth. Rick can’t help but watch it, hopeful and fascinated, and when it disappears in less than three bites and another is quick to follow, he smiles in satisfaction and picks up his burger.

“Well, you didn’t run away this time. I consider that a reason to celebrate.”

“Still might,” he’s warned, and he nods. “Might get th’ fuck outta this place and you’ll never see us again. The fuck’s a lawyer doin’ eatin’ at a McDonald’s, anyway?”

“I came for the Big Mac. They’re ridiculously delicious.” Glancing at Judith, who is happily dipping a nugget in honey mustard sauce and nibbling on it between sips of her juice, he smiles. “She seems to like it, too.”

Half of Daryl’s fries are gone, and there’s a few bites of his sandwich missing. Rick hadn’t even seen him pick it up. “She deserves it,” he mutters, smiling helplessly when the girl licks the last of the sauce off her nugget and dunks it again. Rick smiles too, remember doing that same thing himself when he was a kid.

“So do you,” the lawyer says quietly, meeting the guarded eyes that search his out. When Daryl tries to drop his gaze, Rick ducks his head until he catches his attention again, reaching out and laying his hand on the table but not touching the musician. The offer of support is there though, if it ends up being needed. He can’t imagine what kind of life his wayward musician has lived, to be so leery of any kind of kindness or contact. It’s there, though, in the fading sickly greenish-yellow around his eye; in the way his broad shoulders lift minimally and tensed when Rick reached out. There’s a smudge of purple low on his throat, almost hidden by the grime and his shirt; a few splotches close to it that make Rick’s other hand clench a little around the fries he’s started to bring toward his mouth.

Who hurts you? Who would dare?

He doesn’t ask, knowing instinctively that if he does, then Daryl really will leave and he’ll never see the man again. So he eats, imagining he can feel the warmth of Daryl’s clenched fist just an inch from the tips of his fingers, and doesn’t look away from the eyes searching his own, looking for lies and deception that will never be found. Everything else fades into nothing, the world narrowing to baby blues shielded by dark brown strands he’s itching to brush away—the soft sounds of Judith’s happiness as she eats another nugget, this one dipped in ranch. The fresh crunch of an apple slice as the girl bites into it. The almost inaudible hitch of Daryl’s breathing and the way his pupils shrink
before blowing out wide as Rick keeps looking at him calmly, demanding nothing.

“What do you want with me?” he whispers, shy and sharp in equal measures. Waiting for the catch, because there’s probably always been one before. Rick smiles gently and shakes his head.

“Nothing you don’t want to give on your own free will,” he replies honestly. If this is all that he gets, a wary acceptance of his presence, then he’ll accept that. He wants comfort, though, and relaxation. He wants to listen to Daryl play something beautiful and happy, like the song he’d been playing when Rick had heard him through his window. He wants to hear him sing in a voice that isn’t breaking and full of pain that no one pays enough attention to to try and figure out the reason behind it.

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“That I’ll never try to take anything you are uncomfortable giving,” Rick says simply, shrugging and realizing that his burger is gone, and so is Daryl’s. There are only a few fries left between them, so he nudges them toward the drifter and tries not to show how sad he feels when they’re snatched up and scarfed like he’s going to change his mind and try to take them back. “Friendship is a give and receive, Daryl. It’s not about taking and giving nothing in return, or giving and getting nothing back.”

“Friendship?” Something fragile starts to shine in those eyes, the stormy clouds rolling away and letting cloudless blue shine through again. God, how can anyone even have eyes that light and fractured? Who would try to break the sky until it didn’t even have any tears left as a manifestation of its sorrow? Rick wants to find the person or people responsible and hurt them in whatever way they deserved, reputation and job be damned. Instead, he latches onto the fragile question, smiling and accidentally brushing a finger against a flexing knuckle, watching the way it whitens as it clenches. Pulling his hand away, he sits back against the padded backrest and tilts his head.

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Yeah, it is,” Daryl snorts. “Considerin’ every time we’ve run into each other b’fore, I insulted ya and took off. You’re a bit touched in the head, ain’t ya?”

“Nah, just a determined sunnuva bitch.” He shoots a look at Judith, but she’s still absorbed in her last few nuggets, a few smears of sauce decorating around her mouth. When he looks back at Daryl, the musician is waiting, side-eyeing him as he takes a drink of his soda but no longer a cornered dog waiting to snap. He’s still wary, still feral and needing some coaxing, but Rick is nothing if not patient. The progress they’ve already made is more than he’d been expecting for a long while yet, and he’s eager to see where they can go from here.

One day, he’ll be able to look at Daryl and see him clean and unhurt, the sky in his eyes whole once more and shining the way it’s meant to. That happiness will bleed into his music, and no one will be able to hear it and not be moved to smile. Rick’s already smiling, anticipation thrumming through him. When Daryl sits back and wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, Rick catches a tiny smile, fleeting and gone quickly, so shy it makes his chest warm.

“Should get back,” the drifter mutters, glancing at Judith and smiling wider; grabbing a napkin and wiping at her face in a way that makes her squirm. “Should’a cleaned your own mouth, then, ‘stead of makin’ a mess,” he snorts, and when she reaches for the napkin he gives it over and watches to make sure she’s gotten all of the sauce off. “Go wash your hands, Li’l Asskicker, an’ then we gotta go.”

“Okay, Daryl.” Beaming at Rick, she hops out of the booth and gives him a hug that makes him
want to wrap her up and never let anything bad happen to her, ever. “Thank you for th’ meal, Mr. Rick.”

“Just Rick, Judy. Rick is fine.”

“Okay. Thank you, Rick.” Positively glowing, she skips toward the bathroom, completely missing the look he gives Daryl. The man meets his gaze, but there’s no challenge this time. It makes the lawyer smile, the world trickling back in but inconsequential to either of them.

“Any time.”

A tiny tilt of the head, and those baby blues flick to the side. Rick’s pretty sure the sun is shining even brighter than it was a few minutes ago, and he basks in the warm rays that touch them.

Today has turned out to be the best day he’s had in a long while.
AFTER ALMOST TWO MONTHS, HERE IT FINALLY IS.

I am so sorry to everyone who has been waiting for this. I never forgot about it, I just got so wrapped up in other stories, and then I've been so busy otherwise, and I feel so horrible but LOOK IT'S FINALLY HERE. ;u;

I hope you all like it. *frets*

“Alright, talk to me, brother.”

Shane’s eyeing him up and down, already grinning. They’re heading toward a hot dog vendor near the office, and his best friend has been practically vibrating out of his skin since Rick came into work this morning smiling and still looking a little dazed. He meets the other lawyer’s dark eyes, trying and failing to keep another smile from spreading across his face when he thinks of the day before—sitting in McDonald’s with Judith and Daryl, and the way the man had looked at him before they’d left.

“What are you talking about?” he asks evasively, because part of the fun has always been to rile Shane up more. He’s one of the biggest gossips Rick has ever seen, and he’s always eager for every single detail he can get his hands on when it comes to something. Whatever he thinks it is that has Rick probably looking a little love-drunk, he wants to know bad, and he scoffs in disbelief at Rick’s attempt to deflect him.

“Nah, man, none of that. You came into work lookin’ like you had the time of your life last night. So who is he? Is he hot? Scale of one to ten, c’mon, Rick, work with me here. Give me somethin’ to go off of.”

“You’re not even attracted to men, Shane.” He’s laughing when they get to the vendor and step in line to wait. There’s only a few people between them and processed mystery meat goodness, but suddenly he’s starving. He also realizes belatedly that he’s looking around, trying to strain his ears to see if he can hear any trace of singing or an instrument. Daryl probably never comes this way—probably prefers the less populated or more open areas of Atlanta, where the press of bodies doesn’t tip too close to claustrophobic. He’s gone to the park before, though, so maybe he would venture into other parts of the city as well?

“Pfft, that don’t matter. Ain’t about if I like, him, brother. Good to know that it actually is a guy we’re talkin’ about, though. Didn’t think it could be anything else, what with the way you’re floatin’ on a damn cloud. So tell me: Is he hot?”

Damn it. If he’d been paying closer attention, he would have seen that trap. He’s fallen into it now, and Shane is grinning like the Cheshire cat, his eyes twinkling with mischief and mirth. Rick is saved from having to answer right away by the fact that it’s their turn to order. He does so, trying to delay the inevitable, and he can feel his best friend shifting impatiently, all-but bouncing on the balls of his feet until they’ve got their hotdogs and they’re walking toward a nearby bench.

“Spill, Rick. Give me details.”
They settle down side-by-side, close enough for their elbows to brush but not too close. It’s not that he’s worried Shane will be disgusted if their thighs end up touching—hell, he’d let Rick kiss him once when they were in college, just to see what it was like to lock lips with another dude. Shane hadn’t recoiled, but he’d definitely realized he was completely straight at the same time that Rick realized he never, ever, wanted to kiss Shane Walsh again.

“He’s a musician,” he starts with, because he always knew he was going to cave and tell Shane about Daryl—he just wanted to build the suspense and drive his best friend crazy for a little bit first. Now that he’s accomplished that, he can launch into describing every detail of the flighty man.

“We talkin’ actual talent, or some guy who bangs on a keyboard and calls it art?”

“He’s got real talent, Shane. He can play the guitar, and the violin, and he uses a bucket for a drum, but he plays it better than a lot of people I’ve seen use actual drum sets, brother. I don’t know if he can play any other instruments, but I bet he can.”

“He sing?” Shane turns toward him a little, taking a bite out of his hot dog and no doubt seeing the way Rick lights up at the memory of Daryl’s low, melodious voice.

“Like no one I’ve ever heard, Shane. I heard him do a cover of “Starships” that actually made some people cry because it was so beautiful and emotional.”

“Any motherfucker who can make a Nikki Minaj song into something worthy of tears has got to be one talented dude. C’mon, Rick, you ain’t gotten to the best part. What’s he look like?”

Shaking his head fondly at Shane’s childlike impatience, he leaves his friend waiting as he takes a few bites of his lunch and chews slowly. It’s partially because Shane gets twitchy when he’s kept waiting too long and partially because he’s trying to figure out where to start to describe just how beautiful Daryl is.

“He’s got eyes the color of the Georgia sky,” he murmurs, smiling like a fool and not even able to care that much. “They can get so wide, but usually he’s got them narrowed. I can’t tell if it’s because he’s always glaring or if it’s something else.”

“Glaring?”

“Oh yeah. He’s had a bit of a hard life, so it took a while for me to even get him to stay in one place for longer than ten minutes. I swear, Shane, the first two times I saw him I really stuck my foot in my mouth. He’s so insecure about himself, and he’s so quick to jump to the worst possible conclusion.”

“Christ, and you actually like him?”

“No, Shane, you don’t understand.” Shaking his head, Rick tries to phrase his words in a way that don’t paint Daryl as some delinquent with anger issues. “He’s had a really, really hard life, brother. He’s been hurt by a lot of people, so he doesn’t trust others easily. There’s just something about him, though. I can’t shake it. I’ve met him three times, and yesterday was the first time we actually spent a while with each other, and he’s all I can think about. Shane, he’s got a little girl, but she’s not his daughter. Her name is Judith, and he found her in a dumpster when she was a baby. Her mother had thrown her in a dumpster, Shane, in the middle of winter, and if Daryl hadn’t found her she’d have died.”

“Fucking hell, Rick.”

“He loves her so much. It’s easy to see it. He looks at her like she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”
“Tell me more, man. I’m all ears.”

So Rick tells him everything, from the first time he heard Daryl singing and couldn’t stay away to how he’d played the song for Judith so she could curl up beside him and sleep; how he had soothed her after her nightmare and the way he hides behind his bangs like they’re the only things keeping him safe, even though they can never hide the bruises.

“Bruises?” Shane frowns and looks at him, his fondness turning quickly to concern. He may be a goofball and an asshole, but when it comes to things like this he’s completely serious, and Rick can see the conviction to help that led him to following in his father’s footsteps and becoming one of the best up-and-coming lawyers in Atlanta beside Rick. “Someone’s hurtin’ him?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure he’s homeless, or at least staying at a shelter.” They get up to throw away their trash and start walking back toward Horvath & Walsh, their steps almost completely in sync and their hands tucked into the pockets of their slacks. “He plays in the park, and when I saw him there on Saturday people were throwing money into his guitar case. I’m talking tens and twenties, Shane. I even saw a few fifties. I don’t know what he’s doing with it, but I don’t think he’s keeping it.”

“Drugs?” his friend asks; holding up his hands and shaking his head when Rick glares at him and opens his mouth. “I’m just askin’, Rick, I ain’t sayin’ he’s a junkie.”

“He’s not, he wouldn’t do that to Judith. Besides, there’s none of the signs that he’s got a habit. I’ve never even smelled weed on his clothes.”

“You been close enough to smell his clothes? Did ya kiss him too, Rick?”

“Can you be serious for five minutes, Shane, or is that asking too much?” Bumping their shoulders, his friend sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “So he’s being hurt, and the money he’s making isn’t going toward any extracurricular activities. You think someone’s hurtin’ him ta take it? Maybe he’s spendin’ it on food.”

“I don’t think he is. At least, not for himself. Judith is really healthy, but he isn’t. He looks like he could stand to gain a few pounds. Either that or he’s just got a naturally slim waist. His shoulders are ridiculously broad in comparison. He carries so much, Shane. I want to take some of it from him if I can.”

“Sounds like you ain’t just lookin’ for a quick roll in the sheets, buddy. Then again, I never took you for the one-night-stand type. At least not after we put college behind us.”

Rick’s about to respond, because Shane’s right, but before he can a child runs into him and takes him by surprise. He stumbles into Shane, who catches him easily. Rick turns to look at the retreating figure and instantly recognizes the head of bouncing curls.

“Judith!”

The little girl spins around, her eyes wide and shining with tears that she can’t keep from running down her face. As soon as she sees him, she comes running back. “Mr. Rick!” she whimpers, clinging to him with a surprising amount of strength for such a tiny thing. He doesn’t even hesitate to pick her up, holding her against his side and letting her hide her face against his lapels. She’s shaking like she’s cold, or she’s just feeling too many emotions for her little body to handle.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. What’s wrong, sweetheart? Where’s Daryl?”
“He won’t wake up, Mr. Rick,” Judith sobs. “His face is really hot and he ain’t opened his eyes in a long time and I don’t know what ta do, so’s I was runnin’ ta see if I could find Miss Carol, but she ain’t at the shelter, so’s I was goin’ ta get Grampa Hershel.”

Fear makes Rick’s blood turn cold, and he glances at Shane. His friend is already nodding and pulling out his phone, mouthing *I’ll cover you* from behind Judith before turning back toward the law office and walking away quickly. Rick is left trying to calm Judith’s distress, running his fingers through her tangled hair.

“Can you take me to him, Judy? I might be able to help.”

“I hafta get Grampa Hershel!” she insists, and she’s so distressed that he can’t bear to tell her no, so he nods and shifts her until she’s braced on his hip more securely and he can hold her better.

“All right, sweetie. Let’s go get Grampa Hershel so he can see what’s wrong with Daryl.”

Grampa Hershel is a stoic older gentleman with white hair, and he’s one of the main doctors at the free clinic Judith directs Rick to. She has no idea what the name of the street is, but she gives him good enough descriptions of the landmarks and the place itself that Rick is able to find it without too much trouble. As soon as he hurries through the doors with the little girl, a young brunette woman comes to greet them.

“Hey there, Junebug,” she says warmly. Her expression falls as soon as she sees the tears on Judith’s face and catches the tense, worried expression on Rick’s. She doesn’t even ask him who he is, just nods and says, “I’ll go get daddy,” before she’s turning and striding away.

How often has Daryl come to this clinic, if they know who he is and are fond enough of Judith to give her nicknames? He doesn’t have much time to ponder the question—and honestly, he’s not really sure he wants to know the answer anyway—because the man he already knows is Hershel comes out to meet them.

“I have no idea where he is,” Rick says by way of greeting. Judith’s misery has quieted to the occasional sniffle, and he’s pretty sure the dry cleaners are going to be apoplectic at the state of his jacket when he gives it to them, but he can’t find it in himself to care about his wardrobe when Daryl is so much more important. “She literally ran into me on the street on her way here.”

“No, Grampa Hershel. He’s under the bridge,” Judith tells him, her chin trembling and her eyes filling with tears again. “He didn’t want to stay with Miss Carol, ’cause there wasn’t many beds and he said we’d be safer under the bridge. But he won’t wake up now and his face is really warm and I didn’t know what ta do.” The waters overflow again, and she’s back to hiding her face in Rick’s chest as he tries to calm her down with soft reassurances; a hand rubbing at her back and easily feeling how badly she’s shaking.

“Maggie, honey, get my bag, please.” Hershel rolls up his sleeves while the woman who’d greeted Rick and Judith hurries away again to grab what the doctor will need. “We’ll take my car,” he tells Rick, like it isn’t even a question that he’s coming along. “It’ll get us there faster, because that bridge
is a fair distance away. It’s near Grady Memorial Hospital.”

Jesus Christ, that’s on the other side of town, almost. Judith ran all that way? What if she’d been hit by a car, or something else had happened? No one would have known until it was too late, and Daryl would have been devastated when he’d woken up and his pseudo-daughter was gone.

As soon as Maggie comes back with a small duffel bag, Hershel leads them through a side door and into a small parking garage. He’s got an older Jeep that looks like it’s seen better days, but it purrs like a kitten when he slides the key into the ignition and turns it on. None of them say a word on the way to the bridge, weaving in and out of the traffic when they can and slowed to a crawl on busier streets with no way to break free from the other cars. Rick is too busy trying to keep Judith from dissolving into another crying fit, and Hershel doesn’t seem like he’s one for much conversation. All in all, it’s the longest and most grueling car ride Rick has ever taken, because he can’t stop playing Judith’s words over what’s wrong with Daryl in his head, and it’s making him think of the worst possible outcomes imaginable.

Hershel parks as close to the bridge as he can get them, and Rick cradles the back of Judith’s head to keep her from bumping it when he slides them out of the car.

“Where to, sweetheart?” he murmurs, and she points toward a flap of cardboard that looks big enough to hold a refrigerator. It’s flattened and leaning against the one support beam, and he can vaguely make out a bundle of something tucked between the cardboard and the concrete.

Daryl’s forehead is wrinkled in distress, and he’s pale all over except for where there’s the tiniest hint of fever flushing his cheeks and throat. He’s laying on his side and shivering like he’s cold, but no attempt made by Hershel to rouse him garners a response. Rick sets Judith down when she starts squirming, and she crawls beneath the fragile lean-to without a moment of hesitation so she can curl up against her guardian’s side and touch his face while Hershel digs out a thermometer.

“C’mon, Daryl, ya gotta wake up,” the little girl is pleading. “Ya promised, ‘member? Ya said you wasn’t ever gonna abandon me. So you gotta wake up.”

“Son, can you find me my stethoscope? I want to listen to his heartbeat.”

Rick is jerked out of the daze he’s fallen into when the doctor calls for his attention, blinking stupidly and managing to nod before he goes rooting through the bag for the stethoscope. He hands it over and watches Hershel press two fingers against Daryl’s throat. He pulls a watch out of his pocket and looks at it, what little light that manages to find them making the polished silver chains gleam.

“His pulse is weak and fast, and his temperature is elevated. I think it’s a combination of malnutrition and a pretty nasty bug.”

“I just saw him yesterday,” Rick interjects. “He looked fine. Can it really get this bad that quickly?”

“With the wrong combinations of circumstances, yes. It was cold and damp last night, and the fact that he isn’t eating properly has done him no favors. Right now, he’s too weak to fight it off on his own. He needs to be somewhere warm and dry, where he can be monitored.”

As Hershel talks, he fits the stethoscope in his ears and places the rounded disc against Daryl’s chest. He frowns in a way that is more from concentration and less from concern, but Rick hovers and frets regardless.

“His lungs sound a little crackly, but nothing that should develop into full-blown pneumonia so long as we get him hydrated and get him some antibiotics. I can’t take him back to the clinic; we haven’t
got the room right now. A hospital wouldn’t work, either, because he has no insurance. He can’t be at the shelter, not when he needs an IV and constant monitoring. They aren’t set up for anything like that.”

“He can stay with me,” Rick blurts out. “I live alone toward the edge of the city. He’s been there before. Judy has, too.”

“Yeah. Daryl took me there to run through the flowers yesterday, and Mr. Rick came out to sit with us.” Judith manages to smile at the memory. “We went to McDonald’s and I got to eat chicken nuggets and apples.”

“That’s wonderful, Judy. It sounds like you had a balanced meal.” Hershel smiles at her, and there’s nothing condescending about the way he talks to her. Rick is starting to think there isn’t a nasty bone in the doctor’s body, but he definitely has the kind of presence that makes you sit up and take notice. When he pins Rick with serious blue eyes, he perks up and listens closely. “He needs someone with him to monitor his condition. What kind of job do you have?”

“I’m a lawyer. Trust me, I have more than enough vacation days saved up. I’ll stay with him for as long as it takes.”

And that’s how Rick ends up with Daryl in his bed forty-five minutes later. He’s hooked up to an IV that is giving him a solution that will give him the nutrients and hydration he needs. There’s a smaller bag of antibiotics hanging off of the IV pole Hershel has brought from the free clinic. The doctor had explained that its purpose was to hopefully combat whatever was going on in the musician’s lungs, and hopefully wipe out any other little problems that might be lurking.

Rick looks at the man tucked in under his comforter, only his right arm laying on top of the blanket so that the IV tubing doesn’t get accidentally pulled out. Daryl’s forehead has smoothed out, and he looks like he’s resting peacefully, which is a lot nicer to see than the discomfort that had twisted his features when they’d found him. Judith is curled up against his left side, petting his arm and whispering things that Rick can’t quite catch.

“If you need anything at all, call the clinic and ask for Maggie.” Hershel pushes a business card into his hand and he glances down at it. It says Greene Family Free Clinic on the front in simple font, and when he flips it over he sees a few different numbers, including 911. There’s even an email address. “She’ll get a hold of me. Are you sure you’re okay with this, Rick? It’s not common practice for me to take patients to the homes of people they barely know, but my options are otherwise limited. If it gets to be too much, you’ll tell me, right?”

“That’s not going to be a problem.” Rick twirls the card absently a few times before tucking it into his pocket. He glances over his shoulder toward the bedroom where he can just see the pale tips of Daryl’s fingers resting limply against the dark blue of his comforter. “It’s not too much. He’s more than worth it.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Rick.” The older man rests a hand on his shoulder, but he can’t bring himself to look away from the small part of the musician that he can see. “The world needs more men like you. I think Daryl needs someone like you, too.”

“He’s got me,” Rick murmurs. “He’s got me for as long as he wants me.”
After Hershel is gone and Rick peeks into the bedroom to see Judith sleeping with her head on the pillow beside Daryl’s, he closes the door most of the way and heads down the hallway toward the family room. Dropping onto his couch with a quiet sigh, he pulls his phone out and stares at the screen. He’s got six missed calls and over thirty texts, all of which he ignores as he swipes his finger to unlock the thing and taps on Shane’s name at the top of the ‘missed calls’ list.

“Rick, man, you’d better have some good news for me,” his friend says by way of greeting before the first ring is even finished.

“Wish I did, brother,” he mumbles as he lets himself slide into a laying position with one foot braced on the floor and the other stretched across the length of the sofa.

“Is he okay?”

“He should be. Hershel—the doctor—thinks he just needs fluids and some antibiotics. He’s resting right now, and I need a favor.”

“You name it, man. Anything.”

“I need you to email me the paperwork for an emergency leave of absence. Hershel had no room at the clinic, and they couldn’t take him to the shelter because he needs quiet and constant supervision.”

“Rick, man, are you tellin’ me-”

“That Daryl is currently unconscious on my bed, hooked up to an IV? Yes, Shane, that’s what I’m telling you.”

“Damn, brother, you really don’t do anything half-way, do you.”

“When have I ever?”

“Fair enough. All right then, I’ll pop in and talk to Dale, and get those papers sent your way. He’ll probably tell you to take as much time as you need. He still volunteers at the shelters, did ya know that? Always takes pro bono cases for ‘em.”

“That’s why he’s the best lawyer this city’s got,” Rick chuckles. It’s true, though. Dale Horvath is a saint amongst sinners, and he thanks the Powers that Be every single day that the man saw enough potential in him to give him a shot at rising through the ranks with Shane by his side. His best friend hadn’t wanted to work for the firm his father was a co-founder of, but he and Rick have always been attached at the hip, so when Rick joined Horvath & Walsh, Shane was right there beside him.

“Amen to that. Go take care of your man, Rick. I’ll call and check in later.”

“Thanks, Shane.”

“Any time, brother.”

Locking his phone, Rick drops it on the coffee table and presses his palms against his eye sockets hard enough for it to hurt. After several slow, deep breaths, he feels steady enough to get up and check the contents of his kitchen. Unlike Shane, he doesn’t live on a diet of hot dogs from cart vendors and an endless stream of take-out. How that bastard isn’t four hundred pounds, Rick will never know. He knows he has plenty of food—he’s just not sure if he’s got something that a little girl will willingly eat. Daryl needs to eat, too, as soon as he’s awake and feeling well enough to stomach
Finding a bag of animal crackers he doesn’t even remember purchasing, he checks the expiration date and smiles when he sees they’re still good.

“Mr. Rick?”

Jumping, he spins around and drops the bag in his surprise, which startles Judith in turn. She stares at him with wide eyes, one which is hidden behind the hand she was rubbing at it with. He hadn’t even heard her coming down the hallway.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he says, bending to pick up the bag and looking between it and the child standing in the entryway to his kitchen. “Would you like something to snack on?”

“Yes, please.”

She’s so polite and sweet—it’s almost hard to imagine someone with Daryl’s rough personality raising such a well-mannered child.

“All right, then. Let me get you a bowl. Would you like some water, too?”

“Can I have juice?” Judith looks so hopeful, and Rick doesn’t want to crush that. Luckily he has orange juice, so he pours her a glass and dumps a few handfuls of animal crackers into a bowl and takes them both out to the living room for her. She sits on the floor and eats quietly, sipping her juice every now and then as Rick looks around his sparsely-furnished apartment and wonders what he could possibly have to entertain a child. He has cable television, so maybe he can find a channel that has kids’ shows. Isn’t there a network that only plays Disney movies? He can’t remember for sure. The last Disney movie he saw was Aladdin, back when it first came out in theaters. God, that was such a long time ago.

“Is Daryl gonna be okay, Mr. Rick?”

“Judy, please, you can just call me Rick. It’s okay.”

“Sorry.” She looks down at the half-eaten elephant cracker in her hand, and then back up at him. Her chin is trembling again, and he’s already coming forward to pick her up before any more tears can fall. “Is he gonna be okay?” The words are whispered into his shoulder, and he kisses her hair without thinking about it.

“I believe he is, sweetheart. He’s too stubborn to let somethin’ as silly as a fever keep him down for long.”

Walking around the apartment with Judith balanced on his hip, he shows her the bathroom and the room where his washer and dryer are. She seems fascinated by the kitchen and his dining room, and when he opens the fridge for her to peer inside her eyes go round at the sight of everything he’s got crammed in there.

“Wanna take a bath, Judy?” he murmurs once he’s closed the doors again. “I can probably find something for you to wear when you’re done. It’s up to you, sweetheart.”

“I’d like that a lot,” she whispers back, like she’s imparting some huge secret that no one else is supposed to know. He chuckles and taps the tip of her nose with a finger, carrying her back to the bathroom and setting her down on the mat so he can turn the knobs and plug the drain. He lets her decide what temperature she wants, and after he’s given her a towel he goes to check on Daryl. The man hasn’t moved, but there’s a little more natural color to his skin already and he’s still sleeping.
peacefully. The bag Hershel set up to administer the fluids his body needs is already half empty, and he can’t imagine that’s a good thing. Luckily the doctor gave him a few extra bags in case he ends up needing them.

Resting the backs of his fingers against the musician’s forehead, he frowns at how warm he still is. Daryl’s lips part at the contact, and he lets out a sigh that only sounds a little crackly as he turns his head just slightly. It’s not much, but it’s more than he’s gotten since they found the man underneath the bridge. Rick smiles and strokes the filthy, tangled bangs away from his wayward musician’s face.

“Gonna be in for one hell of a surprise when you wake up,” he murmurs before he steps back and turns away to go digging through one of his drawers in the hopes of finding a t-shirt small enough for Judith to wear until he finds a way to get her some clothes of her own. He moves carefully, his movements exaggeratedly quiet even though he doubts a few drawers thudding will be enough to rouse Daryl if nothing else has managed to. There’s no other sound in the room but the musician’s slow, raspy breaths and the faint splash of Judith playing with the water in the tub.

For the first time since he moved into this apartment, Rick feels happy to be home. Coming home to an empty space isn’t his idea of a grand time, and even if the circumstances that landed Daryl in his bed and Judith in his bathroom aren’t the greatest, being able to care for these two people fills him with a conviction he doesn’t often feel outside of a court room. When he finds a shirt that looks like it should work nicely for Judith, he smiles wider and goes to check on the little girl. He’ll do his best to take care of her until Daryl can do it again, and he’ll take care of Daryl, too.

Maybe the man has a temper, and he’s definitely got a damaged past, but Rick’s never met anyone who made the world seem brighter just by existing in it, and he’s eager to see those eyes that remind him of a cloudless Georgia sky fixed on him again when Daryl finally opens them.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Daryl wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Literally all of the credit for this goes to katytheinspiredworkaholic, because she's the one who encouraged me to get the next part of this done. I know it's been a long, long time, and I apologize for that. I've been caught up in other fics, and real life stuff, and this kind of got pushed to the back. That made me sad, because I love this story so much, and I'd been trying to find the motivation for it when miss workaholic gave me the final nudge I needed.

So here it is, the long-delayed fourth chapter!

Songs appear in the following order:

"Stand" by Rascal Flatts

"Wagon Wheel" by Darius Rucker

"Hey Jude" by The Beatles

It takes three days for Daryl to wake up. In that time, Rick reorganizes his entire fridge three time at Judith’s prompting, because all of the snacks she prefers are always too far back, or just out of reach. Even though the lawyer has told her multiple times that he has no problem helping the little girl get whatever she needs, Judith is surprisingly independent. Or maybe not so surprisingly, considering her life and the man who has clearly sacrificed so much raising her.

Rick was stunned when he learned that all of the money Daryl makes playing in the park goes to the woman who runs the shelter he and Judith stay at. Carol is a survivor of abuse herself, and she’d barely started the shelter when Daryl showed up at her doorstep. According to Judith, Auntie Carol is very sweet and strong, and she tries to make Daryl keep some of what he makes, but he’s a stubborn man. What little money he does keep goes to buying food and clothes for Judith, and seeing her face scrunch up in a mixture of sadness and love for her unconscious guardian had made something in Rick’s chest grow warm. They may not be blood kin, but Judith might as well be Daryl’s daughter, and she clearly adores the man like he’s her real father.

On day three, Rick is sitting on the couch with his laptop heating his thighs as he picks through his emails. Shane has called him every day so far, sometimes twice, and he’s sent nearly a dozen emails ranging from work-related news to random memes and photoshopped pictures of celebrities that make Rick want to laugh and groan at the same time.

Seriously, where does someone find a picture of Chris Evans’ face photoshopped onto a cucumber?
Who even thinks of that kind of thing?

Judith is sitting in front of the coffee table, a cup of juice at her elbow and her attention divided between the movie playing and the coloring book in front of her. Rick had run out and bought a few changes of clothes for the girl, as well as the books and a few kid-friendly movies and Disney films. She seems to be in love with Bambi, and watching her coo over the deer and his unusual group of friends never fails to bring a smile to Rick’s face.

He’s in the middle of reading an email from Dale about a client who’s trying to sue her former employer for discrimination when he hears a crash from his bedroom. Judith flinches badly enough that she knocks over her cup, and Rick doesn’t even pay attention to the spill of cranberry juice over the once-spotless glass. He’s already on his feet, laptop abandoned on the couch and out of the danger zone. Juice drips over the side of the table, staining the carpet, but he’s already down the hallway with Judith right behind him.

The bedroom door flies open seconds before Rick can get to it, and he gets his first good look at Daryl’s blue eyes again. They’re wide and wild, darting around frantically. His thin chest is heaving, sweat beading his flushed cheeks and forehead. It’s not from fever, because that broke some time yesterday, so Rick figures he’s just highly agitated, and with good reason.

“Daryl, it’s okay,” he croons quietly. He puts himself a little bit in front of Judith, just in case the musician is too wound up and tries to bolt. The girl is having none of it, though. She pushes at Rick until there’s enough of a gap between him and the wall for her to squeeze through, and then she’s throwing herself into Daryl’s arms and causing the weakened man to stagger back in surprise.

“‘Ryl!”

“Judy,” the man rasps, his voice rough from lack of speech and probably in desperate need of a glass of water. “Th’ fuck happened?”

“You got sick,” Rick replies for her, watching as the drifter crouches down and wobbles a little bit before determination flashes across his face and he pulls his unresisting child into his arms. She curls up against him, her head tucked under his chin, and Rick doesn’t miss the fact that she’s supporting her pseudo father or that Daryl is stubbornly trying to balance himself even though he’s clearly too weak to keep himself completely upright. The lawyer feels like he’s intruding on something private and sweet, something that isn’t meant for anyone but the two currently involved in hugging each other like they’ve been separated for far longer than three days.

Eventually, Daryl presses a quick kiss to Judith’s golden waves and looks up at Rick again. He looks exhausted, his face lined with tiredness and his hair hanging limp and greasy. He’s probably so hungry as well as thirsty, and Rick clears his throat quietly to offer a meal. Daryl beats him to it and speaks first, his voice low and scratchy.

“Where am I?”

“My apartment,” Rick says nervously. “You were unconscious, and there wasn’t any room at the clinic or the shelter. Hershel said you needed constant supervision to make sure your lungs didn’t get worse. You were pretty dehydrated, Daryl. When’s the last time you ate?”

“She comes first,” the drifter whispers, running his fingers through Judith’s hair and looking like he’s trying to decide if he’s ready to let her go yet. “How long was I out?”

“Three days,” Judith answers this time, sounding disapproving and scolding in the way only children can. “Thought ya wasn’t gonna wake up. Don’ do that again, okay? Ya scared the life outta us.”
“Us?” The musician looks up at Rick, his eyes searching for the truth in Judith’s words, and Rick meets his gaze without hesitation. He tries to convey without words just how worried he was—how spotless his apartment has become in three days because he was desperate to keep himself distracted. How much food he’s made, more than he’s ever cooked in such a short amount of time, because he wasn’t sure when Daryl would wake up and he wanted to make sure the man would have something fresh to eat when he did.

“Us,” he murmurs, smiling sheepishly. “I’ve been driving Judith a little stir-crazy, I think.”

“He’s a worrywart,” the little girl agrees, nodding solemnly. “I knew you’d be okay, Daryl. Yer always okay. Ain’t nothin’ gonna keep ya down.”

Rick kindly doesn’t mention the girl’s tears throughout the last few days—her constant wandering that always brought her back to the bed and her guardian. She slept beside him every night, while Rick slept on the couch. When Daryl looks at him for conformation, he’s got a tiny smile tugging at the edges of his mouth. He knows that Judith is lying, but he’s not inclined to call her on it. He’s probably just happy to have her in his arms right now, even if he looks like a gentle breeze could knock him flat on his ass.

“I’ll get you some water,” Rick offers, and he’s already walking down the hallway before Daryl can respond. He leaves the two of them wrapped around each other, because Daryl needs Judith’s sweet stubbornness and she needs her guardian’s steady presence after three days in a completely new environment.

The juice has left quite a mess, but Rick can’t even bring himself to be anything but ecstatic that Daryl is finally awake. As he fills a glass with water from a gallon stuck on the bottom shelf of the fridge door, he juggles his phone out of his pocket and brings up the number for the Greene clinic. It barely rings twice before Maggie picks up.

“Greene Family Clinic, this is Maggie speaking. How can I help ya?”

“Hey, Maggie, it’s Rick.” Capping the jug, he sticks it back in its place and uses his hip to shut the door. “He’s awake.”

“Oh!” the woman gasps. “Oh, that’s great! I’ll tell Daddy and have him head your way as soon as he’s got a spare moment. How is he?” The worry in her voice is thick enough to hint at grateful tears, and Rick wishes Daryl could see just how many people care about him. Aside from the entire Greene family, he’s also got Carol, and a man named Tyreese that Judith has told him all about. There’s also another man named Bob who used to be a combat medic, who Daryl sits with in the park sometimes when Bob is having a rough day and he just needs some company that won’t treat him like glass. Judith has told Rick all about the people who are in Daryl’s life—every single person who cares about him and is desperate to show the introverted man that they’re there for him.

He’s got Rick, too, but they haven’t known each other nearly long enough for the lawyer to disillusion himself into thinking that he counts for much yet. He’d like to change that, though, and he’s smiling when he bids Maggie to have a good day and hangs up. Heading through the family room, he hears Daryl’s gruff, quiet voice lowered into something that seems to rumble right through his bones, and he can’t help himself when he pauses to listen to the notes that trickle from a throat that shouldn’t be able to make such beautiful sounds so soon after waking up from what was essentially a coma.

“Ya feel like a candle in a hurricane;
"Jus’ like a picture with a broken frame;

Alone an’ helpless, like you’ve lost yer fight;

But you’ll be alright;

You’ll be alright.”

Judith is curled up on Daryl’s lap, her head resting against his shoulder as she plays with the ends of his hair. The drifter’s head is bent forward, his spine curling in a way that looks like it will be painful after too long, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s too busy braiding the girl’s hair, his fingers fumbling from his exhaustion and the lingering traces of his illness but his eyes bright with determination and so much strength that Rick has to stop and breathe for a moment. How can one man who’s been through so much still possess such power?

Despite everything, despite being homeless and the bruises that are finally fading from his skin after days tucked away in a safer environment, there’s something innocent about Daryl. He’s unsullied by the grime he sequesters himself away in, for all that he probably thinks otherwise. Beneath his protective layer, he’s gentle and caring, and Rick can see it as clear as day when he watches the way the musician cares for Judith and ignores his own frailties to make sure his little girl is okay.

“’Cause when push comes ta shove;

You taste what yer made of;

You might bend ‘til ya break;

‘Cause it’s all ya can take;

On yer knees, you look up;

Decide you’ve had enough;

Ya get mad – ya get strong;

Wipe yer hand, shake it off;

Then ya stand.”

“Here,” Rick murmurs, trying not to disrupt the sweet scene but knowing that Daryl will lose his voice before too much longer if he doesn’t quench his thirst with something that isn’t intravenous fluids. “I called the clinic. Hershel’s gonna drop by when he has a moment to spare so he can check on you.”

“Thanks,” Daryl grunts, his voice barely a whisper now. He drinks so fast Rick’s afraid he’s going to choke—or make himself sick. In no time at all the glass is empty, still tipped up for the younger man
to try and drain every last drop. Rick watches him silently, debating the merits of refilling the glass or just giving Daryl the rest of the jug. He chews his lip while he thinks, and he’s so lost in his own debates that he doesn’t realize he’s still staring at Daryl until the musician clears his throat roughly and Rick is snapped out of his daze.

“Sorry, was thinking. Still thirsty?” He reaches out for the glass, frowning when it’s pulled away and meeting the quiet drifter’s serious eyes.

“Why you doin’ this?” Daryl asks. Rick glances at Judith, not sure if this particular confrontation needs to happen in front of her, and he’s startled when he realizes that the little girl is already fast asleep. He hadn’t even realized she was tired. She’s been so strong the last few days, so independent but eager to help him to keep her young mind off her guardian’s illness. Rick hadn’t even realized just how much she was pushing herself. Now she has no need to, and her own exhaustion has caught up with her. She’s out cold, her face relaxed in sleep and one hand gripping Daryl’s shirt tightly over his stomach—like she’s afraid if she lets him go for even a second he’ll slip away from them.

“I need to have a reason?” Rick frowns and shakes his head, reaching for the glass again. “I’m not doing this for any kind of reciprocation, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t want to be repaid for any of this. You needed help, and I was in a position to offer assistance.”

“Ya even been ta work these last few days?” the younger man challenges. Rick hums patiently and finally gets the glass.

“ Took an emergency leave. Trust me, I have more than enough vacation days piled up, just waiting to be used. Daryl, you needed help. I wanted to help.”

“No one jus’ does shit fer free,” Daryl growls. “Yer gonna want something, some time down th’ line.”

“I don’t want anything you aren’t willing to give. I’ll settle for your friendship, honestly. That’ll be more than enough for me, you know that.” Offering a sincere smile and a quick nod of his head, he turns and heads back toward the kitchen. He can hear Daryl moving around behind him—the quiet grumble from Judith as she’s disturbed from her sleep momentarily. Rick doesn’t check over his shoulder to see what they’re doing. His apartment is a decent size, but it’s an apartment. It’s not like Daryl can just jump out the window and run away, especially since they’re not on the ground floor. That’s just asking for too much trouble and effort.

When Rick comes out of the kitchen again, Daryl’s refilled glass in one hand and the water jug in the other, he sees the man just finishing pulling a blanket up over Judith’s shoulders and tucking her in on the couch. He looks up when the lawyer stops by the coffee table, the two of them looking at the mostly-dried, sticky red mess spread out over the glass.

“I c’n clean that up,” he mutters, his head ducked low and his thumb creeping toward his mouth. Rick watches his teeth tear at the cuticle, wincing when a particularly unforgiving bite draws a hint of blood.

“Don’t worry about it. Would you like to take a shower? I’ve got plenty of towels, and I have some clothes that should fit you.”

“Don’ need yer fuckin’ charity,” Daryl snaps, and then he ducks his head and chews harder at his thumb. Rick waits patiently, looking out the sliding glass door onto his balcony. He knows that Daryl is a proud man, and that he’s not used to someone helping him without expecting something in return. All he wants to do is prove to the musician that his intentions are nothing but good. He doesn’t want money; he doesn’t want anything untoward. He just wants to know that Daryl is safe,
and fed, and warm. The memory of seeing him under that bridge, shivering and unresponsive, still haunts his dreams. They’re more like nightmares, dark possibilities and niggling what if’s. Only the light of morning banished them while he waited for the man to wake up—quick, quiet checks to make sure he was still breathing, still healing doing more to soothe his nerves than anything else he might have tried to tell himself.

“So sorry,” he whispers after several tense moments have faded into something more comfortable. “Jus’… jus’ ain’t used ta none’a this. Ain’t used ta—” He cuts himself off and shakes his head, eyeing Rick from the corner of his eye like a wary stray waiting for a punch or a kick.

“If you’re feeling up to it, a shower might make you feel better,” Rick offers. He extends the olive branch, saying with quiet sincerity and a smile that no feelings have been hurt. Daryl accepts it easily, almost carelessly, like he’s going along with it even though he doesn’t believe Rick fully.

“Sure,” the man mutters around his thumbnail. “Th’nks.”

“It’s no trouble. Go, get clean. You’ll feel better. I’ll make something light. I don’t know when Hershel will be here, and I don’t want to wait just in case it’s not until later.” Rick is already heading for the kitchen, intent on wetting a dishcloth and cleaning the coffee table first before he gets started cooking. A quiet snort makes him glance back over his shoulder, and he’s stunned for a moment at the smile Daryl has aimed at him. It’s small, but it’s definitely there. It looks playful and teasing, but not cruel, and his heart thumps heavily at the way just that small curl of lips makes the other man look so much younger and lighter.

“Anyone ever tell ya yer a bit of a mother hen?”

Rick nods, schooling his face into something serious even as his eyes twinkle. “My best friend, Shane. He likes to tell me that at least a few times a day.”

“He ain’t wrong,” Daryl snorts. Something unreadable crosses his face, but before Rick can try to comment on it, the musician is striding as quickly as his weak body can handle out of the main room and vanishing into the dimmer hallway. Rick waits until he hears the click of the bathroom door and the quieter thud of the lock, and then he reminds himself that he’s got things to do so he doesn’t stand in the middle of the room and listen to the sound of the water running; so he doesn’t wonder how long it’s been since Daryl has had the ability to enjoy something as simple as a shower.

Focus, he tells himself firmly, and he glances toward Judith to make sure she’s sleeping peacefully before heading into the kitchen.

His carpet needs more help than Rick currently has at his disposal. He’s going to need to either get it professionally cleaned, or find a store that loans steam-clean vacuums and rent one to clean the cranberry juice that’s dripped into the light-colored carpet and left an almost perfectly rectangular stain.

Hands on his hips, he looks down at it and chews his lip thoughtfully before giving in with a sigh and running a hand back through his hair. There’s nothing for it—he’s not cleaning that any time soon. At least the coffee table is clean again, and the dishes from Daryl’s late lunch are rinsed and in the dishwasher. Rick had taken the safe route and fed the man eggs and toast after he’d emerged
from the shower looking cleaner than the lawyer has ever seen him, and also a lot more relaxed.

Right now, Daryl is laying on his balcony in a borrowed pair of sweatpants and a shirt that Rick wasn’t entirely sure would fit across the young musician’s broad shoulders and chest. He was right, and none of the buttons are done up. He’d unearthed an old, light grey tank top from one of the drawers he hasn’t looked through in years, and Daryl had accepted that as well with a quiet word of thanks and an awkward pinch to his facial features.

Rick gets it—he’s not used to random acts of kindness. He’s not used to getting things without having to give some kind of payment, but the lawyer has done his best to make it clear that he expects no reimbursement for anything. He’s given Daryl everything freely and gladly, and considering that the clothes the drifter is currently wearing haven’t seen the light of day in at least two years, Rick is going to do his best to make sure that they leave with his guest when Daryl and Judith finally disappear in the middle of the night. He has a feeling that’s how it’s going to happen, and he tells himself he’s fine with that. He has to be.

For now, Rick tidies up the living room, even though there’s nothing that actually needs to be cleaned, and tries not to make it too obvious that he’s hovering close to the balcony doors. They’re open just a little—just enough for Rick to hear Daryl’s soft, low voice when he starts to sing.

“Headin’ down South ta th’ land’a th’ pines;
I’m thumbin’ my way int’a North Carolina;
Starin’ down the road;
I pray ta God I see headlights.”

Rick knows that song—he likes the lyrics and the upbeat music. It makes him smile, and he hums along quietly so Daryl doesn’t catch on to the fact that he’s listening. Not that it should matter, after all the other times he’s come across the man singing in public or in quiet little alleys like when they’d first met. Something about it feels different this time, though. More intimate. Maybe it’s because Daryl is in Rick’s house, wearing his old clothes, and Judith is still sleeping on the sofa. Maybe it’s because the sun is slowly setting, and the orange glow spills across Daryl’s relaxed face and makes his hooded eyes glow.

When Rick glances out through the glass door as he passes by yet again to reorganize the magazines, he sees the way the colors painting the musician morph him into something breathtaking and peaceful, his eyes like burning embers and his dark hair gleaming with touches of fire when he tilts his head back against the hands he’s folded underneath his untamed mess of hair and never stops singing.

He’s beautiful and ethereal, and Rick has to turn away quickly before he gets caught staring.

“Rock me, momma, like a wagon wheel;
Rock me, momma, any way ya feel;
He-ey, momma, rock me.”
A knock on the door is both a welcome distraction and a dissatisfying disruption, because Daryl stops singing abruptly. Rick can hear him getting up quickly, the chairs he’d moved so he could lay down scraping over the wooden balcony flooring as the musician hurriedly puts them back where they’d been before coming into the house. Rick would wonder at his sudden nervous energy, but he has a feeling it has something to do with being in a strange place and still trying to come to terms with everything that’s already happened.

Rick is still humming the song when he unlocks his door and swings it open to permit Hershel access into his home. The older man looks a lot more relaxed this time around, and for good reason. As soon as he lays eyes on Daryl, he chuckles softly.

“Son, you know you’re supposed to be resting, after an illness like that,” he chides as he moves through Rick’s home with a confidence that comes with age and assuredness. Hershel doesn’t strike him as the kind of man who is cocky or egotistical. There’s a quite power that hangs around him, a gentle strength he carries in every line of his aging body. His shoulders curl slightly, his spine bending a little from years of hard work, but there is nothing about Hershel Greene that speaks of weakness. He’s the kind of man who will look a gunman in the eye and make them ashamed of the choices that they’ve made, and in the next breath offer recompense for their faults and offer them the chance to start anew.

“Ya know I hate layin’ ‘round like a lazy shit,” Daryl grumbles. He’s standing in front of the couch, keeping his body between Judith and the doorway, and once Hershel is sitting he slowly folds himself into a cross-legged pose. Rick watches him lean back against the couch, mourning the loss of the ethereal light the setting sun had haloed him in but still catching the last traces that trickle in through the balcony doors.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” the younger man grunts. Rick’s eyebrows go up at his tone, but Hershel takes it in stride. Clearly he knows Daryl well enough to ignore when he’s just being difficult, and sure enough, after a moment of pointed silence, the musician sighs and slumps back against the side of the couch. “M’fine,” he mutters petulantly. “Jesus, y’all act like I ain’t capable of takin’ care’a m’self.”

“Well, considering recent events, can you blame us?” Hershel reaches into the black bag he’s brought with him and pulls out his stethoscope and a mouth thermometer. When he holds the latter out, Daryl rolls his eyes and huffs but sticks it in his mouth anyway. He might not be a particularly cooperative patient, but he doesn’t spit insults or make the doctor’s job harder than it needs to be. He sits perfectly still and lets Hershel check his thyroid glands and look in his eyes with the tool Rick can never remember the name of. The lawyer can’t help but hover, and when the thermometer beeps he looks expectantly at Hershel.

“Your fever’s gone. That’s a good thing.” Shaking the thermometer, Hershel glances at Rick for permission and lays it down on the coffee table when he’s given a quick nod. “Are you feeling any aches I should be concerned about? Have you been drinking plenty of fluids to help your throat?”
“Fuckin’ mother hens, both’a ya,’’ Daryl huffs. ‘‘Yes, mom, I been drinkin’ lots of water. Mom 2 won’ leave me in peace unless I do.’’ He shoots a pointed glare at Rick, and the lawyer grins unrepentantly. He’s not apologizing for worrying about the drifter’s health, and from the shine in Daryl’s eye, he knows the younger man isn’t really angered by their supposed smothering.

“It’s just because we care, and you know it,’’ he retorts cheekily, and he’s rewarded with another heavy eye roll and a quieter huff as Daryl uncrosses his arms to let Hershel listen to his heart.

“Your lungs sound a lot better than they did,’’ the elderly doctor murmurs. He’s smiling, clearly satisfied, and he’s shaking his head when he wraps the stethoscope around the back of his neck. “Your recovery time will never cease to amaze me, Daryl. It’s a pity more people aren’t made of stronger stuff like you.’’

“Yeah, yeah, ya c’n fuckin’ go, now. Ain’t dyin’, old man. Still alive an’ well, as ya c’n see. Go on home ta yer chitlins now. Tell ‘em ta stop their titterin’. 

“I’ll let them know you were thinking of them,’’ Hershel chuckles as he packs away his equipment. Rick wants to protest a little, because shouldn’t there be more being checked over? Daryl had been all but comatose, and they’re acting like all he was suffering from was a little fatigue. It leaves the lawyer baffled, because the familiarity between the two isn’t lost on him. Hershel is treating Daryl like his own son, and Daryl is clearly awkward about it, but there’s something like fondness in his interactions with the quick-witted doctor.

“Is there anything else I should be doing?’’ he asks as he walks with Hershel to the door. He can’t stop the worried lilt in his tone. “He was so bad when we brought him here, Hershel. Shouldn’t he need something more than just rest and fluids?’’

“The human body is an amazing thing, Rick.’’ A steady hand rests on his shoulder, grounding him in a way he wasn’t expecting and chasing the tension from his muscles. “It may not seem like a lot, but rest and fluids, and a steady diet, will go a long way toward getting him back to normal. The battle will be convincing him that he can let someone help him. For that, I wish you luck, Rick. If anyone can get through that boy’s stubborn walls, I think it’ll be you.’’

After Hershel has left, Rick stands in the entryway for a moment with his hand on the doorknob. His mind is whirring, his thoughts tumbling over one another in their haste to be heard first. Resting his forehead against the cool wood for a moment, he takes a deep breath and tries to gather everything into some semblance of coherency. If Hershel thinks he really can get through Daryl’s blocks and show him that there’s no weakness in needing others, then he’s going to do his absolute best to prove the man right.

“Hey, Jude, don’ make it bad;
Take a sad song, an’ make it better;
Remember ta let ‘er int’a yer heart;
Then ya can start ta make it better.’’

Smiling, Rick pushes himself away from the door and goes to join his guests in the living room. Daryl is sitting on the couch with Judith curled against him, her distressed sniffs quieted for the most part. He hadn’t even heard her wake up, and he leans against the wall and catches Daryl’s eyes.
The man is running his fingers through the girl’s hair, soothing her as his low, rich voice fills the apartment with a life it’s always been missing.

Rick can’t believe he never noticed it before, but now that he’s here, now that Daryl and Judith are here and filling the once-empty spaces he could never reach on his own, he cherishes the warmth that has made his apartment a home instead of just a place to sleep at night.

Hopefully he can convince his wayward musician to stay for a while longer and fill his home with even more life and laughter.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I had no idea how long this was going to be when I started writing it. It's taken me a long ass time to finish it considering how long it ended up being, but here it is. I want to thank every single person who's encouraged me through this and waited so patiently for this to be done. I don't think I'm done with musician!Daryl entirely, but this part of their story has come to an end.

The songs that appear in this chapter are "Welcome Home" by Radical Face (requested by Ricky!!K in chapter 2), and "True Colors" by Cyndi Lauper. The end of this chapter is cheesy as fuck, but I adore it, so I hope y'all like it too. *scuffs foot and grins shyly*

Oh, and this is unbeta'd, so all mistakes are my own.

Enjoy. <3

“’Tis no trouble at all, I promise,” Rick insists. He’s trying not to put himself between Daryl and the door; desperate to get the man to stay in any way he can that doesn’t involve physically blocking his exit. He doubts it would go over well, because even after a week of decent sleep and decent meals, Daryl still looks pale and slightly unsteady on his feet. He’s filled out some; he’s longer looking as thin and malnourished as he had when he’d first fallen into Rick’s orbit with the most gorgeous voice and wild soul the lawyer had ever seen. Having someone in his apartment, laughter and life filling the space and completing it in a way he’d never had since he moved in, has helped Rick as well. He’s never slept so well before. He would have kept sleeping on the couch happily if Daryl hadn’t all but kicked his ass back into his own bed. The man had refused to keep using his room, choosing to bunk on the couch instead and spending the nights with Judith sprawled over his chest. Now that he’s awake and on the mend, she’s refused to be apart from him at all. Rick has gotten used to seeing the man with the girl plastered at his hip like she’s stitched them together.

“M’fine, Rick,” Daryl says tiredly. He’s settled in for another battle—they’ve gotten closer than civil with one another, but the musician is still an independent, strong man, and he isn’t any better about accepting charity than he was when Rick first met him. Just the fact that he isn’t snarling or snapping is enough to worry Rick., because he knows that Daryl still isn’t at his best. If he vanishes back out into the streets, there’s no telling what could happen. He could get sick again, really sick, like the illness he’s only just gotten over. What if something happens and they can’t find him? What if something happens to Judith and she can’t get to any of them like they were lucky enough this last time?

“You’re still sick,” Rick whispers. He’s trying so hard not to reach out and grab Daryl, trying not to pull him deeper into the apartment again and wraps him in blankets like they’ll be enough of a barrier to hide him from the rest of the world. He has no claim on Daryl, he’s got nothing that can make the man stay, but god damn it he wants to try anyway. He wants to get down on his knees and beg if that would be enough—but maybe that will be too much, and Daryl will leave anyway. Maybe Rick’s attachment will freak him out to the point that he’ll jump over the balcony and risk dying rather than stay with someone who cares about him more than he can understand. Because Rick knows that Daryl doesn’t understand. He’s not used to strangers caring about him anymore, not after so long of
only having the same people in his life.

“I’m fine, damn it.” But Daryl can’t even growl the words. He leans back against the wall and crosses his arms loosely over his chest; curling over like he’s hugging himself. His shoulders are tense beneath his sleeveless shirt—the frayed ends pointing toward self-made alterations rather than manufactured style. The wisps cling to his tanned biceps, the muscles rippling when he slides his thumb between his teeth and chews at it like Rick’s seen teething puppies work a bone.

“I’m not going to force you, Daryl.” Stepping back to give the man his space, Rick runs a hand through his curls and sighs softly. “That’s the last thing I’ll ever do. I just... I want to know you’re safe, and I know it’s none of my business what you do—”

“Why do you care so much?” There’s no anger, no hostility, no venom. Daryl sounds quiet and lost and confused, like Rick’s the enigma he can’t figure out. It’s like he’s never known kindness a day in his life, and Rick knows that’s not true. He’s met Hershel. He’s met Maggie and Carol and Beth. They all love Daryl so much, and they worry about him, possibly more than Rick does. Carol has been over several times, bringing clothes and meals and some of Daryl’s instruments. She’s stayed to talk for hours, even when it seemed like she and Daryl were more asleep than awake and leaning against each other with Judith lying across their laps already dreaming. She’s a mother and a friend to Daryl, and he’s more relaxed around her than he’s ever been around Rick, but there’s still that tension that never seems to leave him. He’s like a mutt waiting for the day his pack doesn’t come home, desperate for any affection he can get and trying his best to give it in return as he waits for the inevitable. None of them will ever leave, that much is easy to see, but Daryl’s still waiting.

It breaks Rick’s heart, tearing a hole in his chest that bleeds sorrow and drips agony the way he’s seen Daryl’s bruised, split skin drip blood. He still has no idea who was hurting the man, but seeing his skin unmarred by the bruises and cuts is another reason that Rick is desperate for him to stay. As soon as he lets the drifter walk out his doors, he’ll see him again with those dark stains around his eyes and smeared down his jaw. Daryl will be as feral as he was before, without care to soften the hard lines of his shoulders or the wary, flickering sweep of his eyes.

“Because you’re incredible,” Rick replies honestly. Daryl makes a low, wounded sound like Rick’s just punched him in the solar plexus, and the lawyer can’t stand the distance anymore. He comes closer, moving slowly and keeping his hands in sight, and Daryl’s trying to shake his head when Rick gently cups his cheeks. They’re warm beneath his palms, flushing from the proximity of the older man while Daryl’s pale, beautiful eyes widen until he can see the whites all around them. The drifter is trembling like he’s caught between panic and something else, something that makes his lips tremble before they part just slightly. “You’re so incredible, Daryl,” he goes on, the sole focus of the man pressed back against his wall with his arms hanging limply by his sides. Judith is gone for a few hours, out having a fun day of shopping with Carol. The woman had mentioned taking her to the park as well, letting her get some of that energy out, and when he’d seen the eager look on her face, Daryl hadn’t been able to say no. He’d also started talking about leaving though, and Rick isn’t ready for that.

If he’s being entirely honest, he’ll never be ready for that.

“M’not,” the drifter mumbles, trying to shake his head. It feels more like he’s nuzzling into Rick’s touch, and he must realize that, because his cheeks flush even darker and his eyes snap back to Rick’s like he can’t look away. Neither of them are blinking, Rick’s barely breathing, and Daryl makes another soft, lost sound. “Why’re ya doin’ this, Rick?”

“Why won’t you let me?” Rick asks back, honest and raw in a way he’s so rarely been around anyone else. Shane brings out the worst and the best in him, the two of them friends for so long that
they’ve put that word behind them and become family. The man is his brother, his conscience and his confidant. The years stretch back between them, filled with laughter and pain and brotherhood, and Daryl—quiet, incredible Daryl, who seems more comfortable with a boot in his ribs than a hug—has come to mean almost as much to Rick as the man he’s known for so long. His affection for Daryl, his love, is entirely different than his love for Shane. Shane is his brother. He doesn’t know what Daryl is yet, but he knows what he wants him to be. The choice from here belongs to the musician, who is trembling faintly and looking at Rick in a way no one else has ever looked at him before.

“Don’t know how,” Daryl finally admits. It’s so soft, barely a whisper of breath, but the words hit Rick with the force of a tidal wave. It’s inconceivable to him that anyone would look at Daryl and not want the best for him in every aspect. How could anyone see this beautiful, talented man and only see what they could get from him, rather than everything they could give?

“Can I show you?” Rick murmurs, his hope as heavy as new leaves weighing down branches—as fragile as butterfly wings and as determined as rivers simultaneously. Daryl brings out the best and the worst in him, and Rick can’t really find it in himself to mind. HE’s never wanted to protect someone so much—never wanted to hurt so wholly and devastatingly on their behalf. He’s hurt people before, back when he and Shane were teenagers and they thought the world should bow to them. When they were young and stupid and ready to fight anyone and anything, although Shane was the more aggressive one. Rick stepped in when he needed to, and with a ferocity that most never expected from someone generally so quiet and even-tempered. It’s a trait that has followed him through life, it’s what makes him a good lawyer, because he’s gentle and supportive but he will rip apart the prosecution without hesitation to defend his clients.

Rick wants to do the same for Daryl. He wants to find the ones who have hurt him and watch them suffer, because the musician is too beautiful, too phenomenal—because any other word is too pale in comparison—to suffer the way he has been for so long. People like Daryl, they’re who Rick lives to protect. They’re his creed and his oath to defend and serve made into flesh, only this particular man is so much more than anyone else who’s come and gone through Rick’s life. He wants to keep Daryl by his side and see him safe, but he’ll never try to cage the man to make him stay. He’ll plead and persuade, but he will never collar Daryl. He’d never want to see him broken to heel, because the drifter’s nature is made up of his freedom. Without it, Daryl wouldn’t be half of who he is, and Rick will see that protected at any cost.

“Ain’t worth it,” Daryl mutters, but he’s leaning into Rick just a little, closing the space between them a fraction and sighing softly as his eyes go from wide and startled to relaxed and intense. There’s something there, something brewing that spreads warmth through Rick like summer wind caressing his skin. It’s like stepping out into sunlight after staying hidden in the air conditioning all day, and he’s angling his head before he’s even thought about it.

The first brush of their lips makes Daryl freeze against him, his muscles locked up so suddenly that Rick knows he’s made a horrible mistake. He’s pushed too hard too soon, and now he has no one but himself to blame when Daryl runs. In the next instant, those thoughts are banished. They’re swept away with the tide when Daryl’s arms come up and lock around his shoulders. Strong, capable hands fist in the back of his shirt and the drifter makes a stunned sound against his mouth. Rick tries again, scraping curious, hopeful kisses against Daryl’s chapped lips until he feels the man melt back against the wall; feels those thin lips soften and open and move against his as Daryl pulls him closer.

Their first proper kiss is like the sun rising after a long, cold night. It’s like the crackle and pop of a fire, when you’re so close you can’t tell if it’s just perfect or if you’re going to get burned. Kissing Daryl is like the crisp, fresh chill of a stream and the sweet brush wildflowers as you walk through them. It’s everything and nothing, it’s Rick’s entire life condensed into one moment. It’s the rush of winning a case for his client—the elation of graduation and knowing he’s on his way to making a
difference in the world. It’s love, new and fragile but protected with careful, caring hands so that it can grow and be nurtured and never know a moment of pain.

Daryl kisses like he doesn’t know what he’s doing, like no one has ever done this for him before, and he lets Rick lead with a beautiful sound that echoes through Rick’s ears and reverberates in his chest next to the heavy, warm beat of his heart. They kiss chastely, curious and exploring, and then Daryl tries to lick across his own lower lips and the tip of his tongue curls and flicks against Rick’s mouth. He rumbles quietly at the warm, wet spark of it, licking at Daryl in return, and the musician’s head slams back against the wall. He gasps raggedly like he’s been holding his breath this whole time, his eyes unfocused and his cheeks red and hot beneath Rick’s palms. He slides one hand up to run it through the man’s wild hair, making a soothing sound in the back of his throat as he guides Daryl back from his panicked surprise.

“Jesus fuckin’ hell,” he hisses through clenched teeth. Rick watches as he shuts his eyes tightly and thumps his head back against the wall again. He swallows thickly, the bob of his Adam’s apple far too enticing, and then he’s on Rick again. It’s a ferocity the lawyer isn’t expecting, and he grunts when his back hits the opposite wall before Daryl’s mouth is hard against his and he feels the drifter’s tongue swipe heavily across his teeth. He kisses back with an intensity unmatched by anything else that’s been building between them, holding Daryl close and showing him everything they can’t manage to put into words. They feed one another with nothing but their gasps and the connection that’s been there for what feels like forever. Daryl has fought it, has tried to push it away and ignore it, but Rick has embraced it since the first day he saw the man using a bucket as his drums and singing with such a deep, perfect voice that he’d pitched Rick right into adoration and affection.

They pull apart slower this time, lingering and panting against each other’s mouths. Rick rests his forehead against Daryl’s, closing his eyes and not even trying to fight the smile curling across his tender, swollen lips. “You amaze me more every day, Daryl,” he whispers. “Not a single day that you haven’t since we met.”

“Yer gonna get tired’a me,” the drifter promises. He sounds resigned and sorrowful at the same time, so Rick has to kiss him. It’s sweet and slow, gentle in a way the last ones weren’t, and he feels Daryl shudder against him like there’s too much building inside of him and he doesn’t know what to do with it.

“I’m not,” Rick replies easily. He pets through Daryl’s hair, feeling how soft it is and being careful when it catches around his fingers. The younger man sighs quietly and leans against him, trapping Rick between himself and the wall. His hands press into the cool plaster, and Rick turns to kiss his strong, bare forearm. Daryl shudders again and steps back; fists his hand uncertainly in Rick’s t-shirt and tugs gently. He looks so nervous, like now that the moment is over Rick’s going to go back on everything he’s been fighting for so far and throw the man out. It’s not going to happen, no matter what, and he does his best to show that; will continue to do his best every day he’s still breathing and Daryl is at his side.

Letting himself be pulled, the lawyer follows Daryl to the couch with a smile and settles into the cushions. He pulls Daryl down before the drifter can try to leave, feeling the heavy, comforting weight of him as he situates them so he’s leaning against the arm of the couch and Daryl’s back is resting against his chest. The man’s head is on his shoulder, his eyes closed, and they relax in silence for a few moments. When fingers begin tapping rhythmically against his lower thigh, close to the bend of his knee, Rick knows what’s coming and he smiles.
Daryl’s voice is low and rough, but as he sinks into the song it smooths out into something sweet and captivating—something deep and meaningful and so beautiful Rick has to close his eyes and immerse himself in the lyrics so he can feel them rather than just listening.

“Sleep don’t visit, so I choke on sun;
And th’ days blur int’a one;
And th’ backs of my eyes hum wit’ things I’ve never done.

Sheets are swayin’ from an old clothesline;
Like a row of captured ghosts over old dead grass;
Was never much but we made the most;
Welcome home.”

It’s an unusual song, if for no other reason than the structure of the lyrics and the pacing. Rick’s never heard one quite like it before, and he finds himself humming along out of beat with Daryl. The drifter’s voice dips into something low and raspy, painting a story of agony and revival that leaves Rick wanting to cry and smile simultaneously. He’s never met anyone who can morph lyrics the way Daryl can—who can take a song that’s been sung by millions of people and twist it into something entirely his own. It leaves his audiences captivated, whether he’s singing in front of a crowd at the park or just for Rick; the two of them tucked away in an apartment that feels more like home than it ever has before.

“Ships’re launchin’ from my chest;
Some have names but most do not;
If ya find one, please let me know what piece I’ve lost;

Peel th’ scars from off my back;
I don’ need them anymore;
You c’n throw ‘em out or keep ‘em in yer mason jars;
I’ve come home.”

“Have you?” Rick whispers. Daryl keeps humming for a little longer, his head tipped back so that the lawyer can see how relaxed his expression is. He looks more at peace than Rick has ever seen him in all the times they ran into one another on the streets. It’s like these four walls and the roof over
their heads have given him something he’s never had before—or something he’d lost a long time ago and has been searching for ever since.

“Have I what?” the younger man finally murmurs. Rick runs his fingers through Daryl’s hair, listening to his quiet sigh and smiling when the musician leans back against him a little harder.

“Have you come home?”

Pale blue eyes crack open, rolling until they’re fixed on Rick and he’s drowning in the depths of them. He can see the smallest flecks of darker blue and bronze circling Daryl’s pupils, something he’d never noticed before and finds himself fascinated by. There are stories hidden in the depths of those pretty irises; dangers and fears and pain unlike anything Rick has ever experienced in his life. Daryl has lived a hard life, a life no one should have to suffer through. He’s been so strong through all of it, but Rick can see how it’s taken its toll.

“Ain’t got a home,” Daryl mutters. Rick runs his fingers across one pale cheekbone, worrying over the lack of color even though Daryl is getting better every day. He needs to rest—he needs a bed and warm blankets and someone to keep him safe.

“You could have one here, if you wanted.” The skin beneath his fingertips is so soft under Daryl’s penetrative eyes; rougher the lower Rick goes until he’s rubbing through the man’s short, neat beard and feeling the hairs tickle his fingers. He can’t help but follow the line of Daryl’s jaw, marveling over the textures until he traces one finger lightly beneath the man’s left eye.

“Was another drifter,” Daryl says suddenly. Rick frowns and looks at him, his hand pausing at the corner of the musician’s eye. Daryl turns his head into the contact, silently asking for more, so Rick goes back to stroking his face; letting his fingers wander however they choose. When he brushes over Daryl’s upper lip, he feels the quick puff of air as the younger man breathes out sharply; shuddering against him slightly but not asking for Rick to stop. “Was another drifter,” he says again, lower and rougher. “Used ta be good friends, ‘til he fell in with th’ wrong kind’a people. Kept tryin’ ta take what I was earnin’. Thought he could beat th’ piss out’a me an’ I’d give in. Was jus’ some tweaker fuck; high out’a his mind most’a th’ time. Prob’ly don’ remember doin’ half’a what he did. Don’ matter none, anyway. Li’l bitch had nothin’ on m’ old man.”

That does not sound like a story Rick wants to hear; or one that Daryl wants to tell. The way his voice changes, dipping lower and edged with a whine, and the way his body tenses subtly—it’s more than enough for Rick to realize that they need a change of topic.

“What should we make for dinner tonight?”

Daryl breathes out slowly, his faint trembling easing until he’s relaxed and pliant beneath Rick’s touches again. He’s back to petting the drifter’s face, following the tendons in his neck down and skirting the collar of his sleeveless shirt.

“Kid loves them damn chick’n nuggets,” Daryl laughs quietly. “Prob’ly eat ‘em ev’ry damn meal if I’d let her.”

“I might have some in the freezer,” Rick admits. The drifter gives him a baleful look, but Rick just smiles and leans forward. They look at one another, each one upside down to the other and breathing gently as their eyes rove and take in details that can only be seen from up close. Rick realizes for the first time that Daryl has a tiny beauty mark just beside his nose, hidden in the shadow of it unless you’re close enough to notice. His features are so unusual, and yet they combine to form a picture that is breathtaking. He’s gorgeous—one of the most beautiful people Rick has ever seen—and he doesn’t even realize it about himself. In a way, that’s even more beautiful, although Rick wants
nothing more than to spend every day for the rest of his life proving to Daryl just how worthy he truly is.

“I think I love you,” he whispers. He doesn’t mean for it to come out, it just happens, and his eyes widen slightly as he looks down at Daryl and waits. He doesn’t even think he’s breathing; he’s frozen with his hands cupping the musician’s jawline and fanning across his tanned throat. He feels the bob of Daryl’s adam’s apple when he swallows, and Rick swallows thickly too. “Don’t run,” he implores—and his voice is soft and weak to his own ears.

“Can’t promise that.” Daryl whispers back. His eyes flick away toward the wall before snapping back to Rick’s face like he can’t stray for long. “Ain’t never had a real home. Barely even had four walls, or a damn roof.” He swallows again, his tongue flicking over his lower lip; dragging it inward so he can dig his teeth into it for a moment before letting it slip free with a sigh. “Ain’t… ain’t gonna be ‘cause’a that, though,” the drifter adds roughly. “Jus…”

“I understand,” Rick promises quickly. “I’m sorry, I know it’s fast. I just…”

“Don’t.” Closing his eyes, Daryl breathes in deeply and holds the air in his lungs for a moment before letting it out again. “Don’ say nothin’. Ain’t gonna matt’r.”

“It’s always gonna matter.”

Daryl gets up, and Rick doesn’t try to stop him. He climbs off the couch and stands beside the drifter, stretching his arms over his head and hissing as his back pops. The relief that follows makes him sigh happily, and he turns to look at Daryl and sees the younger man watching him with a look that is so guarded and painfully hopeful that Rick has to cup his jaw and kiss him. It’s a slow, easy brush of their lips, nothing forceful or demanding, and Daryl makes a quiet sound against Rick’s chin when the lawyer pulls back and rests their foreheads together. He looks at Daryl and smiles.

“You’re always gonna matter,” he whispers. Daryl doesn’t try to look away, but his insecurities are loud enough on their own that Rick can read them easily. He hums softly, shifting just a little bit closer, and Daryl’s eyebrows raise when he recognizes the tune. Before he can say anything, or nerves can get the best of Rick, he starts to sing. He wants to show Daryl his emotions in the same way the drifter constantly does, using the lyrics to channel what he feels and give it the power normal words just don’t have.

“You with the sad eyes;
Don’t be discouraged;
Oh, I realize it’s hard to take courage;
In a world full of people;
You can lose sight of it all;
And the darkness inside you;
Can make you feel so small.

But I see your true colors shinin’ through;
Your true colors;
And that’s why I love you;
So don’t be afraid to let them show;
Your true colors;
True colors;
Are beautiful like a rainbow.”

He thinks Daryl is going to laugh at him, because it’s the first time Rick has really sang around him. His voice isn’t bad, but he doesn’t have the same range as Daryl. He can’t hit the higher notes, so he rumbles them instead—pouring his passion into the words until there’s no way for his love and his yearning to be misconstrued. Rick keeps humming softly, cupping the back of Daryl’s head and threading his fingers through the man’s hair. He rubs the nape of the musician’s neck and shivers at the first light, fleeting touch of the man’s fingertips against his bare arms.

“Show me a smile then;
Don’t be unhappy;
Can’t remember when
I last saw ya laughin’.”

Rick grins, his eyes burning slightly and his throat tight. He manages to swallow the joyful lump trying to block his words, but he still sounds strained and slightly raspy when he replies to Daryl’s sweet, melodious query.

“If this world makes you crazy;
And you’ve taken all you can bear;
Just call me up;
Because you know I’ll be there.”

Daryl laughs, an honest, unhindered sound. He’s shaking his head, rubbing his forehead against Rick’s and snorting in mingled disbelief and humor. “This ain’t a damn movie, Big Shot,” he huffs. He’s not pulling away though; is still humming under his breath as he wraps one strong, well-defined arm around Rick’s shoulders and tilts his head enough to bump their noses together and steal a quick kiss. Then he’s gone, slipping away and leaving only a trace of his warmth behind. It clings to Rick’s clothes and sinks under his skin, leaving him tingling from head to toe and smiling like an idiot as he follows his wayward drifter into the kitchen.
“So, chicken nuggets?” he asks cheerfully. Daryl is already rooting through his cabinets looking for a baking sheet, and he pauses in his search to look back at Rick over one broad, sloping shoulder.

“Judy a’ways gets what she wants,” the man huffs. There’s nothing derisive in his tone—he loves his adopted daughter too much for that. “An’ if th’ brat wants chick’n nuggets, she’s gon’ get some goddamn chick’n nuggets.”

“You sure it’s not just because you want chicken nuggets?” Rick pulls a bag out of the freezer—they’re the fun nuggets, all of them shaped like dinosaurs. Judith had seemed particularly thrilled when Rick had brought them home, and he figures if she’s happy, then he’s happy too. She’s not his, but he loves her like she could be. Like he hopes that maybe, one day, she will be.

“Shut th’ fuck up,” Daryl grunts. He can’t hide his small, crooked grin, not even when he turns away so Rick can’t see more than a flash of his face. The lawyer pretends he hasn’t seen anything, busying himself with turning the oven on so it can pre-heat before turning back toward Daryl to take the cookie sheet. He’s stopped by a broad, firm body pressing up against his side—strong arms, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist that defies logic, and yet all of it works so well for Daryl.

“I can’t promise I’ll stay, Rick,” the musician whispers. He looks determined and resigned at the same time; like he’s torn in two by what he wants and what he’s told himself he needs. “I can’t…”

“But promise you’ll come back?” Rick leans back against the stove, resting his palms against the edge and looking at Daryl without a trace of judgement. “To visit and stay for at least a little while; maybe stay a little longer than that?”

Daryl bites his lip, chewing on it and distracting Rick with the way his teeth pull at the skin until it’s white and bloodless. He reaches up without thinking and coaxes the man’s lower lip out from between his teeth, brushing his thumb through the tiny patch of hair just beneath it and watching Daryl’s eyes flutter closed. He leans into the touch, tilting his head just slightly. Rick places a gentle whisper of a kiss against the corner of the man’s mouth before pulling back again.

Pale, beautiful eyes open to look at him, full of more than any song can ever put into words. There are words in Daryl’s eyes that Rick has never explored; endless possibilities tucked into every fleck and the fathomless depth of his pupils. He’s something Rick never knew could exist, and something he hopes he’ll never lose.

“C’n stay a little while, at least,” Daryl finally agrees, and Rick has to kiss him again. Daryl kisses back, a little bolder but still unsure of himself, so Rick guides him through it. They learn each other just a little bit more, making their own song for just the two of them, until the beep of the oven breaks the spell and they pull back with tingling mouths and dancing eyes.

“I believe we have a little girl to feed,” Rick chuckles. “She and Carol should be back soon.”

“Yeah.” Leaning past Rick, Daryl checks the time on the back of the oven. He’s close enough for Rick to feel the heat rolling off of him; to breathe in deeply and learn the myriad of scents that are unique to Daryl himself. The drifter shoots him a sly look like he knows exactly what the lawyer is doing before he steps back out of reach and leans against the opposite counter. “Let’s feed our girl.”

Our girl. Rick really, really likes the sound of that.

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