On the Man who Made Malice

by queenofthelab23

Summary

There was only one thing good about the dead coming to life according to Mallory. She could run away from the person she was and the memory of the worst mistake she'd ever made in her life - until she runs straight into it again.

Negan is temptation in leather but is it case of once burned, twice shy or will Mallory finally get revenge on the man who made her what she is today?

Negan/OFC - a slow burn/not slow burn smut fic. Flashbacks in block italics.
Chapter 1

“Allie-”

A finger went up to her lips to silence her idiot partner. Bootsteps went by as they crouched in a cramped crawlspace, surrounded by cobwebs and spiders, breathing stale air. Funny how she would have screamed at the sight of spiders a few years ago - dumb ass fears didn’t really exist now, not when the dead were eating the living. A tiny smile cracked her cheeks as the heavy thudding steps faded away. Before the end of the world, she’d gotten her kicks by stealing whatever she could grab; small, meaningless tat that owners had never noticed was even gone. They’d take their possessions for granted and by the time they did see what was missing, she had absconded with her loot and added to her personal collection of trophies. When she stole before – she could only call that time ‘before’ – her heartbeat would thrum, her palms would sweat and yet she’d feel so fucking alive that not even the shame of getting caught would deter from taking what was her property by right of finders’ keepers. Hiding now, packed into a space tight, she felt something stir in her victory. Just maybe they’d win another round against the real monsters.

Looting during the apocalypse didn’t give her the same easy high, not that she had sought out to outright steal from the living. People now coveted what they owned; anyone still alive cherished what little things they had and guarded every piece with a cocked rifle ready to defend their only possessions to their end. She hadn’t felt that high, the rush of being almost-caught for a long time before the beginning of the end, only chasing it when it helped her stay alert, stay alive. And now, as she was crouching in some infested crawl space with Peter by her side (looking like he was either ready to strike a death blow or throw up on her feet), there was finally, blessedly, that familiar rush of victory. It was so rare to feel like she’d won these days that even something small as a can of beans was worth celebrating in her mind. Anything now was a fucking trophy, worth its weight in gold – if gold still held any type of value.

Beside her in the crawlspace and still as taut as a wire, Peter let out a shaky breath and peered through a crack of light between the wood panels, trying to get a gauge on whether the coast had cleared. She would have done it herself but there was always a risk that their potential assailants would jab a knife in between the gap and she’d be down an eye at the least; if he wanted to volunteer, she wouldn’t stop him. Three of theirs in the last two months (she thought it was two months) had been killed, so only her and Peter were left from their original half dozen. Since his sister had died after a routine scavenger hunt, Peter had been ironically more focussed on surviving and had saved them both more times in the last three weeks than he’d ever done. She had quickly learned that death would always come to those who walked alone and that survival, instead, thrived with trust in the right people. She wasn’t so stupid to think she’d be able to survive long alone.

Leaning back from the gap he’d been peering through, Peter opened his mouth as if he was about to say something. Quickly, she clamped her fingers over his lips and could feel his frustration from his hot, angry gaze. If they had anything, it was time to spare and those literal jack-booted thugs weren’t going to give up without a fight. Her and Peter had raided the kitchen, the bathroom, anywhere they could find, snatching up anything and everything worth carrying in two large rucksacks. When they discovered that place, a farmhouse set back amongst the trees, covered in vines and woodland shit, it had been a beautiful untouched goldmine so very ripe for the taking. It hadn’t even occurred to her that other people had seen it until she saw a glimpse of movement through a dirty window pane, their goldmine suddenly turned into a baited trap. While safety came in stacking your decks, there were plenty of assholes would slice your throat open for a half pack of Raisin Bran. Releasing her fingers from Peter’s mouth, she sat back into the crawlspace as far as she could go and motioned for him to do the same, wary of the risks they were taking.
“Boss ain’t gonna be happy,” one deep voice came, just barely loud enough for them both to hear. Peter’s frustration at waiting seemed to dissipate as she was proved right. “Damn near picked clean over.”

“Rick?” asked a second voice.

“Doubt it. We’d have heard before, if it was him. And he’s too much of a pussy to try again. Scout round the woods, they can’t have got far. Didn’t take as much as they could have so it’s either one person or a few who got interrupted. Bet my ass on the first option.”

“Yeah, it will be your ass…” the second one replied again, but the gruff sound faded before she could hear the rest of the threat. The thugs and their jack boots were heading out, away into the open. She could taste the freedom on the tip of her tongue. With the world giving them a break, they could be back at base within a couple of hours and safe from human threat again.

If it was a trick, though, her and Peter were fucked and royally fucked. If it was real, then that was their shot to escape before whoever those guys were came back and raided the whole place, looking for where they were hiding. Peter jostled her a little, reaching up to the handle on the door and waiting for her go-ahead. She swallowed her tongue and put her faith in his instinct and her own new-found vigour. One or two, maybe three men they could handle together but if it was more? It would be over before it began. Still, the idea of cracking open that tin can and feasting back home was driving her to distraction and rash decisions. Drawing her knife from her belt, she looked over at Peter and gave a short, sharp nod.

The creak of that door slowly swinging out was deafening as they both waited for an attack. Nothing. Not a breath, not a shadow, not a damn sound. After another second, she took a solid step and released a breath that she didn’t know was held in. There was a sweet rush of fresh air in her lungs and she looked back at Peter with that spark of victory mirrored in both of their eyes. Grabbing his free hand, she pulled him out and took another step. Razor-sharp pain stabbed into her shins, piercing through thick layers of her jeans and she fell, face first, onto solid oak flooring, her backpack snapping open at the jarring impact. Sweet breath was knocked from her as the world was thrown back into chaos from eerie silence, her own greasy red hair swimming in front of her face as she turned and looked up, crying out as the wire dug deeper into her skin. Standing over her – over them both – was some guy with a receding hairline and a gun in his hand casually trained on them. She was vaguely aware of another man to her partner’s side with his boot on Peter’s back, pushing him down into the floor. They were both royally fucked.

“Gotcha,” muttered the thug on Peter’s side smugly. Angry at not seeing the razor wire sooner, she spotted her knife just barely in reach instead and made a lunge for it with a grunt, gripping the rubber handle, life depending on it. She swiped at the legs of the asshole closest to her, barbs of wire digging and twisting deeper and deeper into her skin. The asshole dodged the swipe but couldn’t move back, blocked by the wall behind him.

“Fucking bitch,” he swore as she carved her mark in his calf with the end of her knife just as he kicked her wrist. “You’re lucky he doesn’t own a red head yet,” he said almost calmly as he brought the butt of his gun down over her. There was a sickeningly hard crack as her head bounced off the wooden floor, pain exploding across her. The stolen goods, every last can, was scattered around them so far out of her reach now.

“Allie, no…” Peter cried out next to her, his voice strangled as the foot pressed in deeper; she couldn’t hear anymore anyway. Her head felt heavy and light all at once, vision swam, already dazed from hunger, shock andwaning adrenaline seeping out of her. Blood gushed from her scalp and pooled on the floor before she lost the battle to stay awake at the second blow.
The first things that registered were how oddly warm she was, and the strange position she was in, considering how she was lying face down on something vaguely comfy. Either she was hallucinating or they had put her on a couch and not some cold, dark ground awaiting her death. Pain soon flooded her body, pooling around her forehead, vision blurry. She couldn't understand why they would give a shit about her comfort, why she was still alive and breathing. Out of the corner of her eye, there was a slim figure stalking up and down by a window, trying to see outside. As she struggled a little to move, hands bound behind her back with what felt like zip ties, waves of nausea started to hit her. She wasn’t expecting that tug to her shoulder, an arm helping her sit up straight as the nausea abated. The balding thug had pulled her up from her prone position on some moth-eaten couch, the other gun-dog nowhere to be seen. There was no sign of Peter, either, she realised and her gut sank in remorse. She should have been smarter about their escape. Should have seen the trip wire before they pulled it taut. Hell, he didn’t even want to go raid the house in the first place.

“Come on, honey, wake the fuck up,” the man’s gruff voice barked, “I didn’t hit you that hard, and you need all your faculties for the next part.”

Blinking away the headache, she wiped her mouth on the shoulder of her t-shirt, tasting blood. “What’s next then?” Her voice was more than a little hoarse from under-use but, God, she didn’t fucking waiver a bit. “You taking our shit? Leaving us for dead?”

“No… well, you could be half right,” he replied simply and went back to his watch by the window. Her eyes caught some flash of black and red as she followed her captor’s gaze. “Boss might take some pity on you though, make yourself look pretty and he might keep you.”

“Do me a favour and fuck off,” she spat weakly, fear tingling through her spine nonetheless. Cretin. They’d stripped her of her weapons and her jacket. Nothing she owned was left except jeans and a shirt, both dirty and sweaty and cracking with dried blood. They’d even taken her shoes off her so she couldn’t run far, if at all.

A thudding on the door caught her attention and Thug Two walked in, frog marching Peter behind him. Though she was relieved that her friend didn’t seem to be hurt, she couldn’t help but notice he had zip ties around both his wrists too, and patches of blood on his own shins. Behind them, there were more faraway voices in the hallway, one commanding and louder than the rest, and a couple of quieter ones. Thug One and Thug Two looked at each other knowingly while Peter stood next to the couch, looking like he was more nauseated than she was.

“On your knees,” Thug Two commanded of them both quickly, shoving her and Peter to the floor. “And keep your mouths shut until spoken to.”

It was then that her fogged-up brain clicked into place and realised where they were. Instead of dragging them out into the open as delicious Biter bait, they’d just brought them down the fucking stairs and into the living room of the farmhouse they’d raided. Some sweet irony, no doubt. Her shins stung as they made her kneel on the carpet, head forced into a bow at the barrel of a gun trained on her. Her hair hung limply on either side of her face, one half of it thickened by her own blood. Peter was by her side, his head bowed the same way and his body tense; she had to be thankful she hadn’t broken her promise, that he was still alive and breathing.

“I don’t take too fucking kindly to raiders, you know,” came yet another voice. A richer, deeper voice with a twang that she knew all too damn well. “I had a lot riding on this fucking place when you two come along and fucked it all up.”

Her eyes snapped wider in recognition the more he spoke to them. The vile taste of vomit started to
curl into her throat in shock. She was going to be sick if she looked up, she knew it. There was jingling of belt buckles and crinkle of leather, and, fuck, he even had the same swagger. Her skin had already broken into goosebumps at the sound of his voice, what the hell would his face do to her?

God, this was some Karmic joke that was playing out. Either that or she was dead with Lucifer himself taunting her. Keeping her head down, face shielded by her hair, she wondered how long it’d take him to realise who she was. Did he even remember her face? It had been a long damn time since... before.

“We were just hungry,” Peter said next to her and she wanted to make him shut up again, to stop drawing attention to elicit sympathy that was never going to come. “Please, just… just hungry.”

Her chest heaved as she dared to move her eyes up from the floor and over him, hoping that she was wrong. What caught her attention was the bat dangling by his side, the shaft wrapped in a blanket of crusted barbed wire. The man’s attentions were fixed on her partner and she snapped her head back down before he could see her face.

“Hungry, huh?” he chuckled, “Fuck me, they’re hungry. My heart goddamn bleeds,” he laughed and Thugs One and Two chuckled too. “Heard you caught Simon good in the leg. Nearly made him piss his pants.”

“She did, actually, with a Bowie knife. We took it.” Thug One – Simon, she guessed – answered stoically. Shifting from knee to knee, trying to focus on the pain in her head and her legs instead of remembering the pain she got looking at his face, her head stayed down. Keep quiet, she told herself; don’t rise to his bait when he sees.

“Bowie knife?” he said, interest clearly piqued. “Now where’d you get a fucking Bowie knife from, doll?” She didn’t say a word, yet, trying to keep her head down low. She didn’t answer. “You fucking speak when you’re fucking spoken to or I’ll do something you’re gonna regret…” he growled threateningly. "Want your boy here to keep his ears?"

“Guy I knew,” she replied quietly and quickly. “He collected them. I stole one once.”

Suddenly, there was a calloused hand around her chin, yanking her face up painfully. A split second and then she saw it; it was pure recognition on his face, through the ache in her head and her blurry vision. She must have looked the same way at him. Of course it was him. She’d never forgotten the sound of his laughter and how he commanded a room no matter where it was, how he would reduce her arguments to nothing and break her defences down in a moment. She smiled in a tiny victory, glaring with pale blue eyes and trying not to laugh at the astounded expression on his face. Someone had thrown ice water over his fire but he looked like he wanted to draw blood all the same.

“Well fuck me sideways…” he muttered to himself, a slow grin appearing on his wretched face.

“Hello to you too, Negan,” she replied hoarsely, trying to catch her breath. Nonchalance, indifference. He’d hate them both, wanting fire and rage. “How you been?”

“Oh I’m peachy keen, doll,” he stepped back and threw her chin out of his grasp, as if touching her hurt him. “What’s it now? Two years?”

“Three, I think, maybe four but who’s counting winters these days?”

He laughed richly and nodded in agreement, crouching down for a moment. “Why’d this shit-streak call you Allie?”

“Because I told him to. It’s my name, isn’t it?” Peter’s sharp gaze turned on her, shocked and
confused. He was promptly ignored. “Or you forget that too?”

Negan laughed and poked the bat in her face as he stood again, using that thing to make his damn point. “Oh no, sweetheart, I fucking remember. I remember fucking everything.” There was a lull and she was acutely aware of everyone’s eyes on her. “I almost missed you, Mallory. Air just got a little sweeter.”

She hated hearing him say her full name again. It had been years since she’d heard it spoken aloud – Allie was an easy nickname she went by now, when hearing her real name turned her back into the person she’d been before the end of the world. “What are you gonna do?” she asked, shoulders beginning to ache from where her wrists were bound together, “Just… just let Peter go. It doesn’t have to be like this. Come on, Negan.”

Those were the wrong words to pick; Peter was grabbed by the scruff, his head under Negan’s boot before she could blink, neck threatening to snap. “Oh they don’t? How fucking magnanimous of you,” he spat. “Are you sure I can’t turn your little boyfriend’s head into a skidmark on the fucking carpet?” The bat rose up to rest on his shoulder. “You seem worried about him more than you are yourself, that’s a fucking new development for you.”

He towered over her and her stomach tumbled. Peter pleaded with his eyes. “What do you want from us? You already took everything,” Mallory pleaded, looking up at him.

"Let us go!"

“Y’see if someone took what fucking belonged to me, I’d usually give them a choice. After, y’know, killing one of them. Still, it’d be a shame to ruin this lovely carpet…” he looked at Peter’s head under his boot and smiled. “Lucky for you both, there’s only two of you. And fifty of me. You ain’t getting a choice to go free, no, no, no, Princess. You – and everything you own – is mine now. Either that or the aforementioned skidmark on the floor.” He hovered the bat above Peter's head threateningly.

Her jaw set, teeth gritting, she gave a single nod. Her soul to the devil for their lives, for Peter’s life. For his sister.

“Well then,” Negan grinned and hopped over Peter’s prone form to grab Mallory’s arm and yank her up to her feet. “You can ride in the fucking front with me. We got a lot to catch up on, after all. I know you missed me,” he winked lasciviously at her before turning to the man called Simon.

“Throw the other one in the back with the rest of the shit, standard drill.”

Before she could blink, the room was empty and cold. The only two were her and Negan. She didn’t want to give him anymore of herself than she could but... if it meant her neck, she’d have no choice. “Negan,” Mallory kept her voice to a mutter, not wanting to rile him up further. “It’s just me and him. No group, no bunker. What you caught us with is all we have in the world.”

“Like I said, my heart bleeds for you, Princess,” Negan replied, running his hand down her arm in a tender gesture, making her skin tingle. “But I can’t have you running around out around here, taking what’s mine, spilling your guts out. You’ll see what we got, back at The Sanctuary. Might even like it when you loosen up and look round.”

She leaned away just a bit from him, needing her space from his overwhelming presence. He hadn’t changed much, she’d noticed; maybe got a bit thinner, a bit leaner but just as fucking dangerous as ever. It scared her shitless. “So,” she said after a moment. “You’re alive, then.”

“Yeah. You know, I did miss you too. Got real broken up about how we left it and everything. Should have known you’d come running back to me eventually,” Negan grinned so wide and came
so close again she could see the flecks of green in his eyes and sun spots behind his beard. His body was threatening to press into hers. One of his thumbs hovered over her bottom lip, in a dare. “And if you want your little boyfriend to be nice and safe in The Sanctuary you’re going to do what I fucking say. Simon didn’t hit you that hard, did he?” He said, his hand drifting up into her hair. Those calloused fingers pulled tenderly at her scalp, trying to see the gash through the blood. Her head swam again as pain pricked at her.

“I’m not yours anymore, I’m not your mistress anymore,” Mallory finally replied, breathless. “We’re not having an affair. You can take all my shit but I am not going to be your property again.”

He didn’t react much; not that she saw. Instead, he huffed and pulled her along by the arm, out of the living room. “I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

Steered outside, the goose bumps refused to abate. Peter – sitting in the back of a pickup truck – looked back to her with weariness and anger. Negan swung his bat onto his shoulder and Mallory turned her gaze back ahead. It figured, she thought; someone was having some fun at her expense now that the one person she could truly never trust was the one she had to. They came to a dirty car in the head of a line of them, its black paint chipped and chrome rusting and splattered with dried flesh. Negan reached ahead and opened the passenger side door for her, her hands still bound behind her back.

“Fuck, Princess, was your ass always so fucking perfect?” he whispered into her ear as she managed to bundle herself into seat. “God fucking damn, I shoulda paid closer attention.”

Mallory just rolled her eyes and tried not to think about those days.

It hadn’t been an innocent relationship – she wasn’t an innocent woman and she wasn’t stupid either. Mallory had always known what kind of men she was hitching her wagon to, especially when it came to Negan. The thing was, when he looked at her – a starving man looking at a meal – she felt powerful and desired, valued for her own worth. She hadn’t stolen anything since she was 21 years old and high as a kite at Georgetown; there were no more thrills as she got older and realised what an idiot she’d been to act out the fantasies of a kleptomaniac freak. Still, that craving for a rush had been lying dormant in her for years. She even thought it had died a whimpering death until Negan sauntered into her life, wearing a white t-shirt and grass-stained jeans, back in the before.

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Another scrawl on some downloaded worksheets, another attempt at filling her time, another try at finding something she could love. Mallory tucked her hair back behind her ear as she sat on a bench seat. The entire place was empty and quiet, the last cheers coming from some practice session outside ten minutes ago. She was thankful for the emptiness.

“Hey, fuck, whatever your name is – new girl,” someone said from behind her. Mallory turned her head instantly, a red pen clamped between her lips. In the doorway of her classroom lingered a guy who was leaning casually on the jamb of the door. He wore the most imperceptible of looks, somewhere between a smile and a frown behind the scruff. His lean arms were folded across his chest, the slight sweat stains under his arms just noticeable. How long had he been there watching her, exactly? “Make sure you keep the fucking noise down, and you and me won’t have a problem being nice next-door neighbours, okay?”

“Neighbours?” Mallory parroted, having pulled the pen from between her lips. “Ah…” a description clicked in her brain. “You must be Negan, huh?” She punctuated his name with a jab of her pen.
He raised his arms up in defence for a second before he wrapped them both back round his chest. “My reputation precedes me.”

“That, and the cursing.” Turning around, she motioned for him to come inside, annoyed at the way he lingered. She went about fixing the papers strewn across her work surface. His reputation did indeed precede him and she’d heard nothing good. Things about him being a bully, about how he worked the kids to death and how his adult education class was a front for illegal gambling. Those were the rumours. “I’m Mallory, or you can keep calling me new girl if you want.”

“I fucking might. And you… do what, exactly?” he asked, eyeing her up and down as she rose from her seat. She got the feeling that he wasn’t used to having someone occupy his space.

“Well… I teach people to play this thing…” she said, pointing to the old, creaking piano behind her, still littered with sheet music and her own scribbled notes. “I’ll take a wild stab in the dark and say you teach something sports-related?”

“Fantasy football,” he said, tilting his head as he walked in the room. “I coach during the day with the kids, weekends I get the Dads playing fantasy fucking football. And ping pong,” he added as an afterthought, “When the season’s over, it’s ping pong.”

Mallory swallowed a laugh and instead bit her lip, setting the papers on one of the desks. “Ping pong and fantasy football. Hence the whistle?” she asked, pointing to the one dangling from his neck.

“Just finished training with the brats,” Negan said, tilting his wrist and looking at his watch. “Didn’t think anyone would be around from the Adult Ed classes yet.”

Nodding softly, she looked back at her papers, “Just getting a head start before tomorrow. There’s only a few people taking part, but it’s a lot to pack in, teaching piano to people who don’t know what treble clef is.” He smiled at that, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “Might end up being noisier than you want, at least at first.”

“I don’t mind a bit of fucking noise, new girl. I just prefer something other than morons thinking they can play a piano after a single lesson.”

Negan was checking her out now. He wasn’t even subtle, dragging his eyes up and down her body so much so that Mallory felt naked. She wasn’t an idiot; there was an attractive youth about her, maybe a spark that he even saw as innocence in his eyes. Her experience with men tended to go one of two ways, and he had chosen option one: flirting. Negan had to be in his forties at least, she thought. He owned maybe a decade and a half on her, possibly more. Even if he wasn’t older than her, and wasn’t her co-worker – because, fuck, he was fucking hot and no, she wasn’t blind – there was one giant and glaring problem currently perched on his left hand. Even wearing the most basic of clothes, with those bright grass stains, he might as well have worn gold robes. Mallory felt underdressed as she did in knee-length shorts and a sweater, even though he wasn’t much better.

“Uh huh. I can’t really help you there. Mine’s a beginner class so there’ll be more than a few bum notes.” Her hands slipped into her back pockets, trying to stand straighter. Something told her that the next six months were going to be Hell, working next to him. “It was nice to meet you anyway, Mr Negan, so-”

“Just Negan,” he had corrected instantly. “You look like you could use a cup of shitty coffee if you’re planning on being fucking trapped in here after dark. Did Bob show you the good teacher’s lounge or let you think the only one was that shithole next to the auditorium?”
Mallory’s brow knit in confusion, “There’s another teacher’s lounge?”

He laughed again, creasing his eyes, and put a guiding hand on the small of her back. “Oh doll, you shouldn’t listen to what that piss-stain says. Let me have the pleasure of showing you round instead.”

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A jolt from the crapped-out shocks of his car shifted her body painfully. It was useless thinking about who he was before the apocalypse, since the very real Negan was sitting next to her, having zip-tied her hands behind her back and taken everything she owned. How Mallory hadn’t thought about the possibility that he’d be alive still, she didn’t know. He wasn’t even just surviving, he was thriving from what she could see. He wasn’t starving or dirty like she was, he had no injuries and was singing along to whatever 80s rock was playing in the car. He’d won an unwinnable situation because of course he had; he was Negan.

“I fucking love that air, don’t you, Mal?” he grinned, the window wide open on his side. “Sweet peaches, never smelled em before the Biters come along. It’s all I fucking smell now.” She didn’t say anything but simply sighed an exhausted sigh and let her head fall back. “Awww don’t pout on me. You’re lucky I got to you first. You think your boyfriend could scare off some of the nastier elements out there? Jesus fucking Christ, he couldn’t scare the dust off a moth.”

“He can handle the Biters, Negan, you don’t know him.”

“Not talking about the dead, Princess. You stick with me and my boys, I’ll make sure nobody ever lays a fucking finger on you again.” He spared her a long, luxurious glance.

“I bet,” she bit back. Her mouth had always got her in trouble with him. Neither of them had changed that much. “How far away is this place?”

“About an hour. Then I’ll get that head of yours checked out by the doc. Don’t go falling asleep on me yet. Who knows what kind of trouble you got yourself into.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Mallory has no idea what to do when Negan invades her world again. Faced danger as a captive of a man she knows too well, she needs to figure out whether to play his games or fight him with her only ammunition.

Chapter Notes

Flashbacks indicated by italics. Beta’d as always by my friend Nicky. We're getting to the good stuff soon, I promise. Thanks for your time!

Edit: I forgot to add that if you’re interested in hearing the piano piece played by Mallory here, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=geOw78Yf7iw

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey, wake the Hell up!”

Her eyes snapped open and she winced in pain, attempting to pull her wrists apart. Fuck; they were still bound together. The skin beneath the plastic had to be rubbed red raw too – sweaty and disgusting and painful. Maybe Negan thought she was a flight risk or something since it was the only explanation for keeping her bound up. Either that or he liked the idea of keeping her on a leash. Mallory had only shut her eyes for a moment, barely five minutes to ease the throbbing in her head and the lingering nausea. It wasn’t like there was even a campsite in the distance yet, whatever this Sanctuary was that he’d bragged about. Men.

“I told you not to close your fucking eyes…”

“I heard it the first time. Trust me, nobody can sleep with you caterwauling next to them.” Mallory groaned just a bit, jolted by another shock from the car bouncing on the road. “Can’t you go a bit easier? You’re driving like a maniac.”

Negan chuckled and purposefully ran over another pothole, swerving the car just to hit it. The thing lurched and Mallory groaned out again – the grin on his face stung worse than the pothole. “God you’re such a child.” She rolled her shoulders and tried to make herself comfortable again, as much as she could. “You could at least cut these ties off. I’m not gonna run.”

“I know, why d’you think I took your boots?” he replied, eyes trained on the empty road.

Then, from the corner of her eye in a wing mirror, Mallory saw the pick-up truck behind them take a left turn onto cleaner asphalt. It drove off, disappearing and taking Peter with it. She panicked, confused, and turned in her seat, wrenching her neck desperately to try and see. “What… what’s going on? Negan, what the fuck?!” she demanded, still craning her neck to try and remember the path the truck had taken. Rage and fear bubbled in her chest and coiled in the back of her throat.
“Sit back down, Jesus Christ, you’ll make yourself sick…” Negan grumbled and reached across the seat, grabbing her arm and spinning her back around. “You throw up in my fucking car and I’ll leave those ties on your wrists for a week!” He stretched his neck visibly and sighed. “They’re doing what we always do with strays like him, taking them back to their bunkers.”

“I told you,” she pleaded, looking at him with those watery blue eyes. “We don’t have any-”

“Bull-fucking-shit. Bull-mother fucking-shit!” he yelled, slamming his fist down on the centre console. “You must have hit that pretty head really fucking hard to forget; I know when you’re fucking lying to me, Mal. Your boyfriend’s probably given you up. My men are gonna go find your love-nest hidey hole and they’re gonna get all your pathetic shit and take everything back with them. Standard fucking protocol!” Her heart hammered in her chest. He had always hated liars, despised hoarders and thieves too. “What, you think because we fucked a couple times a few years ago, that I’d treat you different to anybody else?”

“You’re unbelievable…” she muttered after a moment. “What more do you want, huh? Maybe you can skin me and tan my ass for a throw pillow while you’re at it.”

“Don’t fucking tempt me, doll…” he seethed.

Mallory would never forget what Negan did when he was lied to. The man had always been a sneak, one of those true-blue assholes who could twist you round his finger, let you go like a spinning top and then walk away to let you crash. God forbid she’d ever tried to have her own life – he’d infected her like a parasite and fed upon her need for him. She was tired and drained.

“If you hurt him, Negan, I swear to God-”

He slammed on the brakes hard with his booted foot, pitching her forward in the seat. He twisted violently and produced a switchblade out of seeming thin air. She didn’t know where he’d stashed it or how, but it was suddenly in front of her nose and glinting in the fading sunshine, a very visceral threat. “Keep swearing to God, I fucking dare you. Go on, Mal, you’ll do what?” He laughed and grinned when she didn’t respond, tapping the tip of the knife on her cheek. “God’s not listening to you anymore, I promise that. If he was, he wouldn’t have put you in my crosshairs.” His nostrils flared in anger and neck strained, the veins pulsing, breath quickened. She could tell he was holding back, tensing and evaluating. For all she knew, it was just to try and scare her.

“I just…” she struggled, her mouth suddenly dry and breath absent from her lungs. “I don’t want to hurt you, I don’t want to hurt anyone anymore.” Mallory’s lips twitched into the sad ghost of a smile. “You being here, it’s just that… I don’t understand why I’m up here with you and Peter’s with them. It doesn’t make any sense. The last time I saw you-”

“I can’t even remember the last time,” he said, lowering the switchblade away from her. Instead he pushed her forward and grabbed the bound bundle of her wrists behind her back, forcibly contorting her until she faced away from him, staring out the passenger side window. He was bound to slit her throat, kick her out of the car and watch her bleed to death. “What we did back then was called fucking, doll, that was it. Didn’t mean shit then, and it means even less now that it’s the end of the fucking world.”

Mallory felt the metal press between her hands, carefully angled to avoid her flesh. With one swift slice, her wrists were free and her shoulders sagged in relief. She sighed happily and collapsed back into the car seat, her fingers wrapping around her chapped wrists. Blood started flowing blessedly back into the skin as Negan slipped the knife into the top of his pocket. Her skin stung, but the sheer happiness at not being dead far outweighed that.
There was nothing but tense silence as he righted himself and started up the heap of junk again.

“Thank you,” she said quietly after a moment, the pain through her whole body seeming to dissipate at the sheer relief from not being tied up.

“Make sure I don’t regret doing that,” Negan replied.

Neither of them said another word to the other as he drove, the sunlight that had glinted off the knife now fading quickly. Time dragged by until Mallory saw a structure in the distance – not a campsite, not a fortified house or even just mesh gates. Her and the half dozen other people she’d started with had spent nights in nearly every type of place from court buildings to tree tops but this? It was a whole fucking factory. The perimeter stretched further than she could see, walls of steel and bars, and – fuck – there were people. The closer they got to the front gate, the more people she spotted. It was the most beautiful thing she’d seen in months. Even the few Biters around couldn’t ruin the dominating awe she felt. As they drew closer, Negan flashed the headlights and the gates in front of them swung open slowly like they were welcoming the king back to his palace.

Mallory spared a glance at her captor’s face and swore she could see something like pride behind those dark eyes. Those dark, voracious eyes.

A month went by without so much as a wave from her supposedly evil next door neighbour. His classroom wasn’t going empty either – three nights out of the four that she taught classes, he did too. It was on those nights that she saw the company he kept. Every single one was like a reflection of him in one way or another. Maybe a trait he either looked for or they emulated, Mallory wasn’t certain. They were older, they wore leather, they talked endlessly about sports and women; far too much to be healthy, she thought. Occasionally through the walls, she’d hear Negan yelling at them to shut the fuck up and listen to whatever he was teaching them about fantasy football. It was the only times she heard his voice and even then, she wasn’t sure he was teaching them anything. He could just be playing poker for all she knew.

He never once complained about the honestly shitty piano playing coming from the classroom. Her dozen students had been broken up into four classes of three in each class, one class per night she taught. Progress had started ridiculously slow and every night she had headaches from the off-key missed notes and forgotten scales. Why she even bothered, she wasn’t sure. Within that quiet month, three people stopped coming to her classes altogether. Mallory couldn’t deny that the loss stung a bit when she realised she had the highest drop-off rate in Adult Ed history.

She had been on a call to one of her dropouts when Negan reared his head again, five weeks into her tenure.

“I get that it’s a lot of work but we were really making progre-” she rolled her eyes as she paced up and down the teacher’s lounge. The good teacher’s lounge. “Jack, it’s one night a week and I’d be happy to do some extra work if you feel like you’re falling behind.” Mallory almost jumped at the sound of the door snapping shut; Negan didn’t seem to give a damn what noise he was making when it was her quiet he was intruding on. “It’s just confusing me because you were getting really good. Is it me?”

“Tell him to fuck off,” Negan said aloud before as he bit into an apple nonchalantly.

Mallory waved her hand at him and slumped down into one of the chairs, playing with the end of her pendant. She had resigned herself to the fact that she’d lost another student, and another good one at that. “No, sure. I understand. Good luck.” She pulled her phone from her ear and ended the
“You shoulda told him to fuck off.” Negan repeated through a mouthful of fruit.

“I don’t get it,” Mallory replied, exasperated. “That’s the third one that’s quit on me in the last two weeks.” In truth, she’d liked that one. He was polite and sweet, always patient and listened though maybe a little flirting was distracting him. Losing Jack had cut her deeper than she expected, regardless of him being the third one. “Is it me? Am I a really crappy teacher?”

“Three quitters in two weeks? Yeah, probably.” He said, sitting down across from her.

“Then why am I even doing this job?” she said, slipping her pendant round and round her fingers like a magic trick. “I’m not getting anything out of it except minimum wage.”

He snorted derisively. “Sure, doll, that’s why you’re here until late every fucking night making sure you got whatever your shitty students need. Because you’re not getting anything out of it.” He leaned forward, crooking his finger. “Fuck the students. Do this for yourself, not them.”

She stopped fiddling with her pendant and glanced Negan over, confused. “How’d you know I’m here late if you’re not here too? I thought I was the last one out every night.”

“You’re not. That’s how I know.” She noticed now, how his body sat relaxed and easy but his eyes were trained on her face. “But that’s not the fucking point. You didn’t take some shitty minimum wage, no-thanks job because you love the long hours and crap piano playing. So, why’d you take it?”

Mallory took a moment before she answered him. He probably wouldn’t understand. “For the piano.” Sure enough, he looked at her with his brow crossed and confused. “I am up to my ears in debt, I can’t afford to rent one, let alone go and buy one. I missed playing, missed singing along.”

She was sure he’d give her that cocky laugh and tease her endlessly about it. Instead he just shrugged, “So go fucking play piano then. I thought you were smart, Jesus Christ…”

“I am smart.”

“No, you’re not. Not if you care about whether they care. Screw them if they wanna quit. Hell, spend every fucking lesson just playing and make them sit and listen. Just do what you want to do, doll,” he grinned wider, “I do.” He got up from his chair and tossed the half-eaten apple into a nearby trash can, the fruit landing with a thud.

Mallory sat for a split second before realisation dawned on her, the images slotting into place. Within a second, she had dashed up and grabbed his arm with her lithe little fingers, just as he was halfway out the door. “Wait! Thank you,” she said, looking up as he towered over her. “For the pep talk.”

Negan’s face split into another bright, charming grin. For all the cursing, hyper masculine energy he put out, she thought he had the sweetest smile to go with those dark eyes.

“No sweat off my back. Hopefully that’ll be the end to the God-awful scales you make them do. If I have to hear Für Elise one more fucking time, you’re buying the gun I’ll use to shoot the piano up.”

Mallory laughed and dropped her hand from his arm. “I promise. No more Für Elise. Or scales.”

He winked and headed towards his classroom, whistling aimlessly, with his fists stuffed into his pockets. Maybe everyone she’d spoken to had been wrong about Negan, all those rumours about his
brutal cut downs, his bullying. He’d never said anything to her like that and instead gave her the kick in the pants she needed.

To her surprise, as it turned out, his advice worked. For the next two weeks, her classes consisted of nothing but her playing and the students listening and watching. Mallory would say hello, sit at the piano and talked as she played. Passion flooded through her fingers onto the keys and reignited her waning want to teach. It must have been infectious because by the end of the songs she played, every single one of her leftover students begged her for another chance to try, to learn notes and songs and to play real goddamn music. For every note of the ivories she hit, her need to play more just increased and their want to feel the same thrill got bigger too. Everyone improved. Everyone listened. It was fucking magic.

It was a warm Friday night when it happened. The school – she thought – was empty again except for her. Having spent an hour in her class that day just playing her way through the decades, talking about how the styles changed and how players evolved, all the way up to the 21st century, she was tired. They’d hung on her every word, every key. Still, after every class when the school was empty and echoing, she’d sit down and practice and play and sing if the mood took her, which it often did. Mallory lost all sense of the world when she played.

And so, it was on that sticky Friday night, about 11pm or somewhere near it, with nothing but the janitors working on the other side of the school, that she slipped her fingers over the keys and played another song.

Mallory sang quietly and mostly to herself, just to keep the tempo of the song; “Guess it's true, I'm not good at a one-night stand,” she took a breath and slid her eyes up for a moment. “But I still need love because I'm just a man. These nights never seem to go to plan. I don't want you to leave, will you hold my hand?” Her expression scrunched in frustration as she hit a bad note and lost her rhythm.

She was preparing to re-start the song when she heard his voice again. Mallory always seemed to hear him before she saw him. “You need to stop fucking singing.”

“Am I that bad?” she asked, turning around and glancing at him. Negan had already wandered into her classroom himself, uninvited.

“No, I just like hearing you play better. Start again. Don’t sing this time.”

Raising her brow at him, Mallory nonetheless obeyed and swivelled back around on the bench. She had to bite her lip to keep from singing as she did. She was so lost in the song that she missed how he came to stand right beside her. Negan was always a giant figure but, somehow, he seemed even taller when he was standing over her, casting a shadow across her sheet music. His presence didn’t falter her playing, not even when he slipped down and sat on the empty part of the bench. Her skin tingled where the rough edge of his jeans slid across the tender skin of her calf.

From not noticing him, all she could do now was notice him. She didn’t miss a single note this time and he simply watched her, glance switching from her hands to her face as she did. Her heartbeat kept the rhythm of her playing, too.

Within minutes that felt like hours, the song was over, the air in the room reverberating around her. Mallory reached to close the book to her sheet music and found her slender wrist encircled by Negan’s bigger hand. She turned to see him, confused, he caught her eyes. God. His pupils were blown wide and black, the light barely showing any of the cool toned browns of his irises. His cheeks were pink at the edges too. That scorching gaze was fixated on her face, searching for something.
His hand gently released her wrist and ran up her arm, his fingers skimming her flesh until they threaded through her delicate red waves. Gently, he turned her face to see him. “You know how fucking beautiful you look when you play?” he said through a ragged breath, that gaze travelling down to her chest. “You’re beautiful anyway but… fuck me, Princess.”

“Negan. You’re married,” Mallory warned, releasing a shaky breath.

“I know,” he said, his deep voice sounding as ragged as hers. His hand didn’t move. Neither of them moved. “Thing is, I can’t fucking bring myself to care.”

God, her head hurt. It really, really hurt.

The doctor at the Sanctuary – his name escaped her – wasn’t half bad, she thought. He had cowered slightly when they first came in, though her brain was a little fuzzy from the concussion so it might have been in her imagination. As she tried to think about it, Mallory could have sworn that she saw a few people kneel to Negan as they walked past them. Sure, he had made her and Peter kneel back at the house as well but she didn’t want to believe that he would demand it of everyone.

She had to admit that the place he’d built was astounding. People looked healthy, clean and well-fed, their hair cut and combed out to be neat. Whatever else they had she was itching to see. For now, Mallory was sat on a gurney with a man in glasses poking a little viciously at her head. The room Negan had brought her to was functional and clean but as cold and as sterile as they came. The walls were scuffed and chipped at the plaster, the colours muted and frigid as she expected. The doctor was pretty cold in demeanour too, looking at Mallory with a detachment even as she sat there with her sticky blood drying on his linoleum floor.

“Yup, that hurts, right there,” she said as the man pressed his thumb around her cut. She bit back a remark about giving her some water to clean the blood off and have done with it but with one look at Negan’s thunderous face behind her, she clammed up.

The doc hummed and dabbed at the gash with damp gauze, “Any nausea? Fall asleep?”

“Yes and… yes,” she replied robotically, reluctant to admit that Negan had kept her from doing a Sleeping Beauty impression again in the car after he’d jostled her awake. “Not much, but yeah, nausea and tiredness.”

“You’re going to need stitches, three or four of them at least, and something plain to eat, water to drink…” he said. Mallory noticed him glance at Negan’s stoically quiet figure. “And pain relief come tomorrow morning. I wouldn’t leave her to sleep on her own, either,” he muttered to the man in question. “Without a CT scan, I can’t be sure there’s not a hairline fracture on the skull. Better safe than sorry, if that’s what you want.”

“Just stitch her, carefully,” Negan replied instantly, before Mallory could even form words. “Wrists?”

“Just a rinse with antiseptic should be fine. They’re only abraded. And you know the wounds on her shins aren’t deep.” He said, her jeans sliced up the inner seam to the knee. She was more pissed about that than anything else. “Do the same, keep them clean and let them heal in the air. She’ll be fine in a week, ten days at most.”

“Thanks,” Mallory jumped in before Negan could this time. “Just stitch me up and I can do the rest on my own.”

The doctor instead looked at Negan for approval. It wasn’t until he gave an acquiescing nod that the
man went to get supplies to stitch up her scalp.

Waiting until they were alone together, she turned and glared a little. “Can you not let me alone for one minute?” she sighed, keeping her voice down. Somehow, she thought he’d be angry otherwise.

“No.” Negan replied, “You’re getting a babysitter tonight. And I am not hearing any fucking arguments from you about it, either. This is my Sanctuary, my rules. I’ll get someone to show you around.”

Mallory sighed and rubbed her bare temple, tired of fighting, tired of everything that had happened today. “I don’t know why I’m letting you of all people boss me around again.”

“I am your fucking boss,” he nearly yelled at her. Negan slammed the bat he was still carrying down on the gurney next to her leg. Mallory visibly flinched, leaning away from him as much as physically possible. “In here,” he continued. “Out there, in your dreams and in your nightmares. I am still your fucking boss, and you’re going to listen to me and only me from now on. How many goddamn times am I going to have to say it, Mal?”

One of his broad hands placed itself on the outside of her thigh and he crouched down, crowding her space so much that Mallory had to tilt back. Her eyes widened at the angry, wild expression on his face. She’d seen so many of Negan’s faces but that one had always sent a spike of hot lust through her core. Now, it was barely any different. He was just far more dangerous now than he’d been before. She was frozen, suspended between her memories of him sucking ecstasy from her tender flesh and the one of him threatening to crush her only friend’s skull beneath his boot.

“I’ll let you get stitched up,” he muttered in a voice that was nearly a growl, wrenching himself away from her. Negan cut an imposing figure, striding out the door with that bat swinging to rest on his broad, leather-clad shoulder. He was right, she realised; he was her boss now.

Mallory let out the breath she’d been taking, her fingers coming to rest over the puncture marks his bat had made in the padding of the gurney. She had forgotten, forgotten that this Negan was the same man she knew, only he’d been let off the leash and allowed to roam free. How many men had she seen at the wrong end of his fist when they’d been together? What truly scared her, more than the violence, was how long it’d be before she’d fall back under that overwhelming spell he cast.

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As his lips slid to kiss the top of her bare shoulder, Mallory realised that making bad decisions had become her wheelhouse. His fingers were still threaded through her hair, the air was still thick and her body was still frozen in shock and indecision.

“I can’t be with a married man,” Mallory repeated, her resolve beginning to crumble as his lips inched closer to her neck. “Not again.”

“But you want to be,” he smiled smugly into her skin, everywhere that was touching her suddenly warm and rich, alive. That thumb of his started rubbing tiny circles at the base of her neck, her eyelids fluttering at the prickling sensation. “I saw how you looked at me, how you always look at me. I knew you weren’t a good little girl. I was the bad decision you were always going to make.”

Negan scraped the strap of her tank top down with his spare hand. “And I know you’re not an idiot either. You think I chase women?” he laughed. “Like fuck. They chase me.”

“Negan, stop,” Mallory protested weakly, turning her head to wrench his palm away from making those skin-tingling circles. “I can’t deal with this in my life right now, not ever.”
He pulled his fingers from her hair and laid the curls back down as they’d been. “I’m not going to fall in love with you, Princess.” He pulled her strap back up too. “I won’t leave my wife for you. I’m not dating you. All I want is to do is hear you scream my name into your desk,” he leant back, keeping her gaze. “I want those pretty pink lips wrapped around my dick. It’s simple. Either you want me, just me, or you don’t. Think about it for me. I got all the time in the world.” Negan kissed her skin once more, nearly chastely, before leaving her there to her piano.

Her lips curled into a smile at the pictures he’d painted. No. He was right; she wasn’t a good girl. She was barely a good person to begin with. The path he was leading her down wasn’t going to be one she’d look upon with fondness. She’d walked it before and it was nothing but regret, shame and longing.

Still, those eyes would haunt her for the rest of her life. Maybe even in the next.

Chapter End Notes

So I’m curious about what you want to see next? Thoughts? Comments? Suggestions? Leave it all down below.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Mallory gets back a little piece of what she thought Negan had taken away from her - but how far she'll be willing to go to protect her only friend gets tested.

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd because life happens and I didn't want to make anyone wait. I have admittedly lifted a line from Captain America: Winter Soldier because I love that line. Fair warning: my Negan isn't a romantic man, he's a cruel and sadistic game player who gets under Mal's skin and lives there. Flashbacks are in italics as usual.

Thank you for sticking with me during the Negan drought. Leave me a comment if you like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wait right there,” was all Dr No-Name had had to say before he disappeared out of sight and out of her mind. That had been ten minutes ago; ten long, silent minutes with her own thoughts and a thumping headache as company. Part of her wanted to jump out of the window and make a break for freedom but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it.

Anything Mallory felt, as the minutes ticked by, became hollowed out and blunted as if she had collapsed in on herself. Her head was clean, her skin stitched, wrists pink and tingling with disinfectant, but there was still someone on her mind - Peter. No matter how much Negan kept calling him her boyfriend, Peter just wasn’t. Being alone together for so long, they’d become jammed into one another's lives. God, Peter really could be an idiot sometimes but he’d saved her life more than she’d saved his. That had to count for something, didn’t it? If he was gone too, not only would she be alone but she’d have nothing to show for the sacrifices they’d made either.

Without another soul inside the hospital room, the walls began to close up as she stared through the only barred window to dwindling light. The world outside was becoming bathed in darkness, apart from a few beacons of light from torches and fires on the ground. Maybe if she concentrated, Peter would simply pop up again, like the man always did. She couldn’t leave him behind.

Her skin itched as her t-shirt stuck hard to her like glue, the fabric matted in a bloodied waterfall from hem to hem. Sighing in frustration, Mallory jumped down from the gurney and began rooting around the various drawers and cabinets for something to clean herself up with, sick of the smell and the feel it all. Of course, the whole situation was ridiculous. The idea of this charade being some kind of twisted test set by her ex-lover took over her mind. Sadly, it was all too likely given Negan’s penchant for making her squirm and seeing her suffer. Before the Biters, people used to put the cruellest prisoners into solitary confinement and she wouldn’t put it past him to do it if she crossed him again.

She was startled as the door to the med bay creaked open and a woman she didn’t know peeked her
head inside. “There’s a pack of wet wipes in the cabinet to your right,” the woman said as she stepped into the otherwise empty room. Her voice was tinged with an accent Mal couldn’t quite place. “Mallory, right? Jesus, you do look like a ghost. Sit down, would you, you’re making my head ache.”

“Did he send you?” Mallory replied, noticing the shabby hessian bag in her hand.

“Yes, he did.” Rolling her eyes a little, the blonde woman thrust the bag at her. It contained a set of clean clothes and there were even – thank fuck – some flat heeled boots. “And you’re welcome for the loaners from us. He said you were a little thinner than me… have you looked in a mirror lately?”

Uncaring about privacy, not that it mattered any longer, Mal stripped off her bloodied, tattered clothes and pulled on a pair of black pants and a long sleeve red blouse, something she’d have picked before the end of the world. It struck her as an oddity, wearing things that were remainders of a past; like clinging on to the idea of normalcy. Or maybe she just forgot what wearing nice clothes felt like. Mal turned back to the woman as she pulled on the blouse, “There a lot of clothes here?”

“More than you’d think,” she replied and grabbed extra bandages, packets of pills and bottles of water from the various cabinets around them. Each item went into a small plastic tub she must have taken too. “I’m Caroline, by the way, not that you asked. I’m your babysitter for the night. Negan’s orders.”

Mallory paused as she pulled her hair out from the collar of the blouse. “You said ‘us’?”

“Mmmhmm,” Caroline murmured in reply. “I’m one of his wives. There’s five of us with private rooms on the same floor. And before you ask why you’re getting this treat, my guess would be that Negan’s either going to get you to be his next wife or he’s having me babysitting a liability he doesn’t want causing trouble.”

It didn’t escape her just how beautiful Caroline was. Older than she was, though, maybe a little closer to Negan in age but there was a brutal grace about the woman as she stood there in a button-down sweater and high-waisted skinny jeans. No wonder he’d chosen her as his wife. God, his wife. Wives, plural. The man could just not keep himself from indecency, could he? Dead people walking and he was a king with a harem of concubines to cater to his whims.

“Five of you…” Mal laughed sardonically, purposefully ignoring the dig. Her bare feet slid comfortably into the old boots. “Figures. Don’t worry, I won’t be adding to that number.”

“You’ve been here, what, a few hours?” Caroline said with a thread of annoyance, her brow hard and judging. “You got yourself stitches, cleaned up, new clothes and shoes, my goddamn shoes…” she said, shoving the small box of supplies into Mallory’s chest. “There’s food and a hot shower and your boyfriend’s waiting for you downstairs, and he’s not even hurt. What more do you damn well want? Don’t be an idiot, Negan’s doing you a giant favour.”

Her heart stopped in her chest, not having heard anything past the word ‘boyfriend’. “Peter’s here? Where exactly?” Mallory demanded, rounding on Caroline with a dangerous and desperate look in her eyes.

“Shit, he’s just downstairs, outside I think… wait, don’t… oh fuck.”

Mallory flew past Caroline without a second thought. She pelted out the room, back along the same pathway she had walked, trying to recall where exactly ‘outside’ was. Mal wouldn’t let herself believe it until she saw him for herself, saw that he wasn’t murdered for the sake of a few books and a sleeping bag. Caroline had shot after her, their heavy footfalls drawing the looks of a crowd of
people. Finally, she broke back outside into the dark of night, and saw him standing around with Negan’s men, their guns now missing. Peter wasn’t dead, blessedly. He didn’t even look injured, just as Caroline proclaimed. From what she could see, he looked dirty, clothes torn, spots of blood on his legs identical to where hers had been, but he was alive. He was alive and she could breathe again.

“PETER!” she called out and ran towards him like a child, a wide and carefree smile plastered on her face. Her boots crunched on gravel, all her pain forgotten as she flung herself into his arms.

“Not going to end well…” she heard a winded Caroline say to herself as she caught up to them.

“Allie?” Peter said, face contorting into the most beaming smile. “Shit, look at you!” he exclaimed as she tackled him, eyes dancing around to get a good look at her in the dimmed light. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Forget about me, what about you?” she said, pulling back a little as well to study his slender form. “Did they hurt you?”

“No, no. I’m sorry, I had to tell them about the bunker. They took everything out and brought it back here with us. I should’ve done more, should have listened to you….”

Scanning his face, she reached up and pushed a curtain of dark, lank hair back to look at him properly. “Fine, okay, I believe you this time. I really thought… shit,” she said, the tiny beads of tears forming in the corners of her eyes, though she forced them back. “I can’t.”

“It’s fine.” He leaned back in closer as he hugged her again, using the opportunity to mutter quickly into her ear, “I swiped your thing before they saw. Back right pocket.”

A little slowly, she slipped her fingers into the back pocket of his filthy jeans and pulled out a folded and tattered picture, slipping it up the sleeve of her own shirt for safe keeping. “Thank you.”

Her happiness at seeing her only friend alive and breathing again was cut short at the stab of a finger tapping on her shoulder. “You know, it really breaks my aching heart to split you two up,” Negan said, his voice mocking and lyrical. “But you’re going to a slumber party with my sweet Caroline, and I know he’s not coming to chaperone y’all.” His eyes hardened from their mirth, annoyance dawning. “So, let’s hear the excuse as to why you disobeyed my direct fucking order to stay put.”

Body stiffening at the touch of his hand, she nonetheless complied and pulled apart from Peter willingly. He looked just as rigid as she felt with Negan looking over between them, an unreadable mess. “I was just happy,” she said, wrapping her arms around her chest to hide the photo up her sleeve. “He’s my friend and he’s alive.”

“I knew you wouldn’t fucking believe me,” Negan laughed heartily and clapped Peter on the shoulder, exaggerating a crouch though Peter wasn’t any more than a couple inches shorter. “Are you alright there, Petey? Can I get you something? Grape soda, maybe? How about another hug? Little freaky-deaky conjugal visit from Mal, here?” He winked and her stomach churned. “It can be arranged if you’re a good little guy.”

Peter didn’t cower, but kept his back straight but his eyes dashing between Mallory and Negan. “I’m fine. I got her back, thanks to you. We’re safe together here.” There was a glint of something in his eyes that she couldn’t put her finger on.

Negan burst out into laughter and straightened up again. “This one’s got some goddamn cojones,” he tapped his bare palm across Peter’s cheek a couple of times, the sound audible. “Down boy.” That vicious bat was back up, waving in Peter’s face, an untold threat. The thing was bathed in blood, and
Negan’s eyes were wild. Mal smelled the iron tang in the air and knew it wasn’t the rotten blood of the dead. “We’re just getting started here. Caroline, why don’t you take our little Mallory up, get something to eat before her bedtime. It’s late.”

Instead of moving, Mal stood frozen to the spot as Negan kept his eyes on Peter, his gaze unwavering even as he gave orders. She could hear the blood rushing around her ears, felt Caroline tugging on her arm and pulling her away. Catching Peter’s attention, it took all of Mallory’s will not to plead with him to just play nice, let Negan win this time. That bat still hung in the air, a reminder of his real power and how quickly everything could change. She had no doubt that the barbed wire wasn’t just for show.

“Come on, let him go,” Caroline said quietly, almost sympathetically. “Just… come on.”

The tone of Caroline’s voice made her startle out of her frozen position, and Mallory relented, letting her tug her back. How many times did she have to be separated from the only person she could trust? Gritting her teeth, she refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back, or letting him know she was scared. Instead, she made herself a promise: if Negan hurt a hair on Peter’s head, she’d make sure he would regret ever meeting her.

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“How was it, a night in a real bed?” Caroline asked her the next morning, depositing more clean clothes on the end of a chest of drawers. The room she inhabited was lavishly decorated and contained a sleeper sofa, potted plants, pillows, books. Mal had even found a jewellery box.

“Like sleeping on a marshmallow, like I’m gonna sink through to the floor,” she replied distantly, trying to see through the window into the light of day.

“That’ll take a while to pass. You’ll get used to it.”

Mallory turned her head to look at Caroline. “I wanna see Peter. Now.”

“What are you so worried about?” she replied, sitting on the bed. “He’s done nothing wrong so you don’t have to be afraid. Negan’s not a monster, he protects everybody who lives here.” Her speech was like white noise to Mallory and she turned back to see through the window again.

“Sure, not a monster…” she muttered sarcastically. “I didn’t want to come here.” Resigning herself to the fact he wasn’t outside, Mal poked at the clean bandage on her head idly. “No choice this time, that’s what he said.”

Caroline stopped whatever it was she was doing and instead locked eyes with Mallory, “He didn’t give you a choice? I thought you didn’t kill any one of his Saviours?”

“His what?” she said. “No, I didn’t hurt anyone. I defended myself but that’s it! And that asshole, he said ‘you’re not getting a choice’. You think I’d be here willingly, getting treated like a criminal?”

“He’s never done that, he’s never not given people a choice,” Caroline muttered. “Not since I’ve known him.”

“I’ve known him longer. That man, your fucking husband,” she muttered harshly. “He’s just… cruel. Goddamn insane and cruel.” Mallory refused to cry anymore. She hadn’t really cried since she’d put a knife through her own mother’s head and wept her apologies until her body was completely numb to anymore pain this world could bring. Instead, she screwed up her fist until her fingernails bit into her palm. “If I’m not a prisoner here, if this place is free, then I want to see my friend.” Her teeth were on edge, the panicked feeling rising in her throat. “I did not fight through hordes of Biters to
walk into a place where I can’t shit without permission.”

“Fine,” Caroline relented and visibly sagged in defeat. “I’ll take you around the place, maybe someone’s seen him,” she said before leading Mallory out the door. “No running away from me this time, okay? Your boyfriend’s not worth my neck.”

Mallory didn’t even bother to correct her as they went hunting again.

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“Are you under house arrest or something?” Peter asked her when she’d found him again in the commissary; his old, dirty clothes had been replaced with new, clean ones as well. His hair wasn’t lank anymore either and was instead fluffy and youthful. “I’ve been waiting hours for you down here.”

“Honestly?” Mallory replied, sitting down at a bench with a bowl half-full of oatmeal on her tray. “I have no idea. This place? My gut doesn’t like it,” she shook her head and idly stirred her breakfast. “It’s… I dunno.” She’d managed to persuade Caroline to give her some time with him, despite her protests. Mal knew she wasn’t far away from them though, hovering around like a fly around a bad smell. No doubt anything she’d overhear would get reported back to her husband.

“Maybe we just forgot what safety’s meant to feel like,” Peter replied, “I couldn’t even sleep on the mattress they gave me, I had to put the pillow on the floor.” After a moment, he looked at her pointedly. “Why’d you say your name was Allie? He called you Mallory.”

She had been dreading this. “It was just… easier than hearing my full name. Not many people called me Mallory. Even fewer now.” She looked back down, still playing with her food, the air thickening with tension and un-told stories. “What did he say to you, after?”

Peter went quiet himself for a moment, his eyes distant. “That I was lucky you liked me or he’d already be wiping my brains from his boots.” His voice was as low as hers. “There’s something between you two, right? You knew him straight away, back at that house, he called you your real name.”

No matter how many times she’d thought about this conversation last night when she was attempting to sleep, Mal still found her throat stuck on the actual words. “Back… before the world went to shit…” she cleared her throat, “I taught piano in adult education. Negan taught a class next door to me.” She tried to keep the memories from invading her mind, though it was pointless. All she kept seeing was Negan’s smirk and his eyes, him pushing her to a limit she never knew she had. “We ended up having an affair, he was married at the time. It lasted maybe six, eight months at most. I never saw him after that,” she explained quickly, conscious of people around her. “Until yesterday when it became clear that he thinks he’s Jesus fucking Christ himself. Even calls those thugs ‘The Saviours’.”

“You had an affair?” he replied incredulously. “With that maniac? Holy Hell.”

Her cheeks burned in embarrassment and she glared at him. “You asked, not my fault you don’t like the answer.”

“Don’t like it?” he shook his head and ate some of his own oatmeal as someone walked by them, obviously eavesdropping on their conversation. “You kidding me…”

Mal swallowed her own thick mouthful and looked at him quizzically. “What?”

“This is the best thing. You know him, Al- Mallory. You must know a few of his weak spots,
something juicy. Nobody here is in a better position than you are right now. He has to want to keep
you happy, otherwise I’d be Biter food right now.” Peter said excitedly, looking like all his
Christmases had come at once. “All you have to do is use it somehow, or maybe sleep with him
again. If we can just… get an advantage, it’ll -”

Mallory stomped hard on his foot under the table to get him to shut up, rage coursing through her.
“You shut the fuck up,” she threatened, enjoying his groans of pain. “Just stop. This isn’t one of
those situations, and I am not getting literally back into bed with Negan,” she said, screwing her face
up at his name. “I am not your personal whore and I don’t care what I promised Aimee, you are not
pimping me out to get an extra set of fucking blankets.”

“So, what, you’re just gonna waste this? It’s an opportunity!” He whispered harshly, incredulous
even as he winced in pain. “You’re gonna roll over and let him win when he could kill us at any
moment.”

“You don’t… is there no concept of danger in your brain…” she whispered back. “The best way to
keep your skull intact here is to tread the line and play by his rules. Maybe, just fucking maybe if
we’re lucky enough, we’ll stay alive long enough for him to get bored of us and move on to some
other sucker. Just do like every other person here, no goddamn waves.”

Silence fell over the pair and her icy cold ire began to abate, the guilt kicking in instead. She could
empathise with Peter but the idea of acting like she wanted to screw Negan again made her disgusted
with herself. It’d feel as if she was playing the part he’d perfected. The idea of revisiting their affair,
reliving old lives? Going backwards to go forwards was insane.

A few more tense mouthfuls later, Peter looked at her more softly. A flash back to the person she
liked. “Did you love him?”

“No,” she lied. “It was sex. Nothing else. Just, please, do what they tell you to do, before your
dumbass ideas get us both on the wrong end of his bat.”

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He’d told her to think about it. So, she thought about it. Mal thought in minute, delicious detail about
what pleasure he could wring from her body, she thought about all his sordid promises.

Negan knew she wasn’t a wallflower or a good girl desperate to go bad to prove a point or rebel.
Mallory replayed his heated come-on over and over, trying to find a way to talk herself out of it.
Instead, her body betrayed her and she laid in her bed in her crappy little studio apartment, thinking
about him and his hands, thinking about that wild look he left her with. A kiss on her shoulder had
made her feel more than any man’s lips ever had. To his credit, Negan hadn’t pushed, hadn’t
mentioned anything about having sex with her. Twice they’d run into each other during the week,
and he’d only smirked.

Asshole. He probably knew already that they’d end up in bed together. It was just a game of who’d
break first. She refused him the satisfaction.

Stubbornness had led her to this point. Things that men did to get an attractive woman into bed with
them were ridiculous; his wasn’t the first chat-up line she’d heard from a married man and better
than him had tried. Mallory wasn’t ignorant of her own beauty but hopping from man to man and
bed to bed never really held much of her interest. Apart from that once, but she’d been young and
impetuous and had felt the consequences years after. But Negan? God, there was just something
about him that both excited and scared the shit out of her. She heard him give his classes through the
walls, the timbre of his voice echoing and taunting her to just give in to him. She was certain he was
speaking louder on purpose to rile her.

But he did have a wife. A wife who might get pissed off with her husband’s mistress. She had never met the woman but if someone was thinking about sleeping with her own husband, Mallory wouldn’t play nice either. The risk of both heartbreak and bodily harm wasn’t as enticing a prospect as the sex part. Trouble was, she kind of wanted to see what would happen. Going out in public together, the risk of getting caught, potentially losing her job because of it; it was all scary. But that dark devil on her shoulder told her to play his game just for the thrill of it, to push his buttons like he’d pushed hers. Turnabout was fair play and she could make him suffer as much as he wanted to make her suffer too.

It wasn’t fair. She didn’t want to be this way and had tried to be a responsible, sensible adult with morals and good-standing. The universe instead laughed at her bullshit and instead had thrown her into the arms of a hot mess of a man who wanted to screw her brains out and make her feel like a goddess. She’d met a good match. When just the sound of his voice through a concrete wall made her wet, Mallory knew she’d already lost her own arguments.

Rarely had she stayed late at work in the week since the line got blurred. Instead she’d drink, she’d go play shitty little keyboards in clubs and bars, sing stupid karaoke with whoever she could find on a weeknight. She’d even contemplated taking a random stranger to her bed, just to fuck with Negan’s mind. Probably for the better that she hadn’t.

Mallory walked into one of her bars on a Saturday night and saw him nursing a drink, something dark, maybe Bourbon, she thought. Contemplating walking straight back out, Mallory instead took it as a sign and headed straight for the bar herself, slipping into the seat at the opposite end of the bar, two empty stools across. She had been to one dive already and wasn’t nearly drunk enough, having had to deal with wasted frat boy after wasted frat boy asking her to dance and giving her their numbers. Mal even threw her friend Nicola at one of them to get him to leave her alone. Nic had said thank you before leaving with the guy. God, none of those morons was the slightest bit as interesting as the man at the bar with his lip on the rim of a whiskey glass.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Negan look at her. He didn’t smirk this time; instead his gaze was all heat and desire and need, no more bullshit. She was the one smirking instead, a battle of silence to see who’d have the first move.

“Dark beer with a whiskey chaser,” she said to the bartender with a top-knot bun. Fucking hipsters.

“And one for that guy in the leather, he’ll have a Piña colada with a cherry on top...” she couldn’t keep the laugh from her voice, imagining his face.

“You got it.”

As she waited for her drinks, she turned and leant against the bar, giving him a small wave. Negan blatantly stared at her before his eyes turned back to his drink. Mal couldn’t help but laugh, now seeing it as a stalemate. Good. He was stuck there for the moment and she could have some fun taunting him, a taste of his own medicine. She put her purse on the bar and leant her arm against the wood, running her fingers through her long red hair until it fell in tousled waves down her back. Slowly, her palm came to a rest at her hip and she licked her plump little bottom lip, making the motion deliberate and overt. Her fingers came up to skim at the neckline of her dress where it met her breast, one nail running down her own flesh. She’d never been more powerful.

His hand tightened visibly around his glass as her drink was delivered. Her red dress clung and flowed in all the right places as she wrapped her pink lips around the neck of the beer.

Mallory turned to look back at him and burst into laughter when he was presented with the garish
cocktail, complete with a tiny umbrella and glistening red cherry. Negan looked at it like a bomb about to go off. He glared at Mallory, who simply winked in response, a victorious smile on her face as she swallowed another swig of her drink. Either he’d drink the damn cocktail or send it back. And, either way, she’d won again.

“What’s the matter?” She asked, calling across the bar to where he was. There weren’t many people at that time of night; a couple of guys playing pool and laughing like braying horses and a load of middle aged housewives on a girl’s night. “Don’t you like coconut and pineapple?”

“Not in a drink,” he replied with a playful smirk, but he looked goddamn pissed. “You sure you wanna play this one out, Princess? You look like you’ve been partying all night. Don’t want you running out of steam.”

“I’m good,” she snorted, “Why aren’t you at home with the little missus huh?”

“Barbie went back to her play house,” he laughed and swigged back his drink. “I enjoyed your little show, by the way. That tongue of yours keeps getting you into some trouble. You know how fucking painful it is to sit here with a dick as hard as steel?”

He had no shame, calling out across to her for all the place to hear. He wanted it like that, then? Fine. Licking her lips again – she couldn’t resist – Mallory laughed. “Steel, huh? Heard that one before, Negan.”

“Never felt it though, have you? Or you wouldn’t have waited until all your drunk little girlfriends went home before coming here…” he said, those dark eyes back in place. “You settling for me tonight?”

She pulled open her purse and took out a few pieces of screwed up paper, “Three cell numbers, one home number…” she said, pulling each piece of paper open. “An email address, that’s different…” she chuckled. “And my personal favourite; a post-it note with a dick drawn on it. Not exactly settling.”

“Miyyyyiighty hard to compete with the A-list of Moron City,” he drawled, looking her up and down. “Did I even ask if you had a boyfriend?”

“You didn’t,” she smirked, stealing a sip of her drink. “And I don’t, but that wouldn’t stop you, would it?”

“No,” he replied with a lick of his lips, eyes on her chest and back up again. “It really wouldn’t. Are you gonna call any of those pussies?”

She stopped short of snorting in laughter but instead shook her head. “Fuck no. I don’t want some 21-year-old. Please.”

The air was dense again, making it hard to breathe. “You sure about that? Someone to buy you pretty things and take you out, fuck you once a week and fall asleep on top of you? Take home to your Daddy?”

“As good as that sounds,” Mallory said, “I’d rather not be some asshole’s trophy. I want-” Before she could complete her speech, another man slid onto a stool between her and Negan, the guy immediately facing her. Ugh. She was fucking pissed off now.

“Hi, I’m Johnny… you are fucking gorgeous,” he grinned, obviously a little drunk. “Wanna ditch your Dad and come have a drink with someone your own age?”
“Screw off,” Mallory said, annoyed that the moment had been broken, her victory lost. She stood up to leave but a rough hand grabbed her arm to stop her.

“Just one drink, baby girl, come on, you deserve better dick than this geriatric asshole. I heard you two. No way he can get it up still.”

“Geriatric? Fucking frat boy pencil dick motherfucker…” Negan laughed, downing his whiskey and looking pissed as all Hell. “You wanna fucking insult me, say it to my goddamn face, skinny little Mama’s boy.” His stool skidded out from underneath him. “You fucking pussy,” he kept laughing, that dangerous look back in his eye. “Say it again. I dare you. Fucking, say it again, come on, give me a reason, give me a goddamn reason, I’m begging you.”

“Take it outside!” called the bartender distantly.

“Fuck man, fucking insane bastard… screw it,” the pencil dick said, obviously scared of Negan and rightly too. “Some whore ain’t worth a drink anyway.”

Unable to control herself, Mallory pulled back her fist as hard as she could and slammed it into the asshole’s nose, pain shooting up her arm as quickly as his face was dripping blood. The guy fell backwards from his stool into the bar and onto the floor “I’m not anyone’s whore…” she spat in anger, standing over him as she shook out her hand.

The whole bar was still as the guy was bent double in pain, blood gushing from his nose. Negan’s shock turned into a face-splitting grin, “Fuck me, that’s the hottest thing I ever saw…” he groaned and pulled Mallory tight to his body. “I kinda wanted to beat the shit out of him though. Would have made my fucking night.”

“Don’t need you to throw my punches for me,” she replied, feeling the heat from him through her clothes. “Fuck me, that hurt though. Shit…” Mal groaned, looking between her knuckles and Negan’s face. “We better run before they call the cops.”

Taking her battered hand, he tugged her across the room, both laughing their heads off.

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Clunking of footsteps and the scrape of metal on concrete brought Mallory out of her reverie, her food half-eaten and stone cold. Her stomach churned as she looked around for where that reverberating sound was coming from. Suddenly, she noticed how every other person around them had fallen silent and was kneeling on the floor.

She looked up and saw him on his platform, a literal balcony overlooking all he surveyed. Negan trailed that bat behind him and locked eyes on her and Peter, them standing out like sore thumbs among all the others offering him succour. Her own advice to Peter last night called out to her. Make Negan happy, play his game, do what he wants. Obey. Beside her, her friend looked at her pointedly before kneeling at Negan’s imposing figure.

“Good moooooorning, motherfuckers!” he called out across his people. Mallory just stared, unable to move. She just couldn’t kneel to him again. “Well looky here. Seems we got us a big beautiful peach, ripe and ready for the plucking, don’t we?” His laughter rang out, bat swinging back to its home on his shoulder. “This fucking gorgeous piece of red-headed firecracker y’all see standing up is mine. You see, I used to eat that pussy out raw back in the day, so I’m calling dibs on her now.”

All eyes turned to look at her, if only for a second. Her anger snapped and bubbled up, her fist clenched, tongue ready to spit fire. She didn’t care if he killed her, this was worse than death. He was
humiliating her for his own fun. He didn’t want her, he just didn’t want anyone else to even like her.

“If I catch one single little finger on her skin, well, I’ll break that finger off. My beautiful, vicious little girl here’ll get let off the leash…” he swung out the bat again for emphasis. “And she’ll be drinking all night long.” Negan caught Mal’s eye again, tongue flicking out over his bottom lip as he pressed a kiss to his weapon. “Lucille’s gonna drink you up if you touch my ripe little peach. Now, get the fuck back to fucking work!”

They all immediately obeyed, every single person looking at her with a mix of awe, jealousy, disgust. He’d just ostracised her completely; even if he let her live, she’d never be just another person again. Peter was looking at her pointedly but she couldn’t stop glaring at the monster above them both. Negan crooked a finger at Mallory, beckoning her to go to him like a child. That sadistic little smirk was back on his face. He was always going to win.

Chapter End Notes

So, what's in the picture? Why does Mallory hate Negan so much? Another update will be here next weekend so I'll have to leave you hanging. I hope someone's sticking with me, there'll be answers to all these questions and more.

Happy Holidays to all and to all a good night xx
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Mallory confronts Negan after his humiliating speech in front of the entire population of The Sanctuary but when he makes her an offer she really can't refuse, she's put in the middle of his games yet again. He’s always loved torturing her in every way possible but is the player about to get played? And what is Mal willing to sacrifice to finally get one over on him?

Some rather graphic sexy smut warnings here please. Read at your own leisure.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! Here’s another chapter for you to hopefully enjoy. Please be aware this chapter is explicit with sexy stuff - like that's going to make you stop reading. Thank you to my lovely Beta reader and biggest fan Amy - this was her favourite chapter so far.

Thank you and I'll see you next weekend.

She stung at feeling everyone looking at her as she walked up the iron stairs, Simon leading the way. It wouldn’t have mattered to Mallory a day or two ago, but somehow the fact that strangers knew the kind of man she’d had an affair with tainted her. They knew his cruelty, his selfishness and violence. Like it or not, she was stuck in a place encapsulated by the power Negan possessed over the world she lived in. He had been making life a chaotic mess for a long damn time and he was still somehow able to make it worse and worse and worse still. No matter how she could hurt him, exact revenge, Mal knew it would come to nothing. The advice she’d given to Peter would have to stand; play his game and survive it.

Simon led her to a door at the top of the stairs, one without glass and only a keyhole to let in the light. A sinking feeling in her gut churned again about the threat of solitary confinement and she had to tell herself not to show that wrenching fear. Instead of producing a key, Simon rapped his knuckles on the door twice before opening it, shooting her a look between a scowl and a sick smile.

Inside the room was what must have been Negan’s office. The man himself sat behind a huge desk, his feet up on the wood and his hands clasped in his lap. He owned the room, the building, the people and Mallory. “There you are, Princess. You like the show?” Negan said as Simon thrust her inside and slammed the door, leaving her alone with the King.

“Can’t say I did, no,” she bit back and walked up to the front of his desk, refusing to take one of the seats. His office was even more lavish than Caroline’s bedroom had been. It reminded her too much of his old home; she half expected his framed wedding photos to be up on the walls, coffee brewing
in the kitchen, Lucille’s scarves on the couch where they had fucked. The man had taste that ran into hotel-level opulence, a kind of style that everyone pretended to like. “You called dibs on me,” Mal said, risking a tiny laugh for the sake of it. “It was a funny joke. Boy people hate me now, you should have seen their faces.”

“I did see.” He only smiled wider. That bat was on top of his desk in front of her, too, almost gleaming and begging to be picked up and swung at something malleable – maybe his head if she was lucky. “Not a half-bad joke, right? One of my better ones.” Negan rolled his tongue over his lips. “You eat yet? We make a nice oatmeal, I can personally recommend it.”

“It was a little thin,” she replied, starting to fall back into that ease with him as she always did. “And salty for my taste, I prefer it sweeter.”

His eyes sparked at her defiance, a look she knew too well. “You still got that sweet tooth. I like that in a woman.”

“You know, I’d be grateful if we could cut out the bullshit and you tell me what you want this time,” she asked, hoping to side-step his charade.

“Aww, but the bullshit’s my favourite part, come on, play along. I know you’re pissed the fuck off after what I just did out there. And, basically, everything I’ve done so far.” Negan laughed. He suddenly sprung from behind his desk, running his knuckles over the slight scruff on his chin. The gesture ghosted with the mirth in his eyes as he came to stand right in front of her. “Okay, fine, I apologise with all my heart. Why don’t you hit me with your best right hook, Princess, it’ll make you feel better. Won’t even fucking flinch, I promise. One free shot for uh… let’s call it pay back.” She didn’t move, looking at him with confusion at the offer. “Come on, you know how many people would kill for that? I’m even tempted to let you take a swing at me with Lucille over there,” he gestured behind him.

“Lucille,” Mal said, trying to ignore the urge to take him up on his offer of retribution. “You named that… that thing after your wife?” A chuckle escaped her at the absurdity. “First wife, sorry, I forgot about the others you’re keeping like chickens.”

“No need to be jealous. I’ll call the next deadly weapon Mallory if it’ll make you happy. Lucille’s not the only one who can be a fucking bitch. I bet that head of yours is hurting you real bad this morning, huh?” He leaned in a little as she stood there with her arms crossed under her chest. Negan reached up and cupped her pink cheek with his palm; there was an almost-real look of concern on his face.

Mallory tried to ignore everything in her body as he touched her tenderly; her skin tingled where his callouses were rough, her heart thumped a faster beat in time with his, she could map a path of all the colourful flecks in his irises, right to the edge. She didn’t flinch at his hand, she didn’t back away or lean in. “I’m fine,” she replied. He couldn’t affect her anymore. “Just… peachy keen, Negan.” Mal hated herself as soon as she said the phrase.

His lips cracked in a smirk, “Fucking fuckedy fuck,” biting his own lip, he ran a thumb under hers with his eyes getting darker by the second. “My sweet Georgia peach, there she is,” he laughed and her hands trembled even though her arms were still crossed. “You remember how you got that particular nickname, don’t you? Course you fucking do. How could either of us forget. You still taste like that?”

He was so close to her now, another step and he’d be pressed up to her body like he was the first time, not a lick of light between them. “How the fuck would I know?” She was half scared and half… not. “And you’re not getting a taste of me again, so you can get that thought out of your head.
Go taste one of your wives.”

Negan pouted, his hand slipping to hold the back of her head in a gentle caress that made her eyes widen slightly. “Don’t be like that, I was so nice to you and everything, saving your life from the Biters. Don’t be so fucking rude to me.” His line of sight slid down between them, over her body, and ran back up again. “You’re forgetting that you can’t hide shit from me, Mallory, you never could. I know parts of you nobody else is ever gonna see.” He gripped her hair and Mal visibly shuddered, her breath catching as she stood resolute and unbending. She hated herself. “I know when you’re lying, I know when you’re in pain, know when I got you so close to the edge that it’s driving you crazy trying not to snap. I know you, sweet peach, fucking intimately.”

“So what if you know me,” she rasped out, ignoring the raggedness of her own voice. “You think I’m going to forget all you did to me and just slide back under your command like nothing changed? I lived under those rules for months, for longer than any of them out there. I’m not yours, Negan, and I’m not anyone else’s either. No matter what you’re telling them out there, you’re not laying a finger on me. You’re a monster, not a man.”

“I know,” he nodded almost sagely, though his eyes were still burning a hole into her. “And what the fuck does that make you, Mallory? Wetting your panties for a monster like me? I know you like it when-”

“Fuck you!” she hissed. He gripped her hair harder in retaliation and angled her head up. Her arms shot out to grab his jacket, keep him at an arm’s length, keep him from making another step. She wasn’t sure if she could stop herself, not when her body was betraying her head. “Take your hands off me, Negan, I’m not playing that game.”

He looked wild and composed at the same time, the smallest twitches of his body amplified at such close quarters. “But you liked this game, you liked it rough, you liked it when I made it hurt. You begged me for more, to make it last longer.”

“Negan-”

“Fuck, yes,” He licked his lip again, expression setting to stone. “Fucking loved it when you said my name like that. My bad girl.”

Mallory snapped and swung her fist upwards, socking him in the jaw as she grunted out her anger and frustration. She didn’t feel a single ounce of pain as he staggered backwards, her head dropping out of his grasp, freeing her completely. As her adrenaline surged, muscles twitched and tightened in readiness to flee, that fear bubbled in her stomach; the only weapon was the baseball bat behind him and she was so fucking fucked. He was going to kill her.

Negan shook his head out and looked at her as he righted himself, shaking out the punch from his jaw. “Fuck me, that hurt. I forgot how hard you hit when you’re pissed off.” He pushed the heel of his hand up into his jaw until there was a faint click. “That wasn’t bad, just go for the throat next time.” Her confused look must have been obvious because he simply rolled his eyes. “You needed to get that out of your system. Now that it is, I need to talk to normal, not-so-pissed-off Mallory.”

The depth of his manipulation hit her like a freight train. “Are you fucking kidding me?” She said incredulously, trying not to let her mouth gape open. “What the Hell is wrong with you, you fucking creepy ass psychopath.”

Negan ignored her, instead just leaning back to perch on the edge of his desk. “Just sit the fuck down. I let you get one shot at me and that’s all you’re damn well getting.” He was suddenly so cold and so distant, the eyes that were lust-blown and dark a minute before were now icy and
unforgiving. That part of his personality didn’t rear its head much when they were together, but it was just as terrifying as it had always been. Those moments when she couldn’t tell what he wanted or what he was thinking or going to do. Those were moments when he’d kiss her one second, then kick her out and not talk to her for a week the next.

There was only one victory she had in her pocket; she thought about the picture she’d hidden under the marshmallow mattress as she sat down in one of his chairs. He didn’t know everything about her and what had happened after he threw her under the bus. She’d take her delight in telling it to him one day, one day when he was handcuffed to something and she was the psychopath swinging Lucille.

“Is that why you called me up here?” Mallory asked a little more measured, a little more calmly. “To let me vent at how pissed off I am?”

“No, I got the idea when you walked in here. I could see it in your eyes how you wanted to push me out the window. I thought a punch would be a good fucking compromise. I am capable of compromise.”

Mallory put her hands in her lap as she sat back in the chair. She couldn’t deny it. “I wanted to knee you in the balls, actually. I think it would have been more appropriate given that you’ve basically put a scarlet letter on me now.”

“Oh, no, you did that yourself, Princess, you can’t run away from your past,” he said, pointing his finger at her. “And I am not letting you knee me in the balls.”

“It would have been more fun for me, though,” Mal swallowed back her tongue from pushing him too far. There was always a limit with Negan.

He cracked his jaw again, “Jesus you got cruel,” he muttered. She didn’t reply. “Now we got that out of our fucking systems, I have a little surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” she asked incredulously. “What, you get me my bowie knife back? I kind of miss it.”

He didn’t flinch either. “Nope. Better than a bowie knife. Does come with a caveat but you’re gonna fucking love this one, Princess. I been keeping this under my belt for a long damn time.”

Negan strode towards a door that Mallory had missed before, another plain one with a metal plated key hole. He produced a key from one of his pockets and unlocked it, holding it open. “Well, come inside. See what I got you. I’m curious.”

Tentatively, Mallory got up from the chair and walked past him, through yet another open door. It was, as it turned out, his bedroom. The red silk sheets on his bed didn’t catch her eye though. Oh no, it wasn’t his bed or his furniture or Lucille’s mantle. It was the fucking piano pushed up against the wall, resting under a window. It was shiny, sleek and black, not a speck of dust or dirt covering any of the keys. It was beautiful. The most beautiful thing she’d ever seen in her life.

Mallory broke down in instant tears. They streamed down her sunken cheeks, her small hand immediately stroking the beautiful black gloss as she strode towards it. Her skin glided along the surface. She didn’t take a second thought and sat down on the bench seat, her heart thumping harder than it had a moment before. Negan stood, forgotten, behind her. Mallory hesitated pressing the keys, the lump in her throat, trying hard to think about what was happening, why she was crying at seeing something she’d longed for on the hardest of nights when they’d lost more people, when they’d seen more death. She couldn’t think.
“I…” she choked out, still uncertain as to whether she should press down on even a single key. Her heart and her head fought, her hands tried to remember what it was like to just be a pianist and not a survivor, not a warrior or a hunter. “How?”

“Boys found it in a place not so far away, on a, uh, hilltop,” his voice was oddly level and even, almost sympathetic. “Soon as I saw that thing, it made me think of you,” he admitted. Negan was standing a few feet behind her, simply observing. “I had the boys haul it up, and here it’s been ever since. You like it?”

Her voice stuck in her throat. Why would he do something so… unlike him? Her image of Negan with that baseball bat covered in human blood, the Negan who had ruined her life, ruined her family, it didn’t equate with the version of him who would take a piano just because it reminded him of her. He hadn’t even known she was alive, he couldn’t have.

“Why?” she asked, still crying animal tears.

“I honestly have no fucking clue,” he said, still just standing there. “I never played it, never touched it. It’s going to fucking waste sitting there and I thought, since you’re here now, you could play like you used to.”

“Play? For you?”

He gave her a short nod. “Yes. You’re going to play songs for me, Mallory. And you’re going to teach Caroline how to play too. She’s always wanted to get in here and play it.”

Mal couldn’t speak and looked back at the piano, seeing her face reflected in the gloss. She saw the tears tracking down her face as she pressed a few of the keys, playing scales tentatively. Her heart swelled and she could feel her old self slip back into place like a comfortable overcoat, complete with the man she’d once thought she’d loved standing behind her, holding her hostage. It was the cruellest torture he’d ever inflicted.

“I don’t know if I remember,” she muttered as she finished her scales. “It’s… it’s been a long time since I played a song.”

“Thought you wanted to cut out the bullshit?” he murmured and threaded the red scarf from around his neck, taking steps towards her. Carefully, tender once more, he tilted her chin and wiped away the tears that were still streaming down her cheeks. “Believe it or not, I had the same reaction when we found a fucking ping pong table,” he laughed a more human laugh. “And carpet, a running faucet. The stupidest shit you ever seen, Mal, carpet between my bare goddamn toes and I wanted to cry like a little kid.”

“Hard to imagine,” she said, pulling her chin away from his touch and wiping her own tears away. “I never saw you cry, not even about Lucille.”

Negan’s eye twitched just a little and he shrugged. “End of the world did something after all, brought about miracles.”

Mallory’s head throbbed once more as her tears started to abate, the shock at seeing a piano again fading into simple confusion. What games he played, what he wanted; they remained a mystery. He sounded sincere but the man was a master at getting end results, not giving a fuck about the route he took.

“Down to business, huh?” he smiled. “I admire that.” Negan kneeled in front of her then and her eyes widened. “You play for me and me only, you come up here whenever I send for you. You drop it all, in the middle of the night, at breakfast. No questions, you just come up here and play those pretty songs for me. You teach Caroline how to play, long as it takes…” he said, looking into her eyes. “In return, you get extra points for food, for clothes, all that girly shit you miss.”

Mallory shook her head, “No. It’s not enough.” To be at his beck and call, to be his personal anything required more reward. “You’re a man of your word still, aren’t you? Would you make me a promise to not hurt Peter or have him hurt by anyone? To just leave him alone?”

Negan seemed to consider it, licking his lip. “Only if you leave him alone too, Princess. Don’t talk to him, send him messages. If I find out you been trying, I’ll take one of his fingers as my trophy. Is that a deal?”

He extended his hand. It hung there in the air.

“Can I get my bowie knife back too?” she asked sarcastically.

“Don’t push your luck, Princess,” Negan growled. “Unless you got more fucking demands, have we come to an agreement?”

After a moment, she remembered her promise to Peter’s sister, how she swore she’d look after him. A deal with the Devil himself in exchange for Peter’s protection? It might cost her sanity but that was hanging by a thread anyway.

Mal slid her hand out and shook Negan’s. “I guess that’s a deal.”

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“Be careful, Princess,” he said as he cradled her hand tenderly, running a thumb along her knuckles. “You might have broken something.”

“I did,” Mal said, letting him lower it into a bowl of ice water. “I broke that asshole’s nose.”

He laughed a rich laugh. Both were a little drunk, running on the fumes of the night. “Fuck yeah you did. He deserved it, though, fucking touching you like that. Nothing pisses me off more than an asshole who touches a girl when she doesn’t wanna be touched.”

They sat on the couch in her crappy little studio apartment, two in the morning, maybe closer to three, she wasn’t sure. Her head was washing over with dregs of adrenaline and alcohol; how they’d ended up back at her place, she wasn’t sure. The cab ride had mostly been them laughing together about the pencil dick at the bar and how his face had been more solid than she’d expected. Mal had invited Negan in, knowing exactly where it’d lead if she wanted it to. He’d even told her to treat her swelling hand, insisting that the ice water soothe the burning – he wasn’t exactly helping the other burn she was feeling.

“Not the first time I had to defend myself like that,” she said, wincing as she flexed her hand under the water. “Happens more often than you’d think. You want a beer?” she asked the last part idly, needing something to soothe the dryness of her throat. “Or I have wine if you want?”

“You stay there,” he ordered, getting up from the couch. “Just keep that hand still. I’ll get us a drink.”

His jacket was lying across one of her chairs, his shoes off and kicked under the coffee table. Negan wasn’t as imposing a figure without the leather jacket she thought; he had a slender frame and
narrower hips but there remained a prepossessing air of strength and command whenever he walked into a room. She didn’t know why he’d shown an interest in her particularly – the English teacher down the next hall was blonde and stunning as far as Mallory was concerned – when he obviously had no qualms about fidelity. Whether this would be a one night stand or a longer-term thing, though, she wasn’t sure, but she had to find out.

“Here,” he said, suddenly dangling a bottle of cold beer in front of her face. “Drink.”

Mal did as he asked and took a long swig, watching him do the same as he sat down next to her. “I have to uh… ask you something. Before this becomes whatever it’s going to be.” She took another quick swig. “Is this a one nighter?” She looked at him, never soberer. “Or is this a thing where I’m like your mistress?”

Negan – to her surprised – snorted in laughter. “Holy shit, you get right down to brass tacks huh?” He leant back and laid his arm across the back of the couch, turning sideways to look at her. “Princess, you’re not a one nighter type of woman. I chased a few girls in my time but – goddamn it – I never chased after someone as much as I have you.” His fingers casually tucked her hair behind her ear, trailing through the fallen curl. “I have done some interesting things to get your attention on me, not gonna lie about that.”

“Things?” she said, crooking a curious eyebrow at him. “What things?”

She could have sworn he’d looked at her sheepishly if she thought he was capable of it. Instead, he laughed and looked away, down at the beer bottle he held in his lap. “That student of yours, that guy Jack who quit?” Negan chuckled and had the gall to look in her eyes. “He didn’t uh… quit, exactly. I gently nudged him towards quitting after one of your classes and stuffed a hundred bucks in his hand for good measure.” He swigged from his beer again. “I saw him flirting with you at that fucking piano and, shit, I never been so fucking jealous in all my life. I wanted to rip his head off, how he made you laugh. So, I stopped him by his car and made him a little deal. Had to make some threats but he took the money in the end so it worked out pretty well.”

“You did what…” she muttered, blinking as her anger mounted. “You… paid off one of my students to not come back?” Mal remembered how that quitter had made her feel, made her question it all. “Wait, I had three people drop out on me, all of them…all of them were guys. How many others did you pay off?”

The bastard winked at her. “Ah ha, you, you caught me. First one actually quit, that’s on you, but the second guy, whatever the fuck his name was.”

“Evan?”

“Yeah, that guy. Pretty boy, young, I saw you fawning over him and his fucking biceps. He had to go. Didn’t take much. I was willing to go up to a hundred and he only took fifty. Point is, neither of them were good enough for you. Fuckboys, right? I saved you a six-month relationship, crappy sex and a lot of heartbreak, Princess. You should thank me, they were two-pump chumps at best.”

Unblinking, she wrenched her right hand from the ice water and slapped him as hard as she could. The water had tipped all over the floor, ice scattered wide. A pain seared through her, more than she’d probably inflicted, and she cradled her own hand, panting for breath. “You motherfucking cunting fuck…”

“I deserved that, probably,” he muttered. “But my point still fucking stands. You are making me work harder than anyone ever made me work for it. I am not giving up until you tell me a good,
solid ‘no’. So, tell me no, Mallory. Without an excuse, that I’m a cheating bastard, that I’m married, that I did shit things to get here. Just tell me no because you don’t want me and that’ll be it. No more chasing, no more scaring guys off you.”

Her mouth fell open as if to say something but the words stuck like glue in her throat. Why couldn’t she tell him no? Why was she so willing to put up with the games, the lying, the manipulation?

She took another breath and flexed her sore right hand, wondering whether the pain would be worth hitting him again. “You’re a jackass.”

“I know,” he replied earnestly. He plucked her beer from her other hand and put it next to his on the coffee table.

“You’re not going to make anyone else quit on me or I’ll cut something precious off your body.”

“Boy scout’s honour, doll,” he bit back with a chuckle.

She began to laugh, shaking her head slightly. “I must be the dumbest person in the entire world to even be considering this.”

“Might just be.” He leaned in closer to her, licking his bottom lip. “I promise that I’ll make up whatever I did to you. Repeatedly, if that’s what you want.”

“Yeah, you better had. That fucking hurt.”

Negan grinned widely again and pulled her head towards his, closing the gap between them both. He kissed her roughly, rougher than she thought he’d be for a first time but Mal knew that Negan wasn’t a man who liked decorum and romance. This wasn’t going to be a love story, or some trashy sweetheart affair. She kissed him back with as much fire and passion as he showed her, his hands pressing against the back of her head like he was scared she’d change her mind and hit him again instead. Mal caught her breath between heated kisses, her brain unfocussed as he pressed her backwards into her couch, snarling a little when her nails raked through his hair.

“Fuck,” Negan swore, looking down at her. Her lips felt swollen and tender, skin lighting up warm as her cheeks flushed. Her hand didn’t even sting anymore. “Just look at you. Fucking beautiful.”

Her tiny couch really wasn’t the most ideal spot but Mal had neither the heart nor the want to move from under him, not when he was pinning her down and looking at her like that, like a starving man who’d got his first sip of water. His eyes had gone back to being dark and dangerous, a threat and a promise. He was just looking at her, his knees pressing into the couch cushions, one hand on the back of the thing and another still cradling her head. He wouldn’t move and she couldn’t.

“Negan?” she asked softly.

“You are not a one night woman, Mallory,” he said after a second, his jaw set. A rough palm skirted her thigh, making her leg curl around his waist. She shuddered in response to his man-handling. “I meant what I said. This is not going to be love, I ain’t going to take you out on dates and bring you fucking roses. But you’re still mine,” he almost growled, making her gasp as he reached between them and cupped her over her panties. “No boyfriends, no dates, no other men. You’re mine and I’ll make you come harder and longer and fucking better than any guy you ever took to bed...”

Fingers pressed in slightly and Mal bit her lip to keep from giving him the moan of pleasure he wanted from her. He’d promised to make it up to her. “That’s a lot to give up,” she replied, pressing her hips up to meet his hand instead. Her own hands were planted on his shoulders, almost
unwilling to move without his say-so. “You going to make it worth my while? Put your money where your mouth is?”

Negan’s face split into a grin a mile wide as he looked down at her. “Princess, I can put better things on my mouth if you want me to.”

Her hands flexed on his shoulders, bunching the material of his t-shirt as she did. He had to feel the heat and wetness between her legs, even over the fabric of her underwear. The asshole, fucking bastard jerk. He’d make her dreams of good sex come true. Mal’s hands moved from his shoulders until her arms were wrapped around his torso, tugging him back down. Negan chuckled before leaning in to kiss her again, his own little victory won in getting her to bend as much as he’d bent.

Mallory met him touch for touch and kiss for kiss; his teeth scraped at her lip as her nails raked across the small of his back. Negan pulled her legs open and wrapped the other around his waist as she canted her hips up to meet the hardness in his crotch.

Her skin was fire and ice wherever his fingers grazed, wherever his lips and teeth kissed and scraped. And – God – he was burning passion in a lean muscled body; he tugged at her hair like before, angling her head back to get at the hollow of her throat before tearing her dress in a manic rush to get to her skin.

“I bet you taste fucking sweet,” he murmured raggedly against her, his face buried in between her breasts. He looked just as much of a mess as Mallory felt, his voice rough and raw, the filth spewing from him like water out of a burst hydrant. “Been wanting a lick of your pussy for weeks. Fuck it,” he suddenly yanked her down the couch a little so she was lying flat on her back, her dress open at the top and rucked up at the bottom, goddamn near bare for him to see. She knew it wouldn’t be enough. “You want that, Princess? You want me to make you come on my face before I fuck you?” he licked his lips, like he was anticipating finally getting his licks in.

“Yes,” Mallory panted, lifting her hips as he pulled at her underwear. “Come on, Negan, make me come.”

His eyes widened as he looked at her, that heat and fire from top to bottom. “Keep saying my name like that… I ain’t a fucking 21-year-old anymore.”

“Don’t want one,” she replied, voice hoarse. “Remember?”

He had to lean back to get her panties off her legs but the look of pure and honest need in his eyes when he saw her bare was worth the acrobatics. Mallory could feel how wet she was for him and refused to be embarrassed like most girls her age would be. She liked sex. She loved good sex.

For once, he didn’t have a word to say. Instead, he just pulled her pale thighs further apart and lowered his face between them. Mallory moaned as he licked her like he promised, tongue hot and willing. His tongue ran over the innermost creases of her thighs until his lips kissed her clit in a hot, sweet gesture. Her body jerked, muscles contracted at his seasoned touch.

“Ah, fuck, Negan,” she grunted out, her fingers threading through his hair to hold him in place. “Yes, God, please…”

She felt a couple of fingers, thick and cool, push tenderly inside her as a reward. Her eyes widened as he crooked both fingers up and swirled his tongue teasingly around her tender pink skin. Mallory’s hips thrust upwards into him, riding his fingers and tongue as he built her up and up. He was going to drive her insane with all this gentleness, the teasing licks and barely moving fingers.
Negan leant back for breath with a groan, licking his wet lips. He looked strained, veins standing up from his arms and breathing haphazardly – if he thought she was beautiful, he needed to look in a mirror. “So fucking sweet, so fucking tight…” he growled, animalistic, and pumped his fingers with purpose. Her vision prickled, fingers slipping around his wrist so she could fuck herself on his hand, deciding that she needed more than he was willing to give. “That’s fucking hot, goddamn,” he licked his lips, staring at where his digits disappeared inside her body. “You want more, come on and take it…”

“Yes…” she exclaimed, her voice just as strained as she worked herself up. His fingers twisted and she cried out, whimpering just a bit. “Negan, please, you promised…” she whined, a spoiled brat wanting more.

“Please what?” he demanded roughly, reaching up to grip her chin.

“No more teasing. You said you’d make me come. I want to come.”

He had the balls to laugh as his head slid back down to her cunt, her chin released from his grip. “You come when I say, Princess. You’re not allowed to yet.”

Whining as his fingers stilled, she felt like slapping him for a whole other reason. Her body wasn’t used to prolonging pleasure, exactly. Her own fingers knew the spots that felt good and hit them hard and fast. He was doing this to see her suffer, hear her beg him, call out his name.

“Not allowed…” she breathed as he pulled her hand from his wrist, using his fingers to stretch her open until she burned a little. “FUCK!”

Mallory would never forget the sight of him as she looked down her body – the hand inside her pulled out and laid flat on her belly to keep her pinned down, his dark eyes focussed entirely on how she reacted as he ate her. Her cunt contracted around emptiness, longing to be filled and fucked. He’d turned her into a monster who wouldn’t stop until she got what she wanted and she wanted nothing more than for him to fuck her as deep as he could get. It infuriated her that Negan refused to give her what she wanted yet, despite his professing to make it up to her, the fucking liar. She’d give back as good as she’d get next time he wasn’t expecting it.

“You ready, Princess?” he asked, his own voice as hoarse as hers was. “Cos I need you to fucking come right now so I can fuck you into this shitty fucking couch.”

“Yes, yes,” she begged, her hands gripping the cushions. “Please, Negan.”

“That’s my girl…” he grinned and shoved three fingers into her, almost vicious, immediately finding his target and hitting it hard. “Come for me…” Negan groaned before he sucked hard on her clit, tongue flicking out just a little.

Mallory’s body imploded as she came. Her cunt tightened around his thick fingers, clamping down on him as pleasure bolted down her spine and pooled between her legs. She was a fucking mess, a mess of swollen skin and fingerprint bruises on her thighs. She hadn’t even noticed him gripping her like that, hadn’t noticed how he watched her intently, fingers moving her through it all like magic.

While Mal sagged back against the couch, her body still catching up, he pitched forwards and kissed her with vigour, making her taste herself on his tongue. His hands were everywhere, tearing at her dress to get more of her exposed, groping her roughly. Her teeth ran over his lip, intoxicated by his lust for her. Her hands scrabbled for his pants and the ridiculous belt buckles he had until finally she got his cock in her hand.
It was Negan’s turn to groan out, his eyes ever more dark and ever more dangerous. “Peaches,” he said as she stared between his crotch and his face.

She chuckled and nodded, “Peaches?”

“You fucking taste like peaches.” He shoved his own pants down enough as she pumped his cock a little, eager to see just how he’d feel inside her. Negan pulled a condom from his back pocket, ripping the thing open like a maniac before he rolled it on. She was grateful he’d had some forethought at least and watching him handle himself wasn’t a bad sight either.

“Take your shirt off,” she ordered, her own dress a band around most of her stomach.

“Yes ma’am….” he laughed and did as she asked, pulling his shirt up and off his body until she got her look at him.

Mallory ran her fingers through his chest hair, peeking at his inky-black tattoos before he covered her form with his again, not an inch separating them. “You call me beautiful,” she muttered as he sucked wildly on her neck, aligning their bodies. “But look at yourself. No wonder you’re such a cocky bastard.”

“Not gonna lie,” he laughed as he sank his cock inside her without warning, the sudden burn making her breath hitch. He wasn’t huge but – God – he stretched her just nicely, pushing up and bottoming out to hit her clit too. “I know what I am, Princess,” he groaned in pleasure alongside her as he thrust deep and hard. “I know.”

He thrust more and more, his face buried into her neck and one hand on her breast, making sure she was overwhelmed by the sensations. Somehow, she was pinned under him and could only move if he allowed her to, her hips canting up when he pulled out. Negan swore into her skin as she clenched around him, his head snapping up.

“You fucking did that on purpose,” he growled and pounded her harder, his hand on her breast clamping down on her wrist instead, wrenching it up to her head. “You gonna play that game?”

Mallory whimpered and gasped as he pistoned his hips, the sounds of wet slapping filthy, her body beading in sweat as her orgasm mounted. Giddy thrills went down her, adrenaline coursing. He liked it rough, giving it rough, she could feel it in his grip and his unrelenting hips. “Yes…” she gasped out, breath stolen.

He doubled his efforts again and she cursed aloud. “You’re gonna pay for it,” he grunted, losing control as he fucked her. “One day I’m gonna tie you to your fucking bed and fuck you until I come and there ain’t gonna be any fucking rubber, I’m gonna fucking fill you up and watch you drip and you’ll beg for more of my dick. You just fucking wait, Mallory. Fucking spoiled Princess.”

“Negan!” she screamed as she came again, her vision blurring as he got sloppier, more focussed on himself, her cunt clamped down hard on his cock.

He roared and stuttered, his hand on her wrist tightening painfully until they both sagged down together on the couch. Both spent. Both sweat-beaded, near gone.

As he seemed to come back to his senses, he let go of her wrist and slipped his hand into hers instead, giving her lips a chaste kiss. They stared at one another before breaking out into identical grins, laughing together.

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Just a deal, that’s what it was. Deep down though, Mallory knew exactly why he’d done this for her, or perhaps it was to her. Despite how sweet the gesture of that piano was – and how it had reduced her to more tears than she’d shed since the beginning of the outbreak – it was still a loaded gun between them. Negan had kept his promise when they were together; he’d never bought her a single flower, he’d never told her lies about loving her, never took her on a date but whatever they had was still palpable. She would be lying if she didn’t feel a pull towards him but her head knew better than to trust anything he said or did that made her feel human again. He’d made unforgiveable decisions.

And so had she.

“Just let me explain it to Peter,” she said, getting up from the piano. “He won’t believe it otherwise.”

He sighed and tilted his head from side to side, “I guess I am nothing if not a reasonable guy,” he said as she suppressed a snort. “Have today as a freebie. Starting tomorrow morning, you’re not to go near him or I’ll do something you’re gonna regret.”

“Don’t doubt it.” She lingered slightly in the door of his bedroom, her arm resting on the jamb. “Can we be… civil?” Mal asked, her eyes unable to keep from darting to his bed. “Keep it civil.”

“If you play by the rules, Princess, I’m not gonna press it. Go say goodbye to your boyfriend. Tell him I said hello.” There was a smirk in his voice again, another conversation she hadn’t been privy to.

Mallory didn’t say another word and dashed out of the room, wanting to get out of there before she made any more dumb decisions. She managed to reach the second door – one to the hall outside – and stopped dead just there, a chill going through her spine, her nerves alight. There was piano music, perfect notes, beautiful notes – Für Elise if she wasn’t mistaken – floating through his empty office. She wiped her reddened eyes roughly and wrenched open the door.

Last thing she heard before she dashed out was a slam and cursing coming from inside.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me a review, hit the Kudos button or subscribe if you're enjoying the path we're on. I'm not stopping any time soon, I just hope some of you want to keep on riding with me.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

After running head long into a reminder of the reality she lives in, Mallory has to confront herself with the fact that there are more rules than she bargained for. As people push and push and push some more, what will it take for her to break into pieces and who’s going to be the one to stitch her back together?

Smut warning here too, kiddos. Not for the faint of heart or body. Flashbacks are in italics as always xx

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos on the last chapter; I know this one's a bit long too because apparently I can't bloody stop myself. May your 2017 be filled with wonderful people, a lot of kindness and some of the naughty bits we all like too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What did you do? What the Hell did you do?!” Peter yelled as he dragged Mallory away from the staring, prying eyes. He’d even managed to lose Caroline as well; her perpetual babysitter was nowhere to be seen and neither were any of Negan’s jack-booted thugs. If she hadn’t been so confused and angry, Mal might have thought it was weird how he’d managed to get them alone so easily when Negan ran such a tight ship; an eye on every corner and a gun trained on every head.

“Don’t you think you should just be grateful?” she replied, wrenching her arm from Peter’s grip. “We’re in secure walls, with clothes, and food!” Stubbornness had always been his biggest trait, and every hunt for food lead to her pleading with him to trust her judgement; it was exhausting to fight for every decision she wanted to make, having to persuade him for hours that she knew what she was doing. Peter dragged her away from the cafeteria as soon as she’d walked back down, trying to explain desperately what she was going to do to give Peter an easy ride and protect him like she’d promised all those months ago. “You should be kissing my feet and thanking me, not making out that I’ve done something evil!”

He rolled his eyes as she attempted to walk away from him out of sheer spite, figuring she’d never win. Peter’s broad hand shot out and grabbed her again, his grip far more forceful and unyielding even as she tugged half-heartedly against him. “Don’t play the martyr, okay? It just doesn’t suit you. I never asked you to keep me safe, I never asked you to do anything. I’m not your damsel in fucking distress, I can stand on my own two feet! You don’t survive this long without learning something and I can do fine with or without you making deals with your psychopathic ex-boyfriend.”

She held her arm away from her body as he refused to let go. “Are you seriously doing this to me right now? I made a fucking deal, shook his hand and everything, that’s it. I can’t back out now, and you’re giving me a hard time?” Head spinning after Negan and his mind games, her hand still
tingling and tender from punching his granite-like jaw and yet Peter could make her feel like shit on the bottom of his shoe. Regret wasn’t in her nature, not when the situation was dire as it had turned out to be. He wanted her to use her so-called sway against Negan but apparently using her own methods was bad. “I thought this was what you wanted, remember? Me to get closer.” What exactly had made him change his mind so fucking quickly?

“I didn’t want this, on his terms…” He sighed deeply and turned away from her, his hands on his hips as he dropped her arm. His black hair hung in front of his face again, his eyes sadder than she thought she’d ever seen. The twitches, though – his feet tapping, his fingers flexing, the sighs and his veins standing out – he got like this sometimes, when they’d been holed up together too long. She knew they were believing something bigger, an unspoken law or truce, something that neither of them wanted to waste time acknowledging was there. “That maniac is just trying to twist you round his finger, Mallory,” he said, looking at the floor dejectedly. “And it’s fucking working, that’s the worst part. I thought you were smarter than to let him get to you.”

Softening slightly, Mal pulled her friend towards her and wrapped her arms around his torso in a loose hug. She needed the comfort as much as he did; a friendly face, a smile, something good to see again when there was only sadness and fighting to keep their heads above water. What she’d sacrificed to keep him safe was as much his loss too, one she hadn’t talked to him about – a cost she’d forced on him and was now blindsiding him with. “Look, I’m sorry,” Mal replied, hugging him tighter as he relented, holding her tenderly. “I really… I didn’t think I had a choice.” The words felt bitter in her mouth.

“There’s always a choice,” he replied, turning his face into her neck. When her skin pricked a little at his warm breath skating across it, Mallory suddenly couldn’t remember when she’d last hugged a person with such genuine affection and not out of fear for losing them. True friendships were hard fought for and hard to keep. “I’m going to miss your rebel bullshit.” Peter chuckled into her shoulder, his hands pressed flat across her back. “I’m going to miss a lot of things,” he spoke in a whisper into her skin.

There was no denying her friend – her only friend – was a good man at heart, a good man that she didn’t deserve. Mallory had said repeatedly that he wasn’t her boyfriend and it was true; Peter meant more to her than something childish and meaningless. In another world, another life, she thought, maybe it would have been more but that was the hand they’d been dealt. “I’m gonna miss you stealing the last cup of pudding every damn time we find a batch,” she chuckled and leant back, still in his embrace. “Maybe things’ll change one day. Shit happens so quickly now, I don’t know what tomorrow’s gonna be like.”

A shuddering, nauseating bang came from down the hall. It ripped her away from Peter in an instant, her body on high alert, her hand reaching for a knife that wasn’t there anymore. Another bang came. And another, the door vibrating on its hinges. They were both still and quiet, waiting and waiting for what would happen, frozen in fear without their weapons. The banging came incessantly, desperate, scratches of dry fingernails echoing in the empty corridor.

“Was that...” Peter whispered, his eyes wide and pale.

Another crash came from inside the room. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Sounds like it.”

Mal’s skin crawled, the sounds that she’d woken up to too many times; a hungry, fetid Biter smelling living flesh. She glanced at Peter next to her, her heart pounding in her chest with a fear she hadn’t felt swallow her up in months. Out in the wild, she had weapons and strategies and knew what to do but now, with the maze of narrow corridors and bare light, she had nothing except the man standing next to her and a newly turned Biter rampaging in a locked room. Peter had frozen beside her as
well, neither knowing what to do or whether there were more around them, waiting to stream out. The unrelenting snarling sounds were everywhere, swallowing them up. Boxed inside with a walking corpse, with no weapons and no easy escape, no options.

“Shit, fuck…” she muttered as another bang echoed. Mal panicked and suddenly pulled them both backwards away from the sounds, desperate for her fucking knife. She’d give her left leg to have Lucille. Eyes darting across the exit routes in front of her, irrevocably lost, she started to panic, head pounding. Which way had they come? Which way had he taken them? What even was that room? She didn’t recognise a thing and from the look on Peter’s face, neither did he. They had walked into a fucking trap, she was sure.

He grabbed her arm in a flash, yanking her backwards violently. “Run…” he said as she jerked, tugging him back in kind.

“We can’t leave it!” The door was still pounding, the Biter snarling and growling like an animal. “We have to kill it with something before it starts biting people.”

The handle rattled, door thumped and shuddered, groaning with death.

“I don’t have any weapons,” Peter said, jumping as the door started to crack from the next angry blow.

“It’s not like I do either!” The ghost of the bowie knife strapped to her hip was haunting her. “Fucking fuck, we can’t leave it, Peter, it’ll just kill everyone! There’s fucking kids in here! Please!”

Mal yelped in shock as a sickening final crack came, the door splitting into two. Each half dangled from the jamb as the Biter scrambled out, disorientated. Too late.

She and Peter backed away quickly from it as it came towards them, jaws snapping and snarling. It was an older looking monster of what used to be a man, its eyes fogged and vacant as it came charging towards them with a shuffling gait, skin grey and tight across its cheekbones. She hadn’t seen one so human in a long time.

Mal and Peter ran back down one corridor as it came after them, them picking up the pace as it did. They quickly pounded on the few scant doors they came across along the enclosing halls, trying handles and finding them all locked, every room closed off as they yelled for help. Every exit turned into another corridor to run down like a fucking maze. She banged insistently, trying to break down one of the doors at the end of another corridor as Peter tried another door, using his shoulder to try and break it open. Panic turned into gut wrenching fear and she screamed in frustration, not finding another way, backed into a wall with no way out. Her head was splitting open with the pressure, vision clouding over.

“Peter!” She screamed helplessly.

“Fuck!” Peter cried out as the Biter nearly grabbed his arm in its cold grip. He snatched himself away just as its fingertips grazed his skin. Peter ran towards Mallory, her face hardening into coldness as they ran out of options. She had to keep her promise, had to protect him, do some good in the world for all the bad. “No!” he called out.

Mal threw Peter behind her and shoved as hard as she could at the Biter as it came towards them, her charging like a quarterback at the snarling creature. It stumbled backwards away from them and she took her one and only shot, shoving at it again and again until it landed with a dead weight thud on the ground like a rotten log, its arm snapping in half with a visceral crack.
Peter grabbed her hand and they stomped hard as they could on its head, its broken arm scrambling for their legs, its yellow teeth snapping. They slammed their feet again and again against its head, Mal roaring out her anger and fear until the sharp heel of her boot cracked the skull and dug into the greying brain. She cried out, her face red hot and forehead wet with sweat, cheeks tear stained.

Peter stumbled backwards as sticky blood trickled out of its head, staining the concrete as they stomped. He panted and yanked his foot out of the viscera, the body still, sinking away from the corpse. Its brains nothing more now than sludge on their shoes. “It’s okay-”

Mallory kept stomping and stomping, thrashing her whole-body weight into its head as her boot drove deeper and deeper into the brain of the dead Biter, flesh and blood splashed and splattered all up her leg and arm. She felt her stomach rising in bile as it landed on her hand and she started to shake violently, roaring out in anguish repeatedly as she stomped and stomped and stomped.

Peter sprang up and pulled her back, the adrenaline waning in her body as he tried to comfort her, his arms wrapping around her once more. Numbness consumed her body like it always did, as dead as the thing on the ground with a smear where its head should have been. She couldn’t look at the smear of its brain across her skin or how the thick, coagulated blood stuck to them like brownish glue, cementing her foot in place.

The halls around them were empty and silent, Peter holding her tired body up, her hands still shaking. He wrapped his arms around her body tighter though Mallory still felt nothing but numbness and the acrid taste of bile rising in her throat. She limped away from the corpse and from Peter’s hold, pressing both hands to a cold, grey wall as she bent double, disgusted and dead as the thing on the floor.

“Must have died in his sleep,” Peter said, his voice distant to her ears. She couldn’t hear anything but ringing, her very bones weary and brittle. “Mallory?”

“M’fine,” she muttered, her head starting to catch up with her body. Peering back up at Peter, she took a final deep breath before shaking off the blood and brain matter from her leg, clothes sticking to her skin. “Been a while since we had one that… fresh.”

Peter nodded vaguely in agreement, reaching out to take her hand. Mal instead looped her arm over his shoulder and leaned on him as they walked away, leaving nothing but bloody footprints fading in their wake.

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“You know, nobody would blame you if you wanted to sit this lesson out,” Caroline said, handing Mallory a small cup of steaming hot coffee that she accepted gratefully. “Considering what happened yesterday, you can… take a break?”

“Word spreads fast around here, doesn’t it?” She had spent the rest of the day trying to scrub the stench and the blood from her skin and her borrowed clothes. “I’m fine, it was just… unexpected, it’s not like I’ve never put down a Biter before.” Taking a sip of the drink, she tried to keep her eyes from wandering around Negan’s bedroom too curiously as she sat by the piano. The door had remained open, though the man himself was nowhere to be seen. Mal had honestly been grateful for the distraction when Caroline had cautiously asked to start her lessons that morning.

“I know, but still…” Caroline said, her own cup in her hand. “You don’t expect it here. People aren’t meant to turn like that, in their sleep.” She was quieter, Mallory noticed, like the incident had shaken Caroline more than she’d expected. After that shower and a change of clothes, she’d recovered fine,
more than fine, and slept well too.

“How long has it been since there was a Biter on the inside?” Mallory asked, glancing up at her new student.

“A long time. Months, maybe a year. It’s not easy to tell weeks and days here without someone keeping a count. We don’t exactly have a sign that says ‘259 days Biter Free’ but I can’t remember when the last one was either.”

Humming softly and looking at her coffee, Mal kept her opinions to herself. She found herself having to resist the urge to tap the piano keys just to make sure it was all real. “I put down my last one maybe a day before I got here,” she replied. “And I killed one yesterday using my fucking boot. Would have been useful if I’d had an actual weapon but I guess I made do, huh? Mom always said I was resourceful.”

“He was a person to someone here! He had friends, worked in the gardens, lived a life. Maybe you need reminding about that from time to time,” replied Caroline curtly and sat down next to her on the bench, her body tense.

It was ridiculous that she was still having this argument with people who had no idea what it was like to live on the outside, without the protection that The Sanctuary provided. “I don’t doubt it but it’s hard to think about that when he was trying to eat my face,” she looked at Caroline pointedly. “Can we just get started here?” Mallory asked, rubbing her temple. “I’m probably already on your husband’s shit list for yesterday. I don’t want to make it worse.”

“Fine.” Caroline set her coffee cup on the top of the piano.

Instantly, Mallory’s eyes bugged and she reached up, placing it on top of a book of sheet music instead. She took a breath and sighed. “You know anything about playing piano?”

“Not much beyond how it works,” Caroline replied, smoothing down her skirt and blouse. She was so practiced, this woman next to her, elegant and refined, like she was moulded from clay to poke at Mal’s sensibilities and amorality purposefully. Mallory didn’t know if she wanted to teach anymore, or if she even had the patience for it with someone like Caroline, a perfectionist people-pleaser who was rubbing her up the wrong way.

After as long an hour of her life as there had ever been – or maybe it two or three – showing Caroline the exercises and scales, Mal’s mind and eyes began to wander around the room, her nerve and patience tested at the jarring slipped notes. She let Caroline play again and again until she was getting close to half-decent, her fingers becoming more dexterous as they practiced and practiced until the slipped notes were disappearing and Mal’s patience started to return.

There were, in fact, other things to notice around Negan’s bedroom as the piano droned; the books on his shelves, the half-empty jar of pomade on the window ledge to her left, the emptiness of his night stands and red silk sheets crumpled and messy. It was… stark at best, she thought. There were no photographs, nor anything to remind her of the first Lucille, only the mantle that her namesake had to rest on every night. His bat got better treatment than half the people here.

“Mallory? Mallory?” Caroline said, looking at her pointedly, her voice laced with exasperation. “I asked if you could show me a song.”

Shit. She had zoned out more than she’d intended, apparently not hearing whatever Caroline had been talking about. “Right, yeah, of course…” she replied, repositioning her hands easily over the keys. The instrumental piece Mallory played flowed easily as the silk of his sheets, her fingers
finding home in the keys like she’d never stepped away from it. Her once pale skin seemed to glow warmer as she played, her mind focussing on the music and away from the noise in her head.

“Wow,” Caroline said after a minute of simply listening and watching her fingers, her awe sounding sincere for once. “How long have you been doing this?”

Mal let the song reverberate out, having to think about an answer to her question; what even was the year now? Caroline hadn’t been wrong about time getting away from them now. “Since I was three, so roughly 25 years, maybe. I’m not exactly whether I’m 27 or 28. My grandmother had a piano, so it was always there in the house when I was young. I was her only granbaby, so she just… taught me on my own.” Mal stared vacantly down at the black and white of the keys, positioning her hands to hover, ghosting a shadow over the notes.

“What songs did she teach you?” Caroline asked quietly, like she was afraid.

Tears started to bead in Mallory’s eyes as she simply played a too-familiar song, her blue eyes were hot and stinging her vision again, but, still she put up a fight against the urge to cry. She didn’t want anyone else, least of all Caroline, to see her in tears over some fucking music, not when there were worse things to be sad about.

It still felt like another life ago, on a different planet, that she had been a teacher, someone who spread some joy and happiness into people’s lives and enjoyed the process too. She thought about her grandma, her Mom, the students in her Adult Ed classes, all the damn kids she’d taught before the end of the world had come about. Every single face she saw had to be dead, all those fucking kids, all those people, dead and turned, wasted lives lost in pain and fear. She saw that Biter’s vacant eyes, his teeth… she felt them snapping at her throat and the waxy feeling of its drying skin.

Suddenly, and all at once, Mal couldn’t breathe, her throat tight and head swimming in faces of the dead and the decay, walls enclosing around her as there was laughter in her face. She was back at the end of that hallway, she was shooting her mother between her fogged-up eyes, she was sinking a knife into Peter’s sister, people she had known ripped apart and eaten, screaming for the sweeter taste of death in the face of so much pain.

There was a claw-like hand around her wrist tightening its grip and she thrashed at her assailant, her chest heaving as she tried to come back to herself, heart thudding. She saw Caroline’s stricken face, scant tears that mirrored her own trailing over pink cheeks. “Shh it’s okay,” she said, leaning and wrapping her arms around Mal in a loose hug. “Sweetheart, it’s okay. What’s wrong?”

“Don’t touch me,” she gasped, pulling away desperately from Caroline’s claying arms and breathing in great gulps of clean air. “Can’t breathe…” Somehow, she was now keening on the floor, the piano bench knocked astray, Caroline kneeling in front of her. Mal’s head was still spinning as she scrambled against the dizziness that consumed her. Pain pierced through her skull where she’d been hit with Simon’s gun, like someone had stabbed her head repeatedly. Caroline’s touch had suffocated the life from her, the air sucked from the room so there was nothing but dead space encroaching on her body again. She just felt the sick laughter and sliding locks and the eyes and screams of dead people.

“Where is she?! Move out of the fucking way!” Came a commanding shout from in front of her, Negan barrelling into his own bedroom. Mallory vaguely heard a clattering of wood before his palms pressed her back down so her head was lower to the ground and she panicked. “Just fucking breathe, Jesus Christ,” he growled, his own voice sounding strained to her ear. It was far away, out of her reach. His hands felt familiar as one kept her in that position, making her stay still as she breathed. And breathed, waiting for Lucille’s blow to her head.
And breathed again, air filling her burning lungs. No blow came.

Mallory placed her palms flat on the floor to stop her head from spinning out of control again as someone stroked her back in a soothing rhythm. She wasn’t sure what had happened, whether it was her head injury or just a panic attack – either was embarrassing enough in front of Negan and Caroline, when word around the place spread like wildfire and she’d have another label pinned on her. Her eyes were screwed shut and Mal instead focussed on herself, a shiver going down her spine as she felt the press of something cold on the back of her neck, cooling her heated blood.

“Princess,” Negan said, less distant, less… Negan-y. “Can’t I leave you alone for five minutes without you getting into some kind of fucking trouble?” He almost teased though even in her state she could hear how thinly veiled his anger still was.

As her head finally felt like it was trying to settle back down, she looked up at him. He was holding something, probably a wash cloth, to the back of her neck, the water trickling down her back. “Guess not…” she wasn’t sure what the skip in her gut was, whether she was grateful for his help or ashamed that he had to help in the first place when she’d told him in no uncertain terms that she’d never need anything he could provide. “What the Hell was in that coffee?” Chuckling a little, she pushed his hands off her as she sat back on her haunches, exhausted again.

“Just coffee,” Caroline said, standing in front of her with her arms wrapped around her chest. “What was all that? She just flipped out.”

“None of your fucking business, that’s what happened,” Negan growled, standing up and storming over to Caroline, who was lingering by the door. Mal couldn’t hear what was said, but Caroline nodded and dashed out of the room soon after, a blank expression on her paling face.

Mallory swallowed as she managed to haul her dead-weight of a body up and sat back on the piano bench, using the washcloth to dab at her hot cheeks and pounding head. The cloth wiped away the remnants of the grime and death on her face. Maybe the attack had jolted her head again and it was a delayed reaction; it was a less embarrassing thing than a panic attack. It wasn’t like she’d not been through shit lately, so why would she have one now? It didn’t make sense that Negan knew what was going on or how he had known what to do instead of just yelling at her to get a grip.

Pacing across the room, he clicked his tongue against his teeth and pulled off his leather jacket, tossing it onto his messy bed without care. He squatted in front of her and bounced, his expression inscrutable. “You and I need to talk about the fucking rules here. Like killing Biters on our own without a fucking weapon and with a fucking head injury, just to make things worse.” He looked furious at her, her gut squirming again. “Fucking fuck, Mallory, you just loooove making my life a fucking misery, don’t you?” He seethed. “Thirty guards patrolling round with goddamn weapons! And you… you’re the one who puts a fresh Biter down with just your fucking right foot, God, don’t I look fucking stupid. And I only heard about it five fucking minutes ago!” He slammed his fist into the wall, away from her face. “You made my guys look like goddamn toy soldiers with plastic fucking guns!”

“I didn’t realise I wasn’t allowed to save my own life around here,” she said, trapped by his body in front of her. “I gotta go get Daddy’s permission before I kill something that was trying to eat me?!”

Negan’s eyes flared dangerously dark as he pulled her to her feet.

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Expecting to wake up to an empty bed and a pounding headache, maybe even the mother of all hangovers, Mallory was instead pleasantly surprised as she was coaxed into waking by a warm arm...
wrapped around her, determined fingers trailing up and down her bare back. They traversed her spine as delicate as stroking rose petals despite their size. She groaned, pleasantly contented, and pulled her own wild hair off Negan’s bare chest. He was stupidly good looking in the morning, sleepy at the edges with a warmth and humanity that she loved when it was directed at her.

“There you are, sleeping beauty,” Negan was already grinning down at her lasciviously, “I almost had to resort to drastic measures. Thought I’d fucked you straight into a coma.” He chuckled, hand still running up and down her back rhythmically.

“Not for a lack of trying…” she mumbled, leaning over him to peer at the clock. “Oh fuck, it’s like 9am,” she said, moving to get up.

He tugged her back towards him effortlessly, holding her in place with an arm wrapped around her waist. “Noooope. Not gonna happen today.”

“Don’t you have work?” she asked, half-heartedly trying to move again though it only served to make him hold her down tighter. “Negan, come on, I can’t lay here all day and neither can you.”

“Given the choice of blowing a fucking tin whistle at some greasy faced teenagers or spending the morning with my dick inside you, I think we’ll go for the latter,” he said a little forcefully, giving Mal a pointed look.

“Tin whistle?” she teased. “What are you, teaching in the 40s?” When he gave her a look, she sighed in mock exasperation. “Okay fine, I’d rather be in bed with you too but we can’t have sex constantly, can we?”

In response, his solid mass of thigh slipped between her softer ones to coax her legs apart without much preamble. “Who says we can’t?” He asked with a quirk of his brow and a slow, salacious smirk. “You think all those things I said last night were just words? I live up to my fucking promises, Princess. One day, when you trust me enough, I am gonna tie you to this fucking bed and spend all day making you my personal fuck toy until you beg me to let you come.”

Mallory whined into his chest as he pressed his thigh up slightly, catching her at a good angle like he had planned it purposefully to toe a line between tease and pleasure. “What do you mean when I trust you enough?” she asked, looking up at him with latent curiosity, one foot running down his calf.

“When you trust that I’m the only one fucking you, and that there’s nothing wrong with me so I don’t have to use a fucking rubber every time I want to screw your brains out. Fucking annoying pieces of crap…” he said with disdain, earning a laugh from her lips. Men.

“Fucking necessary pieces of crap,” she chuckled too, eyes sparkling. “So, you actually want to…”

“Fuck yeah I do, when you trust me enough,” Negan repeated, both of his palms travelling down towards her ass and gripping her solidly to pull her further onto his thigh.

It was his turn to groan when Mallory instead slipped her own leg up and caressed as tightly as he had done to her. She could feel his cock, hot and half-hard on her stomach, unable to stop the excited joy she felt at having him in her bed. Relationships had been toxic to her so some casual sex with an extremely unselfish lover was Heaven and Hell mixed together, a heady addiction she was already deep into.

Having the advantage of her hands, Mal pushed herself up so she was leaning over him, her hair cascading down her shoulders in waves of vibrant red, messy and ruffled from a night of fucking.
She kissed him then, a slow kiss that soon raged into a burning, coursing fire, his hands moving from her ass to her hips like they glided over silk. He wasn’t scared to touch her or needy in the way he did so, treating her like a human being and not a piece of meat or a delicate porcelain doll in kind.

“As wake up calls go,” she muttered against his lips, her hips canting up to get more friction when he stayed still. “This one’s pretty high up there.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he said, squeezing her ass just a little. “Believe me, I’ll spend all day buried to the hilt in that hot little pussy of yours but we’re gonna go over some ground rules with this shit.” The next thing she knew, Mallory was flipped over onto her back, Negan’s legs pinning her down to her own mattress as he pressed into her. Her nostrils flared in annoyance that he could so easily spring an attack on her. “There, much better,” he grinned again, pulling her wrists down to her sides, arms straight and locked in place.

Groaning in frustration at being so effectively pinned, Mal changed tactic and looked up at his naked body, licking her lips in the way she knew he liked. “You really want to talk about the rules now? Sure you don’t want to wait to talk about this after we have sex again? That thing must be getting painful.”

“We screwed three times last night after a few shots and about half a dozen beers between us,” he said, unwilling to let her go even an inch despite her incessant wiggling. “That’s enough of a taste test for now, Princess. Keep your fucking ass still while I’m talking.”

His last command was spoken with such authority that it made her eyes open wider. Her body instantly still in place while her skin flushed pink over her chest, tingling and warm. It wasn’t painful, it wasn’t frightening, it was something deeper inside her that responded so viscerally to his manhandling.

Mal smiled dirtily up at him, deciding to play along. “Alright, Negan, what are the rules?”

The joking look dropped from his face and she shuddered again. “First off, you don’t ask me anything about work unless we’re actually in work and, even then, only if it’s fucking necessary,” he let her wrists go slowly, and seemed pleased that she kept them in place of her own accord. “And you don’t ask me anything about my wife or where she thinks I am. That’s the big one, sweet peach – you stay out of that part of my life.”

“Hardly fair…” she grumbled, annoyed. “How come I can’t go on any dates or have a fucking boyfriend or anything when you’re married? Double goddamn standard.”

“Because one, I don’t share. And two, I have a fuck of a lot more on the line to lose than you do. You’re just the Adult Ed girl – I work there with the kids so if they find out I’m fucking a 20-something year old, then I’m out of a job. You’re not having any boyfriends or any limp dick dates because then I can trust you to keep your fucking mouth shut and there won’t be any eyes on us.”

Mal had to concede that it made a bit more sense at least, though part of her thought that he was just looking for an excuse to be possessive. “I’m 24…” she muttered grudgingly in reply, conceding.

“Next rule: you don’t come to my house unless in-fucking-vited. I’m guessing you’re a smart enough girl to know that one’s a rule already.”

“Do I look like a moron?” she asked, his hands now drifting to cup and play with her breasts as if he couldn’t go five minutes without touching her. Mallory didn’t rise to the bait and kept her own hands pinned to her sides resolutely, though her fingers itched to traverse the hair on his chest. He
had to know the effect he was having on her.

“Those are my only strict rules – no work talk outside of work, no other men, no asking me about my wife and no coming to my house. Easy peasy, lemon fucking squeezy.”

His hands slid down over her chest and ribcage, skimming across to her waist and back up again, taunting her to move and see what would happen. Mallory didn’t move a muscle. “Not that I’m crazy about dating,” she said carefully, “But what if I do meet someone and want to see where it goes?”

Negan’s eyes seemed to dull a little at the idea. “Then we’d be over. I don’t share my women, Princess, you’re mine or you’re not. Enthusiastic fucking consent.” His hands rested on her hips, his thumb drifting to her clit, skimming it slightly just to make her whine. “What I do promise is that you will never get heartbroken or have to do anything you don’t want to do or go anywhere you don’t want to go. You don’t gotta talk to me or listen to me complain, you don’t have to dress fancy or be anything other than who you wanna be…” he raked the nail of his other thumb down her hip and she whimpered at the shivers he wrought. “All I want is what I said in the fucking first place. Just sex, no bullcrap, no complications. My wife ain’t gonna come after you and I’m not chasing you anymore either. You want out, that’s fine. Wish you well. But… I’d rather you stayed.”

How the fuck did he make it sound so enticing? No boyfriend mess, no drama, nothing involved except laughter and sex? Hell, he was even good at it. She’d have to be a fucking fool to pass that up. Mallory was young, free, independent from relying on men for anything and here Negan was offering himself as her living sex toy. He was that kind of a man, she knew, one who loved women and loved the power he could exert over their pleasure. She didn’t know much about him but then did she really need to when it was just screwing around?

“Where do I sign?” she grinned up at him, chuckling.

Negan laughed along with her, that lustful look back on his face at a snap as he bent down and kissed her again. The night before, he had spent an hour just with his mouth on her, turning her into a mess of sweat and post-orgasmic bliss with her own sheets becoming wrapped around her legs and clenched in her fists at the pleasure. If there was anything more beautiful than the sight of that man’s face, eager and desperate between her thighs then Mallory couldn’t imagine it. She had learned the shape of his tattoos and he’d seen hers, a Celtic pattern behind her ear that nobody had noticed before. Negan had delighted in tracing it with his tongue as he fucked her from behind agonisingly slowly until she had begged him to make her come.

“Good thing you’re a quick learner,” he muttered into her ear, turning them again so she could take a bit of control back.

It was a reward for following his lead, for listening to his rules and she was soon straddling his thighs. Mal gazed down hungrily at the man between her legs as hers and only hers. Maybe she was feeling a little arrogant that he’d chosen her instead of that blonde English tutor but, with him at her mercy, she felt like a fucking Queen. That was what drew a mass of women to Negan, she thought – not the power he had but the power he inspired. She’d never known anything like it. Need and want became consuming when put in his hands to give out.

Hands skimmed over his torso in an echo of his own stroking of her chest, Mallory finally getting to rake her nails deeply over his skin and through his chest hair, enjoying the growl and how his stomach contracted and jerked at her touch. “Someone’s ticklish…” she muttered, biting her bottom lip impishly. “That’s… unexpected.”

“Don’t even fucking think about it, Princess,” he warned, pulling her legs apart by her knees to
expose her to the air. “I can still tease you from down here, you know.”

“Those are fighting words,” Mal replied, leaning across to her night stand and pulling another rubber from the box, her stash already greatly diminished from their night of sexcapades. “Maybe another time, when you’re least expecting it, I’ll strike you down and there’ll be nothing you can do about it.”

“Even try tickling me and you’ll wake up one morning with a gag in your mouth and some pathetic bit of silicone inside you,” he threatened, bucking as she slipped the piece of thin latex onto his hardening cock. “Mother of mercy, I might fucking do that anyway, that’s hot as Hell. You pink all over, unable to do anything but take it when I give it. Fucking beautiful, don’t you think?”

Mallory wouldn’t admit that it did sound hot as Hell to her, too. She’d never considered herself that kinky but Negan had one filthy mouth on him that she was already enjoying— as he said – with enthusiastic fucking consent. She was already soaking wet and beyond ready as she shifted herself to sink on his cock without warning, both swearing and groaning as she did. Her hands found stability and tightened on as she bottomed out, the angle pushing her body to another limit. It almost stung, how he stretched her, partly from all their overnight drunken adventures and from the position. Mallory’s eyes watered softly, her stomach quivering as she took her time in getting used to him again.

“Shh, shh,” Negan said softly. It must have been killing him to not take over and thrust up inside her and she was grateful for this control, to take the time he’d given her. “There’s my good girl. Look at you, fucking goddess…” he praised incessantly, his hands trailing and groping everywhere they could as if he couldn’t decide where he wanted to touch her first. “Fucking tight, Jesus, Mallory, ride my dick. I want to see your tits bounce.”

His words spurred her on and Mal started to slide up and down his cock slowly, leaning forward just enough to make her own body light up in response to his hips canting up into her. She gripped her headboard with one hand and took her own pleasure first, “Negan,” she moaned as his hands settled on her ass, guiding instead of controlling. “Fucking feels so good.”

“Yeah it does,” he groaned in reply, voice straining. “Look at me, fuck, look at me.”

She ignored the order and kept riding him, feeling her muscles pulse in readiness as she did, her breasts bouncing dutifully.

“I fucking said look at me,” he growled and thrust his hips up roughly into hers, patience fading.

Her eyes snapped up as she cried out in pleasure and pain, one of his hands moving to grip her jaw lightly, forcing her face to meet his gaze. “Negan!” she said, strangled, just as he stuffed his thumb past her swollen lips. She licked it on instinct, sucking at his skin and tasting him and only him. He refused to let her attention focus on anything but them in bed together, chasing each other towards an end.

Mal scraped her teeth across the pad of his thumb and he groaned out loudly, the bed creaking and cracking as they fucked each other with a fiery passion. “Mallory,” he said, voice rough and tense, “You better fucking come on my dick now, I wanna see you fucking soak me.” Negan smacked her ass cheek hard with his wide palm, her cunt tightening around him in a guttural response.

“Mother… fucking Hell…” she managed to say through her croaking throat. “Need…”

His wet thumb immediately attacked her clit viciously, rubbing in tight little circles as she came hard and fast around his cock, gasping and breaking apart on top of him. Negan didn’t stop
jackhammering up into her, barely able to move as her pussy gripped him tighter. She felt him groan in his chest as he came, hips stuttering until they were both exhausted and spent, sweaty and fucked beyond measure again, her thighs sticky with her own wetness.

Mallory collapsed on his chest, her eyes wide open and gasping for breath, surprised at how quickly that had gotten so intense when they had spent most of last night learning every inch of the other. “Gonna need more condoms,” she muttered, her whole body limp and exhausted across his.

Negan pushed aside her messy, sweat-damp hair and kissed her forehead with tenderness. “And coffee.”

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“I’ve never hit a woman in all my fucking life but you are pushing it!” Negan yelled, pacing up and down again. “Just tell me exactly; why do you think I have fucking guards with fucking guns fucking for, Mallory?!”

She winced at her name from his lips, knowing she really was in deep shit. It wasn’t fair when she had only been defending herself. Why wasn’t Peter getting yelled at too? Because of their deal? Because he’d promised her? “What do you want me to say?” she said, backing up to the wall as he stalked ever closer. It was sickening to be treated like a child by all of them, by Caroline, Negan and Peter all at once. It wasn’t anyone’s job tell her what to do – she could hold her own damn head up above water and could kill her own monsters. “You want me to say that I’m sorry? Because I’m not. This place isn’t fucking perfect. We got into an argument, we got lost and we got jumped. It’s not my goddamn fault your guards suck ass. And you’re the one who took my bowie knife away!”

“Mine! My fucking knife, remember?” Negan said, his hands clenching and unclenching as if he missed the hilt of Lucille to grip – she was by the door where he’d dropped her.

“Same goddamn difference. If I had it, I wouldn’t have had to stomp on its head, I wouldn’t have had to run, I wouldn’t have had Biter brains all over me.” She huffed her chest out. “So punish me. Do whatever you do to people here, I heard whispers about it when I was downstairs yesterday. Go get your iron out, melt my face from the bone if you want! You were always a fucking sadistic bastard.”

“Yeah but you creamed your panties for it, Princess,” he seethed. Negan looked right then like he was about to hit her before he laughed again, voice eerily calm and composed now. “I should give you the punishment you fucking deserve. These people here trust me to keep them safe and I can’t have you doing that job for me, making us look like amateurs. You are on fucking bed rest for the remainder of the week, I don’t give one tiny little shit if I have to strap you onto that bed my-goddamn-self.”

Disgust rippled through her. He knew full damn well she couldn’t take that, not for five minutes, let alone a week. “Like Hell, I’d rather have the fucking iron.”

He ignored her easily, stalking up to her as a predator ready to strike her down. “Bed rest, sleeping beauty. I’ll find you a room and lock you up if I have to. You ever do anything so stupid again, I’ll-”

“You’ll what?” she dared, squaring up to him, craning up her neck to see him, irate.

He grinned viciously and grabbed her chin, pressing his lips to hers in a punishing kiss. Taken aback, Mal’s brain took a moment – a flash of a second – to register what was happening. Desperate hands pushed him away from her, shock and anger and disgust draining through her. His eyes were sparkling and dark, mirth and victory showing in his face.
“I’ll lock you up, throw away the fucking key,” Negan threatened quietly, his fist flexing on the wall next to her head. “And forget you ever existed.”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me some feedback! Did you know that you can find me on Tumblr too? Hit me up with requests if you want some one-shots because I can't help myself anymore. Many thanks to my beta Amy, who keeps me on the straight and narrow as much as she can.

I'm now going to tumble into my 3rd annual rewatch of Hannibal (yaaas Mads Mikkelsen. Go watch The Salvation too - Mads and JDM together. Yum.)

Cheery-byes!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

When Negan follows through on a threat he made to her, Mallory decides that it's time to make her mind up about what to do about their situation. He can try, she thinks, to torture her but there's still an ace up her sleeve - one that she knows will blow everything he thought he knew about her away. Trouble is, does she really want to play that hand yet?

WARNINGS: rough sex, unprotected sex, light and uber consensual BDSM with D/s dynamics coming out. If it's not your bag, turn away. Flashbacks as always are indicated by italics.

Thanks for reading and commenting.

Chapter Notes

I'm not going to lie about this, it's one Hell of a long chapter of what is mostly just rough sex. I got a little carried away reading all the fics people have been writing during the hiatus and I just couldn't cut anything out. I want to shout out to the awesomely talented Cunninglinguist and their amaaaaazingly inspiring Negan/OC fic Receive the Beast. Admittedly there is a bit of a homage to that gory, sexy fanfic in this chapter, all in love. You have to love a fellow Mads fan.

As always credit for encouragement and Beta goes to my friend Amy who is basically a cheerleader. I love you.

Thanks for all your love so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No,” she paled at his threat to lock her away. “You can’t. It’s not fair.” It was all so complicated.

In the most pivotal moments of her life, there had always been choices to make, a decision to call and take the consequences whether they were bad or good. Making the right moves and taking the right path was easier than she’d anticipated. There were choices when people got sick, when people got bit, when they were dying – those were the easy ones, to just put them out of their misery and protect what she had left and salvage from the wreckage. The difficulty came when the numbers got fewer, when good in people became harder to spot and easier to screw over. There were vicious killers, dangerous and deadly, who were the monsters she had come across more often, again and again and again. The ones that lurked and killed in the dead of night, those who would appear as a balm, as a friend… her nightmares resonated still. When Mallory had found roasted human bones, long cold and aged, she hadn’t said a word to anyone.

Her own lines blurred too easily. There grew in her a ruthlessness, a steel cast from their first loss at the hands of a living, breathing being: children were easier pickings, she supposed, since you could
hold one hostage and demand anything in exchange for empty promises. She’d made the wrong call that day. A wrong call she was still paying for, years later. But that, those choices she could see, she could understand how hunger and need and desperation to survive could drive the warmest and most loving of people to do disgusting, heinous things just for a meal. She’d done some herself.

Yes, Mallory had long drawn and re-drawn her boundaries, the lines she was willing and unwilling to cross and had – once or twice – become what she was trying desperately not to but she still had lines. The man in front of her, his demonic glint of glee, lay a fire of rage and savagery that lived in his face like it was carved into his bones. There were monsters beyond the monsters, sadism and brutality for gain and then, and only then, there was Negan. He wasn’t a sadist for gain, he didn’t take what he wanted in order to survive because he was already a God among scared followers. He took because he could take, because he wanted to push pain and endurance to its limits in people, break them down into beings who were rotting faster than the Biters. Mallory had seen how he could do it, before the outbreak, she’d felt his need for control and supplication and threw it off her shoulders because... because she liked it.

He knew. He knew all too fucking well how the sounds of locks and the clink of metal bars drove her to desperation, how they broke her down. Threats he made to her, never empty, were always so fucking personal. She could still taste him on her lips even as she shoved him away, her body trembling in disgust at herself more than at his actions. He would break her, he would smash her up, he would wreck her. Because he knew now, he had felt it in her for that tiny fleeting moment made of memory.

She had kissed him back and willingly so.

Negan whistled, long and low, the coldness of his eyes mitigating a smile. “Oh Princess, Princess,” he still encroached her space, one fist tapping on the wall next to her head in a rhythm. “My sweet, juicy Georgia peach,” he licked his lips, as if he could taste her still. “I know you’re scared. There’s worst things I could do, though, right?” She couldn’t speak, voice stuck in her throat. “You don’t know the worst I could do…. do you wanna hear it?” He positively sparked at that, bouncing on his heels. “Do you wanna see?! I could, I could just take you out to the colonies, they know how to treat me right and they’re due a reminder, I think. I’ll just pick some pathetic waste of resources and turn his head into fucking cheese spread. Maybe I’ll make you lick Lucille clean afterwards, like a fucking lollipop. I know how eager that tongue of yours is.” Negan’s eyes flared again. “Would that be better than a warm bed, Mallory? Is licking blood off my Lucille preferable to Her Majesty’s demands?”

“No…” she said, keeping herself from more trouble, lest he act out the threat she knew he found enticing.

Tutting, he leant back and she could think again, not surrounded so completely by his darkness. “No?” Negan shook his head, dropping his voice to a whisper she had to strain to hear. “Well ain’t that a damn shame. We can save it for the next time, can’t we?” Mallory felt his finger running over her stitched-up head, wincing at the stinging it produced. “Nothing you wanna say to your old pal Negan? Since we’re being fucking civil.”

“I am sorry for yesterday.” The words felt like Lucille’s barbs down her throat but she spat them out all the same despite herself. Mallory could ask him not to touch her, she could ask him to give her space but it seemed like a bad idea to even try. He knew his power over her now, through that kiss, he knew that he could break her. He would try. Let him try.

“You know what? I’m kinda believing you now. Did not think you were gonna be that easy to wear down, Mallory, I am almost disappointed in you, such a shame. I like it when you fight me, and you
like it too.” Her lips betrayed her as the bare corner quirked in a stiff smile for a flash of a second. “There it is. Hello firecracker. You do like standing up to me.”

“No, I don’t,” she replied, bristling at the accusation.

“Lying little liar, pants on fire,” Negan said in a sing-song voice. “That pretty head of yours might as well be my palace, Princess, come on. You can’t stop yourself, can you?” He chuckled smugly. “Don’t be ashamed to like what you like, how many times I gotta tell you? Revving the engine’s half the fun.”

“Fuck you,” she muttered, though her body was still half-frozen in place. “I’m not that girl anymore. Fuck you and fuck this place.”

“Fuck this place?” Looking at her for a second, Mallory saw something that would have been akin to hurt in a normal person. Negan pulled away from her and grabbed Lucille from the doorway, waving her shaft erratically. “I fucking warned you, Mallory, and there you go, trying to hurt my feelings like I ain’t got none.” His voice slipped into mania and he grabbed her by the scruff of her shirt, lifting her away from the wall. “You are coming with me, fucking spoiled little brat, get walking.” Negan practically threw her forward, her feet catching as he did. Coffee was already staining his floor.

Mallory felt Lucille’s bite in between her shoulder blades as Negan frogmarched her out. He wouldn’t stop talking either, not when he grabbed a random guard, not when he pushed her forwards with Lucille, he even ran his mouth when she bled through her shirt. They came to an already open room a few doors down from his office, a frigidly cold space that contained only an undressed bed and an old wood desk chipped and marred by time. It still reeked of death to her, stank of bleach and blood. Forcing her inside, Negan pulled a key from guard’s belt, the young woman lingering by the door with a more-than-satisfied smirk on her face. That scared her more than Negan did.

“You can’t do this,” Mallory protested, attempting to keep the terror from her voice at being confronted with her punishment. “You can’t lock me away, you can’t!”

“One fucking week, Mallory, one motherfucking week. You do what I say, when I fucking say it and then you might be in a better position to negotiate. You think I’m treating you like your Daddy would?” He spat the word, gleeful in his twisted imagination. “Then I’m grounding you until further fucking notice.”

“No, no, Negan-”

“Shut the fuck up!” he thundered. “Bad girls get punished, remember? It ain’t my choice of punishment, trust me, but I don’t think you’re quite ready enough to take it like you used to.” He licked his lips lasciviously, obviously restraining himself from giving her what he wanted to. “I’ll have some clothes and shit brought up to you, Princess, something to keep you warm and cosy tonight,” he winked. “I think you’ll make a nice next door neighbour for Amber. The walls here are thin as fuck, though…” he leant closer in, like he was divulging a great secret. “And she can get kinda loud, like you do.” Negan winked. “Arat’s gonna take good care of you tonight.”

Mallory watched silently as he looked her up and down, as if he was remembering every second of who he had made her into with that single glance. Not another word passed his lips as he stalked back out, head trained on the ground though that smirk was unmistakable. The lock clicked in place behind him and the last thing she heard was his soft, chilling bark of a laugh. Unable to do anything else, she stood as a stone in the middle of the room, unwavering and cold.

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For a few weeks, her life was a whirlwind of work and sex and Mallory’s enthusiasm for both hadn’t abated, though she expected it to. It had been a struggle to contain the two parts as separate entities, particularly when she would steal long lingering glimpses of him out on the field with his football team, when Negan was as messy, ruffled and sweat-dewed as he was in her bed. She didn’t think anyone knew anything about their fuck-buddy status since he was far better at containing his desire for her, even when she knew it was there. He would – and did – surprise her constantly when nobody was looking at them, giving her ass a pinch or sliding past her and making sure she could feel him. Negan liked to tease.

The generally blissed-out, fucked-beyond-measure mood made work easier as well; she played for herself, put out her business cards and was glad for the freelancing work she was receiving in tandem. Mal taught disgustingly rich people how to play the pianos they’d bought for living room furniture and relished the opportunity to play real instruments. Indeed, she saw it as her duty to make sure the beautiful pianos were used and not left to gather dust and stiffen as so many people did. She even booked a gig as a private pianist for a soiree one of the rich clients was hosting; she didn’t exactly know what the difference between a soiree and a party was but she had been happy to charge them a few hundred dollars for the pleasure of finding out. Her rent was secure for three whole fucking months after that one party, playing Handel and Bach for handsy old geezers smoking sweet tobacco. She was busy, busier than ever.

And so, it became inevitable, she thought, that Negan would lose interest in her.

For weeks, he’d dropped by her house two or three or four nights in a row, sleeping at hers if he happened to come by on Fridays. Mallory discovered a lot of things he allowed her to discover; that vanilla wasn’t in Negan’s vocabulary, that he was as unselfish a lover as they came, that he could tell what she was thinking before she’d formulated a though. One of those nights with her had been spent with Mallory sat on his face the entire time, him making her come over and over and never letting her touch him back. He’d heap praise on her relentlessly until she felt a million times lighter than air, like she was sitting on clouds. It was easy, it was fucking hot, it was completely and utterly effortless to be attracted to him, to want him night upon night in whatever way he asked for because he made it that way. Simple, raw, and honest. Until it just wasn’t any of those things.

She realised suddenly and stupidly one night that she hadn’t seen Negan for at least half the week, maybe more. Having cut her hours down at the school, it was getting harder and when she’d been there, he just hadn’t. Negan hadn’t texted or called, hadn’t slipped her a dirty stick figure drawing on a post-it note in her pigeon hole – nothing. His interest in her was fading; they had drifted away so suddenly and without warning that she’d just… forgotten about it.

The next day though, that Monday night, he was there. And Jesus, he looked awful in the most beautiful way, like she’d never seen him before. Like the ruins of some granite statue knocked down and crumbled.

Negan hadn’t shaved in a week by the look of it and had that pissed-off-at-the-world darkness barely simmering under the brim of his cold exterior. She’d be worried if she didn’t find it so fucking attractive. Taking the initiative that night, Mallory waited until she saw he was alone in the staff room before making her move, only for him to ignore her and brush her hand off his shoulder as he walked past like she was nothing, like he hadn’t been balls-deep in her pussy the week before.

The outright rejection stung her deeper than she wanted to admit and knocked her ego in tandem, the ego he’d built a goddamn plinth for display. The bastard was under her skin and not knowing what had changed was slowly eating at her.

Even asking him what was going on would break his stupid fucking rules; no emotions, that was the
deal, no complications, no mess. For the rest of the week, she quietly seethed and ruminated; night after night of nothing but apathy and silence. He didn’t even look like himself; like someone was attempting a really shitty impression of him instead. Whatever had happened – whether it was her or his home life – to bring him down, she was going to find out.

“Sorry, are you Mallory?” one of his students had asked her the next day, when he was passing her in the hall. She had told her own class to pack up early so she could go get drunk on cheap beer and Prosecco at home, waiting for a call that wouldn’t come. When exactly had she gotten so needy to rely on Negan for her stress release? “I just, uh, I’ve seen you around and wanted to talk to you,” the man asked again, knocking her back into the present.

This guy was fairly normal looking, she thought, not the kind she expected from Negan’s band of brothers. He was your average thirty-something divorced Dad looking to get his ego back, the same as her. Negan had to be thrown out of her system. “Yeah, that’s me. Sorry, I don’t know your name?”

“I’m Byron, hi,” he replied. “I don’t guess that you’ve got any spaces left for a late starter? Only I tried to sign up before but was told your books were all full. You’re really popular, so…”

“Oh!” she said, brightening immediately. “Right, sure, absolutely…” she opened up her purse and pulled out a notebook, her rosters inside of it. “There’s two spots I can get you in for, the Thursday class or the Wednesday,” she said, her eyes darting between her book and his face.

He was… actually kind of cute once she got there; dirty blonde hair, all stuck up every which way in the back like he’d been running his fingers through it manically. He had ears that curled out at the tops and a scar on the end of his brow, the skin paler there than the rest of him. She didn’t usually go for blonde guys but he made it work, some kind of California surfer dude wearing the messiest, most ripped up clothes she’d ever seen, and dark blonde scruff around his jaw.

“You do private lessons?” Byron asked softly, catching her staring. “I’d feel like I was chasing everyone else to catch up.” He smiled at her and Mal felt that skip in her stomach, the one she had felt when Negan would praise her at every turn. It felt good to have that again, a tiny spark that could build into something real.

“You do, actually, here…” she looked up and produced a scruffy business card. But her hand hovered in the air as he took the piece of card, Mallory’s eyes fixated on a person watching them from afar, her skin prickling on the back of her neck. He wouldn’t look away.

He was just there, leaning on the wall at the end of the hall without a care in the world. Negan cut a dark contrast, black t-shirt and combat jeans with heavy boots, unmoving and blank next to Byron’s golden warmth, her new student’s face animated and lively, engaging and friendly. She hadn’t seen Negan smile with any warmth for days. Would he consider her talking to Byron as breaking his stupid motherfucking rules? She was allowed friends, he’d never stipulated against that and it was business. Just business.

Not knowing whether it was a reaction that she wanted or just to feel desired again, she couldn’t say. Mallory couldn’t put her hand up to why she did what she did, mostly because she feared what the real answer would be when she got it.

“Wait, sorry,” she said a second later, her mind racing. “I think that’s an old number, can I give you my new one?”

“Oh go for it,” Byron replied in kind. “My little girl’s gonna go crazy, if I get any good. You teach kids too? She’s asking about lessons.”
“Definitely, you can bring her down any time you like.” Mal found a pen and took his hand in hers, writing her phone number on the top of it swiftly and smoothly, her heart thudding in her chest as she did so. “How old is she, your daughter?”

“She’s seven, her name’s Alanis,” he said, glancing at the number with a smile.

Mallory beamed and saw Negan behind Byron, stalking towards them with his hands buried in his pockets. If she didn’t know him, she’d not spare him a second thought. But she did know him and he looked, if anything, pissed the fuck off.

“Bet you were a big Alanis Morissette fan in the 90s huh?” she shone brighter, her imminent victory tasting sweet, if still untenable. “‘Jagged Little Pill’ was her best album even if she didn’t know the definition of ironic.”

“That was a great album,” Byron chuckled at her kindly, his warmth exuding. It had been a long time since a guy was genuinely sweet to her. “You’ll have to teach me some of sheet music to show my daughter, she’ll go nuts.” He was a nice guy, she thought. It was a shame what Negan was going to do to him if he actually tried to call her. Woe betide the man if he tried to kiss her. God that kind of power was intoxicating.

As he approached them, Mallory licked her bottom lip at Byron, reaching out and squeezing his arm in an obvious ploy of a gesture. She could hear Negan’s mind from here, all his attention focussed on where she held Byron’s arm. “No problem,” she grinned back at her new friend, catching Negan’s eye as he stormed past them and into his classroom, his face a picture of jealous wrath.

“I’d love to show her. Come by next week’s classes, huh? I’m sure I can squeeze you in,” she batted her eyelashes coquettishly. “I don’t mind a little late night studying if you’re-”

“Hey Parker!” Negan called from inside his room, leaning through the door as he held onto the jamb. “You trying to hit on the fucking piano girl? Wouldn’t bother man,” he said, the smirk hiding thinly veiled contempt. “She’s not really into what you’re offering, if you get me. She’s more interested in taking a lick at the cute little blondie down the hall from what I hear, ain’t you, Princess? She must like short skirts and fake tits.”

“Oh, fuck off Negan, go polish your ping pong balls,” she bit back instantly, reddening at the cheeks in embarrassment at his crudeness, making her look like an idiot. He had to manipulate people for fun. The sick, sadistic bastard had done it now.

Mal looked back to Byron, who glanced at her awkwardly as if the air had been let out of him. “So, uh, I’ll call you sometime next week, maybe. Nice to meet you, Mallory.”

She was left standing there in the hall, wrung out and alone, as the man practically sprinted away from her, his head hung low and shoulders slumped. Mallory looked back at Negan, dumbfounded at how he’d turned it around on her so easily.

“I’d close your mouth if I were you,” Negan said coolly, definitely sounding like he didn’t give a fuck. “Before someone stuffs something inside it and you choke.”

Waiting for Byron to move out of sight, Mallory lunged forward and pushed Negan backwards into his own classroom viciously, sick of the sight of him, sick of his quick mind, sick of him walking around like he owned her and then not giving a damn until she had a chance at someone else, someone better.

“You’re a piece of work, you know that, right?” Mal kicked the door to his classroom shut behind her, nostrils flaring. “Two fucking weeks, two motherfucking weeks and you haven’t even looked at
me and suddenly you’re what, scaring guys off me again?”

“It’s been a week and a half, and don’t pretend that little masterpiece theatre out there wasn’t for my benefit,” he replied, sitting on the corner of his desk nonchalantly. “You broke the fucking rules doing that, you know it as well as I do; you fucking broke the fucking rule. No other men. You agreed to it, so you got no leg to stand on here.”

“I was only talking to the guy!” She protested, gesturing angrily. “I finally get a goddamn break, get some better paid work than this piece of crap job and find a sweet guy to flirt with and you’re so fucking jealous that-

“Jealous?” Negan interrupted. “You think I’m jealous of that asshole? Jealous of anything? No, no, no, I ain’t fucking jealous, I’m protecting what’s mine. You want to keep doing this, you don’t go dropping your panties for every guy you see. Like I said,” he said, getting as angry as she felt. “Your pussy comes for me and me only, Princess.”

“Then why haven’t I seen you in two weeks?!” she exclaimed.

“Week and a half!” he protested back.

“Two weeks, Negan!” She said, folding her arms over her chest. “Used to be every night, right? Three or four at the least and then you cut me off cold, even told me to get a fucking grip when I tried to come on to you. So, what’s the deal, here? You don’t want me anymore? You trying to avoid the break-up speech? Because I didn’t take you as a guy without balls.”

He breathed heavily and there was his true, violent anger simmering under the surface, something darker that she had somehow not seen before.

“You can come over here and feel how hard my dick is right now and then try and tell me I don’t want to fuck your brains out,” his hands gripped the edge of his desk until his knuckles turned white. “What you don’t do is tell me what I want; more specifically, what I want from you.”

“What do you want, then?” She licked her lips again, trying not to let her eyes flicker down to his crotch and see if it was bull. “Because I sure as shit don’t know anymore. I don’t like being treated like I’m nothing, Negan.”

Catching him glancing out the window of his classroom door before that heated gaze landed on her, Mallory squirmed. “Who I am doesn’t fucking matter, does it? All you gotta know is what I’m not. I’m not going to hurt you, I am not forcing you do to anything here. No bullshit, Mal, I know there’s something you’re feeling right now and I can’t fucking handle it. Not now, not ever, and I put my hand up to that.” He raised both palms for a moment before they landed back on his knees. “So, I left you alone for a bit, so what?

Did I fuck you so good that you can’t even go a week and a half without having my dick inside you?”

Mallory swallowed thickly at the lump in her throat, her mouth suddenly dry. “Yes,” she admitted begrudgingly, through gritted teeth. “You arrogant asshole, yes, yeah you did fuck me so damn good that it’s not the same when I’m trying it on my own.” Her jaw ticked in frustration. “You got me. Whatever it is that’s making you stay away from me, whatever idea you’ve concocted in your head about me, just forget it – I just want to get fucked. You’re driving me insane.”

Negan’s eyes flared. “Tell you a secret, Princess? The shit I got going on in my head right now, the way I want to fuck you?” He shook his head and shifted his hips. “You sure you like it that way? Cos right now, I don’t want to pour my bleeding heart all over your sweet, fake good girl act. I want the real Mallory, the one who’s flirting with other men to get my attention, to get me to punish her.
She’s the one I wanna fuck into my desk right now. I’m not gonna stop, and I’m not gonna be gentle. I’ll rip you apart at the seams until you break. I don’t think you can do it, Princess.”

He looked so on edge, a vein in his arm pulsing rhythmically in beats. Those hands were clenched in barely concealed frustration, whether that was because of her or not, she wasn’t sure. Negan was a man in need, though, that much became clear, avoiding her because he thought he was going to tear her in half with even a soft touch. Negan wanted that kind of cathartic release, needed it more than she did, to truly let go of whatever it was in his head and take control of her and her body.

Quietly, Mallory went over to his door and pulled the shutter down over the glass pane before turning the flimsy lock. She gave the handle a good wiggle, making sure it was secure enough from outside intrusion. After allowing herself be nervous about sex for the first time since her first time, Mal turned and looked at him with a serious face. He had laid down a gauntlet she wanted to pick up and shove back at him. “So, is there a safe word or do you wanna use the traffic light system?”

Eyes catching the light of flames, he sprang from his position on the desk and instantly stalked towards her in giant, assured strides like a starved wild animal. “Traffic lights. Can you be quiet?”

“Probably not…” she admitted, reaching for his belt buckle and unclasping it slowly, threading the cracked leather through the loops of his pants. “But then I thought you were going to stuff something in my mouth anyway. Not like anyone’s around to hear now.” Need for him battled with her stubbornness to take it lying down.

When he cradled her head, threading his thick fingers through her hair and tugging her up, she wanted desperately to kiss him again. “Then snap your fingers if you want me to stop,” he groaned, looking like he was about to snap too. “We all settled here? Because my dick could cut fucking glass right now.”

Considering her options, or at least faking it, Mal gave his belt one sharp tug until it was free. “I’m good with that scenario. Besides, you could always use this thing to keep me quiet,” she said, her head still captivated of him fucking her mouth. “Gonna have to hold my hands back though. Not sure I can resist touching you for much longer.”

Negan groaned audibly, hauling her closer to him with clasping, greedy hands. “First thing tomorrow, I’m finding a second belt to wear. Versatile little fuckers. I could use them in so many ways…”

Aching and needy, Mallory swallowed thickly as he got closer and closer to kissing her, a tantalising thirst she was desperate to quench. “Does your imagination never stop?”

“Not when it comes to you,” he admitted, dropping his hands away from her and taking the belt instead. In a flash, he had spun her around and tied her hands behind her back roughly, yanking them to the small of her back until she couldn’t do much more than wiggle her fingers. “That better?” he asked. Mal stole a glimpse of him over her shoulder admiring his handiwork, eyes fixated on her ass.

Her trapped hands hit Negan’s crotch as he rubbed against her from behind, tucking her hair away frantically from her shoulder, getting as much of her skin exposed as he could. Mal’s insides stirred at the feel of how hard and warm he was even through his pants and her skirt. “Oh God, you weren’t lying,” she groaned as he wrapped his arms around her torso, trapping her to his chest. Negan began to grope her breasts, tearing crazily at her button-down blouse until he could get under the cheap fabric, the flimsy seams tearing around her arm audibly. “Hey, I liked that blouse!”

“You can afford a replacement,” he said huskily into her ear, his voice chillingly erratic. “Unless
“No…” Mallory hummed, feeling his hot breath skip across her neck and shoulder, the sensation making her tingle. It was amazing how easily she had forgotten what he’d said and done when she felt his cock on her ass and his hot breath on her milky pale skin. There was nothing in her head except a cloud of lust, kept alive by him resolutely refusing her any control.

The grab he made at her throat so suddenly and tight that she nearly squealed. His palm squeezed her just enough to restrict her moan of desire and fear, Negan pulling her back against his body with an arm tight as a rope around her waist that anchored her in place. “Don’t think I forgot how many rules you broke. You’re gonna make it up to me tenfold before I let you come.”

Without mercy, Negan sunk his teeth into her neck and sucked hard, shaking by the throat slightly as she jerked in pain and pleasure. Just as her thighs started to ache, he let the pressure off the column of her tender neck and licked a hot pattern over the deep bruise he had marked her with. She felt her body jerk at the sensations, her blood rushing as the onslaught stopped as soon as it had begun. “Get on your fucking knees,” he ordered, reducing her legs as something akin to jelly. “Gonna stuff that fucking beautiful little mouth full…”

Every part of her aching in pain and desire, Mallory automatically dropped to the cold floor, turning to look at him as she did. He looked even taller from her perspective on her knees, God-like in his composure; her lack of it seemed amplified. Lips watering as he pulled his cock free of his loosened pants, Mallory took no preamble and made no move to struggle as he tapped on her swollen lips with his cock.

He felt hotter and heavier in her mouth than she imagined, her lips stretching to accommodate him when he finally slid into her awaiting mouth. Mallory couldn’t help but groan at the feeling, not when he hadn’t let her do this to him much though she didn’t know why when he was looking down at her like that. With one hand winding itself around her fiery red hair, he didn’t give her time to get comfy and instead thrust shallowly into her willing, eager throat until she had to make herself relax and let him take over. His grunts were guttural, each swipe of her lips and tongue made him keen over and over. He fucked her mouth, taking his pleasure before hers, taking all that he could get. Even her eyes watered at the sight of him so crazed; Mallory would have given anything to climb into his mind. Not for nought though, there was more than a dull ache and rush of wetness between her thighs and she had to press them together for relief from the throbbing.

Sliding his cock out, she panted for breath in great gulps, licking her swelling, damp lips. Waiting wasn’t tolerable, she had to get another taste and licked a hot, eager line up his shaft with her tongue, wanting to see him completely lose his mind. Mallory slid her eyes closed and sucked at his cock, moving her tongue in soft circles around the tip to drive him to the edge quickly.

Negan ripped her mouth off him and wrangled her hair roughly around a tight fist. “Oh no, no, you don’t get off that fucking easily, Mallory, don’t you think I don’t know what you want a goddamn taste of. Greedy girl.” He tsk-ed at her, yanking her up from her supine position on the floor and throwing her away. “You can’t have it til you earned it, that’s the goddamned game.”

“How?” she asked croakily, stumbling a little as her feet hit the linoleum. “Please, I just want you, Negan, that’s all. Fuck me.”

Voice laced with malice and lust in equal measure, the restraint he’d always shown her was waning thin underneath the veneer. He remained still, rooted in place and resolute, not touching a single part of her. “Bend over that fucking desk and pray to God I take it easy on you.”

Mallory jerked forwards as he pushed at her, manhandling her roughly until she was bent over the
desk. He made quick work of her skirt, jerking the tight material up to her waist in an eagerness he’d not shown. “Negan!” she grunted as her chest hit the wood veneer. Knowing full well he’d see how wet her panties had become already, she prepared herself for his reaction. Knowing him, there was only one option…

“Holy fucking shitballs, Princess!” he exclaimed in rapid, avid glee from behind her. “You are fucking dripping and I haven’t even touched your pretty little pussy yet. Oh, man, you really are greedy tonight, aren’t you? It’s taking all I got not to suck you bone dry. You want my dick, sweet peach? Want me to fuck you?”

“Yes!” she wailed, annoyed. Just as she thought he was going to expose her to the air, instead he yanked her underwear up so sharply that it pressed on her swollen clit. “JESUS!” she cried out, face sinking to the desk as her body keened. “Just fuck me already, it hurts...” Not being able to see him was the worst of it though; she longed to see his face as he looked at her aching body, dripping in lust for him all over the desk he’d gone on and on about. “Fuck me, you know you want to.”

It was infuriating how calm he sounded. “Think you’ll find I said you gotta earn my dick,” he replied, leaving her underwear bunched and rippled close to her cunt, just as torture. “You keep your hands where they are and take your punishment, and I’ll make sure my sweet peach gets to come.”

Confused for a moment, it wasn’t until he began to untie her hands that she knew what he wanted; he needed the belt for a more viscerally painful purpose. Her stomach twirled in excitement and nervousness, knowing that she could put a stop to it if she wanted to, that he would back away and rub her aching shoulders and make her come. But Mallory was nothing if not stubborn and knew she could take his hits, make him proud of the pain and pleasure she could stand to get his cock inside her.

“Give me a colour, Mallory,” he said a little more evenly still, trailing a loop of soft, old leather across her ass. Her hands felt the relief of not being bound but – God how she longed to touch him, to rip her underwear off and sink fingers inside herself or, better, ride him until she came.

“Green,” she replied after a moment of thought, shifting her hips to a better position. Her hands were still sitting at the small of her back like they hadn’t even been untied.

“That’s my girl,” Negan said. “Five for my Princess, okay? Count ’em out nice and loud.” His voice sounded more broken and she wondered whether his look was cold or full of fire, whether he really wanted to hurt her or whether he wanted to pinken her skin, make a mark to match the bite on her shoulder. Not knowing which Negan was swatting her ass with a belt was killing her softly.

Mallory waited for a hit, even a trail of the belt along her skin. The silence consumed them and the room into one moment, her body veering on overdrive. He made her wait for it. And wait.

The sting was unexpectedly sharp as it landed across the thick part of her ass cheek. She cried out, feeling another rush of wetness soaking her pale pink underwear. “One...” Mal panted as she called out the number, turning her cheek to press against the cool wood of his desk.

“Taking it like a fucking champ,” Negan said proudly, running his calloused fingers over where he’d hit her. “You’re fucking beautiful when you clench like that, Mallory. Do it again.”

“T..two!” she called as he hit her, a little harder, a little more vicious, and she had to fist her sharp nails into her palm to keep from screaming. She gasped when he dealt another blow, harder still as her thighs and legs ached and burned. Her voice waivered when she called out the number.

“Three!”
Negan’s lips and hands descended on her reddened ass, soothing the burn almost as instantly as he created it. His fingers edged at the sodden fabric between the lips of her cunt, making her cry out and mewl in pleasure, sobbing her pain at the touch that wasn’t a touch. “You have no fucking idea, I never dreamed…” he whispered into the red-hot skin on her cheek, just barely audible to her. “Two more, Princess, two more nice smacks for me. You can do it, you’re my fucking warrior.”

Mal steeled herself this time, emboldened by his words. The bite of the leather struck her even harder and she couldn’t help but cry out in sheer pain, her body jerking forward, rippling up her spine. “Agh, Negan! Four!” She sobbed again, pussy twitching softly.

“Shhh, shhh…” he soothed again, pressing his crotch into her thigh, she supposed for his own relief as much as hers. It did nothing to stem her deep need to be filled, it did nothing but give her will another test, another poke to keep going. “I’m gonna end up coming over your ass if you say my name like that again. Colour?”

“Oh God, green, so fucking green.” She groaned and sagged a little, mouth dry.

“One more, I promise, fucking promise. That’s it.” Instead of the smack she was expecting, he unceremoniously yanked her right leg up until her knee rested on his desk, displayed for his pleasure. “My fucking Queen…” he groaned behind her, spreading her as wide as her hips could stretch.

With a loop of excitement settling in her gut, Mallory realised exactly where he wanted to place the last hit.

A flash of a second later and she felt her whole body convulse into spasms, jerking wildly as he smacked that damn belt over her clothed cunt, the wet cotton hitting the leather and grazing her clothed clit. She bit back a scream as pain and pleasure flooded her from spine to toes, back arching, wetness spreading down her trembling thighs. “Fuck…five…” she panted, breathing in oxygen like she was dying.

Negan didn’t say a damn word to her. There was a clatter as he dropped the belt on the floor and ripped her underwear off, the fabric in pieces. He thrust his cock deep into her tight, hot pussy, ruthless and unrelenting. “Mallory,” he groaned, fucking her roughly, pulling her arms back enough to sting her joints. He was harder than she’d felt before, his cock stretching her body to new limits, to edges of pleasure and pain. “Never… so fucking gorgeous…” he stuttered. “Fuck!”

Gasping as he fucked her, deep and hard and remorseless as he had sworn he would be. This was what she’d been missing, what she needed, his cock buried deep inside her, wrenching every bit of searing sweet pleasures from her like no other person ever had. “Yes…” she managed to groan out, her pussy still clenching and unclenching from the hit of his belt, on a painfully thin edge, waiting to be toppled. “Please, please, Negan…”

“Fucking come, come…” he cried out himself, pounding her hard enough into the desk so it wiggled in place. The filthy slaps of skin on wet skin echoed as her body bounced.

Blood rushed, coursing in her veins as she came around him, clamping in the tightest of squeezes around his steely hard cock. Her wetness gushed and she cried out again and again, her body convulsing in overdue sensation of wrought iron heat. Negan wrung her body dry as he nearly fucked her through the cheap desk.

Roaring behind her, he pounded into her harder and harder, punishingly fierce with his thrusts until she felt him spill inside her, coating her cunt in his come as he called out her name. He stayed buried inside her, pressing grateful, hot kisses to her sore spots, her skin tingling. Leaning over her,
he thrust shallowly until he slumped on top of her, completely spent inside her.

“Shitting fuck...” he said, sounding as exhausted as she felt. He released her hands from the small of her back and Mallory sagged boneless onto the desk. She could still feel him inside her, her cunt giving tiny fluttering squeezes. “That’s fucking perfect,” he muttered, stroking her arms softly, the feeling coming back to them as she stretched out her limbs.

There wasn’t much for Mallory to do but lie there until the feeling came back, pins and needles prickling when it did. As Negan pulled out of her and zipped himself back up, she could feel his come dripping a little out of her. “Ugh,” she said, whimpering slightly as she turned her head to look at him finally. “Can’t move.”

“Good. Don’t.” His voice sounded tired but almost as dark. Obediently, she stayed in place and heard a very familiar shuttering click. “That is one for the old spank bank. Thank you, Princess, your contribution is going right up the top of my favourites list.”

Getting up on her forearms, she let her prone leg slip back down as she turned around to lie flat on his desk. That was enough moving. “Did you just take a picture of me on your phone?”

“Makes the memories last longer, don’t it?” He replied, stealing a glance down at his phone. “You really are fucking beautiful with your pussy all full of my come like that. I am never deleting that shot.”

Arguing – even if she had the energy for it – was futile with Negan and his desire to see her like that. “Can you help me up at least?”

“Hmm?” he replied distractedly. “Oh sure, here,” he muttered, pocketing his phone gleefully. She didn’t expect him to scoop her up into his waiting arms but he did just that, grinning lasciviously at the sight of her. Mallory sunk into his arms, not thinking too hard about the consequences or the danger of what they’d just done. He didn’t look anywhere near as fucked out as she did, his skin a little shiny from exertion and hair barely mussed. Mal was a wreck. She sagged into his chest, still captured in his strong arms. Negan perched himself on his desk with a pained groan, settling her on his lap. He had to be just as tired beneath the surface, she thought as he tried to tug her clothes back into place. Mal could tell that his heart wasn’t in it. “Sorry I ruined all your nice clothes. I should have made you strip for me. This shirt is beyond fucking repair.”

“Worth it,” she replied quietly, watching him with intent. “I gotta get home looking like this, though. Maybe nobody will see though it’s my fucking luck some cop pulls me over.”

“You can borrow my jacket, Princess.” He said, idly playing with her hair and kissing her neck tenderly like he refused to stop touching her. “We’re going back to your place tonight so I can make the last two weeks up to you. Tit for tat, as the fucking saying goes.”

Her face warming at his attention, she quietly leaned up and captured his tender lips in a grateful kiss, one hand on the back of his head. Any showing of sincere care was the sweetest of gestures from Negan. “You don’t have to do that. I was the idiot.”

“And I was an ass,” he said, pressing another hot kiss to her neck in supplication. “I keep my fucking promises and I promised to keep you satisfied. You haven’t been satisfied, therefore I fucked up. And I am going to make it up to you, no fucking arguments. What do you need me to do to make it better, Mallory?” He certainly sounded sincere.

The offer was enticing and she figured this was his way of showing her he cared after the pain and domination; her ass was still sore and pink, her thighs and arms aching from being stretched to their
limit, her bite mark stinging hot. “I want a shower. And I want to sit on your face again, I liked that. I missed that,” she grinned lazily, her fingers tangling up in his hair.

Negan laughed again and she could see tension falling out of him, melting a winter to spring. “Sounds like my kind of Heaven, spending all night between those sweet milky thighs...” he kissed her again. “I hope you’re okay with me coming inside you. I couldn’t think about stopping...” the question sounded important to him but he still licked his lips, like the idea of it was turning him on all over again.

Not wanting to worry him, Mal nodded softly and smiled in reply. “It’s okay. I kind of... liked it. I discover a lot of things with you.”

Negan’s arms around her tightened almost imperceptibly, a whole new world of sexual desire opening for them both. “You drive home, Princess, I’ll follow you. In for a penny, in for a pound.”

He had kept his promise and more besides, wrapping her in his leather jacket lest anyone caught a glimpse at the mess he’d made. Mallory felt something, though, a spark of something inside her that she would ignore again and again in favour of his touch, in favour of his attention to her desire. She wasn’t sure how it had come to be that a brutal man would be so tender, so caring and concerned with what he had done to make her come like that.

As she drove back to her apartment in her clapped-out car, she found herself glancing in her mirrors every few moments to check that it wasn’t a fantasy, her mind completely encompassed on Negan. She’d had intense, passionate relationships but none compared to their chemistry. One spark ignited another and another between the two until they flamed. Her fingers twitched on the steering wheel as she drove into the dark of night with her toxic lover trailing not-so-far behind her. Unable to guess what was in his mind, not even knowing his real life made her want him all the more.

When she spent all night with his tongue licking every thread of pleasure he could from her, that was when she felt most alive. Mallory would thread her fingers into his thick hair and became exactly as he called her; the fucking Queen. She couldn’t imagine ever tiring of him, despite the arms-length he kept her at. He could dangle her there forever as far as she was concerned; even a taste of something as sweet as Negan would be worth the burns from his flames.

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Freezing cold in the middle of the night with only scant blankets around her to keep her warm in her ‘room’, Mallory shivered and shuddered. Wiping angry tears off her cheeks as her head refused to stop turning around and around the shittiness of her life; of Negan, of the torture and hope he punished and tortured her with in tandem. It might have been a hopeless endeavour to worm her way into his good graces by toeing the line – it was more than apparent that she couldn’t bite her tongue at him.

Keeping another promise, he had sent a random person with some things for her, items that were necessities before the apocalypse; clothes and hot food, bed sheets and some soap and toothpaste. Mallory would be damned if she took any of the so-called gifts. They were little more than a way to keep her at his mercy for scraps of warmth, for meals he forced on her. Stubbornness did nothing to stop the hunger in her gut or the cold of her hands from driving her insane but they were hers; her pain wasn’t his property on lay-away.

It wasn’t until she heard the other part of her mental torture begin though that she remembered his cruel taunt.

Horribly familiar groans and creaks sounded, his voice just inaudible enough for her to wonder what
sweet nothings he told his wife as he screwed her into a bed. It didn’t do much for her pride that when he groaned in pleasure, she pressed a cold hand between her thighs. Her pussy was slick and wet, body betraying her mind and heart. She couldn’t stop herself as she felt his hand on her throat in her memory, his beautiful destruction of her body. Her fingers slid over herself as he laughed from behind the wall; he would know what she was doing. He always knew.

Mallory cried her gasps of sordid pleasure into her soft pillow, crying as she got herself off to the sound of him fucking another woman. She despised the way her thighs quaked at hearing his laughter and the timbre of his voice. Her tongue practically tasted the salty bitterness of him a million times over. Mal refused to let him take her own body away from her, to take her autonomy and make her his own; she’d never give that up. Not again.

Never again.

The noises stopped long after she gave up her own orgasm, forcing her hand away from her body before she could come. Mal broke down in silent tears of anger and frustration that streaked hotly down her red cheeks. She couldn’t face walls and locks and bars, couldn’t face the loneliness of being away from human hearts beating and Negan had done both at the same time and made sure she knew what she was missing out on. Loudly. He wasn’t wrong about his wife being loud in bed.

Long after the noises of their sex stopped, in the black of the night, Mallory rose from the ashes of her broken spirit. She washed her face in the tiny washroom, the moon as the only source of light to see her own face by in a rusted mirror. She soothed her cheeks and wiped the taste of him out of her mouth, spitting it out with gusto.

Her mind poked at her, her fingers slipping into the back pocket of her pants, reaching for the last piece of her sanity. Peter had been kind to save the picture for her, she realised, though he had no conception of what it truly meant to her. The black and white waves of her first – and only – sonogram soothed her as she looked down at the worn-out ultrasound photo. There was no longer any deep desire within her to see that child’s imagined face; the need for her unborn baby to be returned to her had long, long past. Instead, its picture remained on her as a victory now, the only thing she had left to dangle over Negan’s head just before the executioner’s sword cleaved it off.

One day, she’d tell him what he’d abandoned to rot away, but it wouldn’t be before she was ready. Mallory wanted it to eat away at him like nothing ever would so that finally – blessedly – she would be free.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that wasn’t too long for anyone. Come check me out on my Tumblr if you haven’t already; I take requests and love reading your comments and reblogs. Did you know that Negan Smut Week is coming up? Send me a prompt! It's going to be great and not at all 9000 words long >.> I'd apologise for the British-isms but I can't stop them.

Please leave a poor fanfic writer some love in the comments below. I cherish each and every person who likes what I'm doing here, since I know it's not for everyone.

See you next Saturday, beautiful people.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Negan comes to Mallory with a peace offering she can't resist as she hides her true self from him. He wants her back and broken as she used to be and won't stop until he's scared her into submission. Mal won't give in easily but a taste of his power and influence might soon turn her head.

Meanwhile, Negan learns more about Mallory's past as he lets her into his home and she learns some truths of her own.

Flashbacks in italics. Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

Hope this chapter finds everyone well. This one was difficult to pitch, I won't lie and I'm not 100% happy with some of it but I want to get it out there and see what people think.

As always, leave me a comment or some feedback, kudos if you want or just strike up a conversation about Negan. I'm eager to hear what people think of that motherfucker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mallory had heard long ago that you knew someone was insane when they repeated the same actions over and over again, expecting different results each time. Insane people were all around in the beginning; their ridiculous ideas never panned out the way they thought they would. She’d seen mothers hand over their children to strangers, people running upstairs instead of downstairs to get away from Biters, she’d seen men who thought the end of the world made them more adept at shooting a damn machine gun into herds. Those were the truly crazy people, those who thought that they were right and were doing right. Mal saw how fear made you crazy, one day or another. Normal people were the ones who went off the deep end first, hurling headlong into a pit of irrationality. There were no miracles in the apocalypse.

Insanity just wasn’t an option anymore. Crazy got you killed quickly, viciously, brutally – it got your guts ripped out from your abdomen and eaten while you died in agony. That’s why the world was different now, Mal thought, the crazy had gotten people killed so the only living left were those who sounded increasingly, almost disturbingly, sane. They talked crazy and yet the plans made a sick sense: bars and locks that kept you from escaping also kept you safe, supply runs that might kill you would also keep you from dying of starvation, walking around the woods found hidden goldmines but drew herds towards your presence with little means of escape. Other people kept you safe but got you killed too; that was what she’d learnt above everything. Crazy infected as much as the virus had.

The fact that those safe hands keeping her from being torn apart by Biters, from desperate and dangerous groups of survivors belonged to her psychopathic ex-lover didn’t shock her. He was, if nothing, a determined man leading an army of people who were seeking a saviour, someone to pray to now that God had deserted them. Negan had been determined before and was even more so now,
pulling every trick in the book to get what he wanted out of the world and more on top. He knew he was crazy, he revelled in it but Negan brought out Mal’s crazy too.

Sleep had never come easily, if at all. Her limbs and back burned from being tensed all night, her skin almost blue with the cold draft of concrete and brick around her, encapsulating her in their chill. The room he had left her locked inside was little more than a cell with a stack of untouched clothes and an uneaten meal she wasn’t going anywhere near. Her crazy was stubborn.

Mallory had ripped the crusted red bandage off her head in the night, letting the soft throb of blood in her veins keep her awake and on edge enough to be alert, unable to relax, unable to stop her head from circling plans and ideas, enough to keep her away from sanity. While Negan’s patented method of intimidation, reasonable negotiation and manic violence wouldn’t work with her, he knew isolation would. He had to keep her away from other people, people who could taste her thirst to see his regime toppled and Negan on his knees. So, he would probably keep her locked away as long as he could until she was kissing his feet like the rest of them, kneeling in the dirt. Mal wondered how many he had murdered to gain the loyalty and faith of the rest.

Sitting cross-legged on the edge of her bed, Mallory watched for the sun rising, wanting to hear people talking below her, maybe even see the shadow of footsteps outside her cell. He made her wait. It felt like hours after light did finally cast itself into the room that his obnoxious knocking came at the door, shaking her from her stupor where she imagined his throat cut and gushing red blood over her shiny boots. Living in fantasy.

“Shave and a haircut!” he sang through the wood, knocking with a thud at every word. She didn’t call back and heard his fake sigh. “Come on, Princess. Let’s try it again. Shave…and a hair…cut.”

The childishness astounded her, setting her head back against the concrete wall. “If you want to come in,” she called back, bristling. “Just fucking come in!”

“Not until you say it!” Negan effused. “Not unlocking the door ’til you play along. How about one last try, then you can wait another day.” He threatened, knowing a full day locked inside would drive her even more crazy. The knocking was booming, echoing in her room in intimidation. “Shave and a haircut!”

“Two bits,” she spat through her teeth, rolling her eyes at nothingness.

Like magic, the lock unclicked and there he was: clean, hair combed and a little slicked back, a tray in his hand with… oh God. He was pure evil. “Good morning starshine!” Negan beamed brightly, “The Earth says hello! Sleep well?”

“Is that bacon?” Mal asked, eyes wide as she strained to see what he had on the tray. Her mouth was watering already from the smell. “How do you have bacon?!”

“Oh, I am positively radiant this morning, Princess, thank you ever so much for asking.” Negan stepped inside and shoved the tray on the desk, next to her last untouched meal, kicking the door closed behind him. “Hunger pain working out well for you? I thought to myself ‘I bet she hasn’t touched a goddamn thing’ and look!” Negan gestured to his unclaimed offerings, the soup in the bowl cold and congealed, bread hard as a rock and twice as dry. “Am I fucking psychic or I just know you too fucking well?”

“I wasn’t hungry,” she replied quietly, eyes slipping between her breakfast and her jailor. “I’m not hungry.”

“Sure you are! Even I can’t remember when you last ate. Caroline says you barely had a thing last
time she saw you. Don’t it just eat at you, Princess?” He sat on the corner of the desk, across from where Mallory was rooted to her spot on the bed. “Pun in-fucking-tended.”

Her gut squirmed at his words. They twisted her around in more hunger, growling, her mouth still watering from the smell of the bacon alone. Mal really couldn’t remember the last meal she’d had. That damn plate of bacon and eggs looked warm and inviting, looked real and fresh. “I’m fine.”

Negan frowned and shrugged simultaneously, picking up a piece of bacon just to wave temptingly in her face. “You sure? I even got them to do it extra crispy, how you like it. Eggs over easy, nice and melty, toast with extra butter. I remember how you lick it off, the more butter the better it is. Used to drive me crazy watching you eat like that, sucking the grease off your fingers…” he licked his lips too. “I even brought you fucking coffee that don’t taste like burned horse shit. Just eat it, Mallory. All salty and sweet crunch, that was you. Never doing anything by half.”

She licked her lips and instantly regretted the action because he knew he’d won the first battle. Without a word and with a grin on his face, he turned and picked up the tray from the desk, depositing it beside her on the mattress, though he kept the stolen piece of crispy bacon for himself and took great satisfaction from eating it loudly in front of her.

“Thank you,” Mallory replied stubbornly, taking a piece from the tray and eating. She could have cried all over again, tasting it. The meat a little salty, a little smoky, crisp at the edges and just the good side of greasy. Flavour exploded across her eager tongue: it was the best thing she’d tasted in her life, better than canned pudding, better than that time she had managed to hunt a small deer and shared it among her group. “It’s fine,” she said with a shrug, looking at him.

He laughed a rich laugh and ate his piece in one go, licking his fingertips clean. “I take that as a giant fucking compliment coming from your stubborn ass, Princess. You love it.”

The way he watched her eat, with both hands on his thighs and his gaze never wavering from her lips? It was as if he was trying to taste it all again for the first time through her tongue, through the way that she really did lick the butter dripping from the toast. Negan looked at her, enraptured and hazy eyed.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said after a mouthful, feeling less and less like this was about her being hungry and more like him watching her obey his command. “How do you have bacon?”

“There’s a colony out west a few miles, they raise the pigs. I just get to mosey on down every once in a while, take a few and they keep the rest for themselves. I just lucked out that one of the cooks in the kitchen here actually knows his shit.” Negan winked lasciviously. “Best damn thing you ate in months, right? You know, I don’t go giving my meat to just anybody.”

Mallory swallowed and a lump fell in her stomach, the hunger gone to be replaced by a sick sense of ownership. “Your meat,” she parroted, disgusted. “Is everything a joke to you?”

He laughed again, slapping one of his palms across his thigh. “Jesus fucking Christ, I love it when you get prissy. Mallory, Mallory, it ain’t my fucking dick. It’s just bacon and eggs, Princess, don’t get your panties in a wad about it. You’re hungry so I fed you something. That is what civilised people do, right? Take ‘em in, give ‘em clothes and food and a fucking warm bed. You are the first one in history to throw all of it back at my face.”

Her words to Peter echoed again; play along, play the game, bite your tongue and kiss his boots. She thought it was dumb fucking advice and easier said than done.

“It’s a nice meal. Thank you,” she enunciated each word deliberately, straining to hold in her
sarcasm and ire. “Does this mean I can go back to the general population today, Your Highness?”

“Majesty,” he answered, licking his bottom lip as she ate her toast. “Kings get called Majesty, not
Highness.”

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” she said, sitting up straighter at being corrected. The slow warmth of
her body getting nourished blossomed as she ate her meal ravenously, completely forgetting his
taxunting. “Am I getting out of this room today, Your Majesty?”

Negan was still watching her eat as his stomach got fuller and fuller and she became satiated, she
forgot to even care about his gaze. “I like you, Mallory, you are to-the-fucking-point. Alright, I’ll lay
it all out on the fucking table,” he said, smacking his palm on the desk beneath him. “Cos I do, you
know… like you. I got me a big raging hard-on for you, mmmmm, baby it was all I could do to fuck
Amber into a coma last night. Don’t think I didn’t hear you through the wall too, whimpering like
you’re dying…” he chuckled and put up a hand of surrender when she glared dangerously. “Don’t
look at me like that, like I’ve done anything worse than you have. Why you think you’re still alive?
Cos you’re so fucking useful to me here, in a fucking locked room doing shit all to help? You ain’t
even letting me screw you.”

“I am not becoming your wife,” she spat, full of revulsion. “I am not saying it again, Negan. You
know that.”

“Like I’d bother asking you,” Negan muttered in reply. “No-pety, no-pety nooooo. I’m saying that I
like you and as much as it fucking pains me to keep you in here, and it fucking does because it’s a
goddamn waste, it is for your own fucking good.”

“Putting me in a locked cell with a guard dog is for my own good?” Mallory chuckled. “You know,
that’s real good bullshit, Negan, one of your best efforts yet. I give it a nine out of ten for ingenuity.”

He laughed along with her too, leaning back on his hands. “No, no, seriously. Look at all the shit
you got yourself messed up in already. Getting kidnapped, conspiring with your boyfriend, killing a
Biter with your boot, having fucking panic attacks at the sight of my bedroom and breaking down in
front of a piano? You’re a walking disaster zone, Princess, you always fucking have been. Spending
your life stumbling from one chaos zone to the next. Hate to tell you the secret but you know what
you are? A fucking liability. You’re a pain in my ass.”

“Liability?” she said, hurt deeper than she wanted to admit. “In case it’s skipped your attention, dead
people are eating living people. Chaos is kinda what we live in now, isn’t it? It’s hardly my fault that
all this motherfucking shit keeps happening to me.”

Negan shook his head. “No, no, no, no, no, Princess. There is chaos and there’s chaos. You gotta get
in line with me here or you’re just gonna get someone killed, one way or another. For all I know,” he
looked at her pointedly. “Those pretty little hands have already squeezed the life out of some guy
twice your size because he, I don’t know, touched something you wanted.”

Mallory’s eyes flashed and she looked away, sipping up the taste of unburnt coffee. “No.”

That refusal was enough for Negan to jump from the desk and slide onto his knees in front of her, his
eyes manic and dark again, his face crinkled in mirth. She refused to move, refused to look again.
“You did, didn’t you? Holy-fucking-shit, I can’t believe my little peach committed cold blooded
murder!” He put his hands on her knees, squeezing them excitedly, like he wanted to pull them apart
and sink back into her. “And here was me, thinking that piss-streak boyfriend of yours was talking a
load of crap to try and scare me!” Mal looked back up at him sharply, shock funnelling through her
fogged brain. “Ah, fuck, I owe him a free swing at me now. Maybe we won’t tell him that, huh?”
Peter was a dead man, deader than a dead thing rotting in the dirt. “He told you?” Mallory said with a quiet fieriness, all of her anger and hate now directed at her friend. Former friend.

“Wouldn’t stop bragging about you. Said some sick gropey little fucker stabbed his sister so you jumped the asshole, squeezed the life out of him with your bare hands. That’s murder, baby girl, that is stone cold murder. Brings a tear to my eye.” Negan smirked and stood up, his hands still on her knees. “You and me are gonna get along great, liability or not. I wanna hear the whole story.”

Mallory could see it now. Peter had told Negan the story he knew, the version he knew. She had wrapped her hands around a man’s throat and watched the light dim from his eyes before she’d put a knife through his eye socket. What Peter had missed out was the sick thrill she got from it; a vindication, a justice she’d felt surging through her spine when she pierced his eyeball and watched the vitreous goo flow out among the blood. She had loved it and hated it in equal measure and felt nothing but emptiness afterwards. The crunch of his bone would remain in her mind forever.

“So, what, I killed one man?” she said, her voice hollow. “Who here hasn’t? It’s how life works now, you take a life or you die.”

“Exactly! Now you’re getting it, Princess!” He grinned and clicked his fingers snapping wildly. “Arat!”. Mallory was confused until her guard dog walked in, carrying Lucille in her gloved hand. Negan took the bat from his less-than-glamourous assistant and hauled it over his shoulder. “Now you’re learning some fucking lessons about how shit works. You and I are going out on a field trip today, Princess. Just like I promised. We’re gonna spread the gospel according to Negan.”

Mallory wrapped her pale hands around her coffee cup, eyes slipping shut for a moment as the dull ache in her head turned full on into a deep-seated throb. He’d promised to show her his colonies, teach them a lesson because of her and her words. “What if I refuse?” She asked, looking back up at him, trying to be patient and penitent.

“I can’t force you to come but uh…” Negan leaned over her and whispered beneath his breath. “I don’t think Arat likes being your babysitter. So, if you don’t want her to come in here and slit your throat and make a mess of my mattress, I’d come and join me for the day. I ain’t half as pretty but at least I won’t kill you, at least not without warning. Cos I like you too much.”

Exhaustion settled into her bones, though it was marginally better than being starving and exhausted simultaneously. “I’m not exactly eager to get my throat slit by your right-hand girl,” she muttered, crossing her arms protectively over her chest. “But why would I go with you just to watch you kill some poor bastard? You already made your point to me, I get it; give me half your shit or die.”

“You still need the air and the exercise, cooped up in here all night long with nothing to do but yourself…” he said, pulling her chin upwards gently with two fingers. “And I need to show you. You need to see, to understand why I got no more places for chaos and liability here, Mallory. Falling in line is the only way to live with me. And you will fall into line…”

“I know you have a thing for breaking women,” she dared to whisper back, her eyes hardening. “But you’re never going to break me, Negan.”

He just grinned at the challenge. “You might not wanna test me on that. I’ve done it before and I can do it just as easily again.”

***

Nothing made sense anymore…
Epic elegies could be written about his body. She could map every strain in his arms as he pinned her wrists to the bed. Mallory tasted on the air when he was about to wrap his hands around her soft hips and tell her to meet him in a supply closet, because they were nothing if not a giant cliché. He could smile at her in a thousand different ways and she’d instantly know what he was thinking about, what he wanted, who he wanted. The answer was almost always her.

He could shift her mood from pissed off and exhausted to relaxed with a few kisses and lewd words whispered in her ear. He loved doing that; coming up to her when she thought she was alone, tilting her head and talking for five minutes non-stop about how he loved the curve of her ass while his hand was down the front of her pants, working to get her off.

He just seemed to love making her feel good. It didn’t make sense.

Not that it mattered what he said. Whenever she had gone to return the sentiment in kind, he would instead kiss the air from her lungs and drag her away from trying. Mallory went to sleep every night — with or without him there — feeling like she could conquer vast worlds and have them kiss her feet. He was rough but sweet, kind but tough. She gave as good as she got but he didn’t ever care much about his own pleasure when instead he could fuck her brains out in the back seat of her shitty little car and still make her come twice before he gave in.

Her naked body was entwined in his white cotton sheets, draped as she was over his chest, watching the soft tic of his throat. Not a day had gone by that the man hadn’t been all over her since their argument; his eyes roamed over her body at work during the evening and his hands mapped the same paths at night with his lips and tongue following after.

Whatever she had expected from him, though, it wasn’t this softness, this part of him she’d never thought she’d see in another million years. It was strange to think that he was the same man as the one she’d been told was a bully, was vicious and cruel who cared about nobody but himself. He had pulled a cruel trick or two on her when she had done the same to him first, but nothing more. It didn’t make sense.

“Negan?” she asked quietly, looking up at his jaw.

“Whatever you’re fucking thinking about, Mallory,” he growled sleepily, his fingers lazily tracing that same soft curve of her ass. “Stop it.”

“But—”

“Stop. Fucking Christ, woman, turn the damn brain off for a moment and enjoy the eye of the storm.” She didn’t know whether he meant her or himself.

Mallory sighed softly and resettled back on his chest, her arm on his stomach sprawled out. “You mean you’re not done for the night?” she turned and teased, pressing a kiss to his sternum. “I thought you brought me out to your house because you just wanted to play scrabble and realised you were gonna lose so you fucked me instead.”

Negan laughed tenderly in reply, placing his flat palm against her ass cheek. Her flesh was still warm from the smack of his hand against her a half hour earlier. “You don’t wanna play me at scrabble. I’ll beat your ass hands-down, Princess.”

“You already beat my ass,” Mallory grinned, placing another kiss on his collarbone. “Literally.”

“Yeah, I fucking did, didn’t I?” he said, palming her a little more roughly. “I thought the belt was nice but ain’t nothing like watching your caboose jiggle for me. You just about ripped my dick off.
She still blushed from time to time at his crudeness; his brain without filter, instead letting all his thoughts trickle down to his mouth. She knew where she stood. “And whose fault was that?”

Negan groaned as Mallory kissed his neck with hot bee-sting kisses, teeth nipping. “All mine. Fucking proud of it too.” He lifted his other hand to her ass and hauled her onto his lap, draping her aching body so she was lying along the length of him. “You trying to fucking start something again with that mouth of yours?”

Mallory said nothing but kissed and sucked along his neck as he kneaded her sore ass with wide palms, his fingers dipping under the white cotton sheets.

Part of her still couldn’t believe she was in his house; it seemed mythical and imaginary but... it didn’t make sense either. It was so much more domestic than she thought he’d like. Every wall was a tone of beige or cream, accents of girly stuff in random places, peppered with knick knacks and ceramic figures. Mal had ignored the wedding pictures on the mantelpiece and even more pictures on the walls, lest her guilt and curiosity drive him mad. His home was neater and tidier than she expected too; she hadn’t expected perfection but this house was so far removed from her expectations that it made her pause.

Ever since he had hauled her into his car and driven them here, a million questions had been on her mind: where was his wife? Was this overstepping a boundary she wouldn’t like? How long was it going to be before he kicked her out?

But she couldn’t ask. He’d made those rules, drawn his lines and stuck them out resolutely. She only had the answer to the first question after she took ten whacks of his hand to her bare ass on his couch. Mal had been told that his wife was ‘away at her parents’ and that had been that. ‘End of discussion, now grab the headboard and scream for me when you come.’

She thought it was natural to wonder what the Hell his deal was with his wife; Negan had said that she knew about his affair but for all he’d told her, that was bullshit with more crap on top of it. A lie upon a lie upon another lie.

Instead, she’d garnished details inside his bedroom in their post-sex haze. It was a damn expensive house, as far as she could tell of it. There was real cornicing, and a cherry wood bed frame that couldn’t have been cheap either so the house oozed a kind of class and warmth that just wasn’t... Negan. He was the thing that didn’t make sense, he was the thing that stuck out as odd. It was like he’d maxed out his credit card buying a life. His happy face adorned the walls, his watches were in the nightstand, but it was an otherness. She wouldn’t have picked this place for him.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft gasp from her lips, his fingers having found her warm, wet centre and begun probing interestingly. “Negan...” she moaned, writhing on his hand as he sunk two thick fingers into her. “God, Negan...”

“That’s it, Princess,” he said, the sleepiness gone to be replaced with want and need and desire. “Hot as fuck when you say my name. You’re fucking wet again, making my dick all hard. All your fault.”

Suddenly and all at once, the soft stretch of his fingers was gone. His arms wrapped around her instead and he hauled himself up to lie back against the head board. “You always hard?” she asked hazy eyed as he tugged part of the white sheet away from her shoulder to replace it with his lips. “Is it like a permanent state?”
“You wish. I’d be brain dead by now from lack of blood flow north. Takes a lot of fucking blood for my huge dick, Princess. ’S why I get so fucking stupid around you. Taking risks because you wear those tight fucking jeans to work…” he growled. “How’s a man meant to do anything but think about fucking you from behind when you wear shit like that.”

Without preamble, he went back to kiss and suck hard on her shoulder, drawing all thought out of her head. Mallory moaned and writhed in his lap, running her fingers through his hair as he divested her of the sheets. “We already went twice. You can’t be hard again already…” she said breathily as his lips found her breasts.

“I could always stick it inside you and you could tell me if it’s hard or not,” he groaned in frustration, voice on the edge of annoyance. “You fucking complaining about you making my dick hard?”

“No, no!” she said, anchoring his head to her chest again to get his mouth where she wanted it. “It’s just… I’d understand if I had to leave. I don’t know… fuck… I don’t know the rules here and it’s driving me crazy.”

He wrenched his head away from her chest and gave her a confused look. “You think I’m waiting to kick you out at an appropriate time? Like three fucks and you’re out?”

Mal struggled for the right words and Negan gripped her brutally hard. “I… well… I don’t know! This is your place, not mine.”

She could feel his roar of frustration through his chest as he pulled her back from him, his hands grabbing her ass to pull her harder onto his lap. “Just fucking stop thinking, Mallory! It ain’t rocket science. Turn off the fucking motormouth brain and let me touch you.” He mashed his lips to hers in a kiss, his arms tugging her back until she was pressed hard against him. Her hands scrabbled for purchase as Negan rucked his hips up. “Let me make you feel good.”

Panting for breath, she helped him tug off the sheets in a haze of crumpled fabric. “Yes,” she moaned more audibly, free of the cage. His hands were everywhere, becoming more tender and gentle the more he got to touch her. She felt him sigh into her neck as he held her naked body to his tightly, his fingertips sliding along her spine from top to bottom. Mallory’s skin broke into fevered shivers from the motion and she cried out as he suddenly entered her without warning.

Her nails sank into his arms as Negan let the weight of her settle into his lap, his own breathing as laboured and ragged as hers. His hands splayed out across her shoulder blades, fingertips twitching to hold her tighter. “Okay?” he asked brokenly, finally looking up at her.

Negan’s eyes were softer and sweeter, the way he’d been after he’d thrashed his belt over her backside in his classroom. Her mind fell free of the noise and wonder about his house, about his wife, and was fixed on the feeling of him filling her cunt and stretching her wonderfully to the breaking point. “Yeah, yeah…” she said, letting herself relax as he relaxed, breathing as he breathed. “Feels so good. Deep.” Mallory’s hands came up to encapsulate his face, stroking the stubble around his once-smooth chin.

He smiled dirtily and kissed her in a slow burn. “You could say that,” he said, the smile never leaving his lips as he lifted her up effortlessly and brought her back down on his cock again in a smooth motion. Both moaned in time as he did it again and again, until Mallory took over and was riding him lazily. Both were too exhausted to do more than ruck slowly into one another, eyes resting on each other in a burning need that built layer upon layer. Mal had tasted his sparks, she’d felt the burn of his passion but this lazy fucking, this need for human contact that made her mind blank was different. It was new. It was frightening.
He pulled her down onto him harder and deeper. Negan’s normally incessant motor-mouth wasn’t running, her usual rampant mind quiet and fixated. Both were simply two people seeking the comfort of an unspoken bond, not talking, not thinking. Negan’s lips bit and kissed at her jaw as she rode him with her hands and fingers tugging at his hair.

Outside, the winds stormed, rain pelted the window like bullets when humidity broke in the lush warmth of Virginia. He snaked a thumb onto her clit and rubbed her teasingly, making her body keen for more, drawing her hips faster and deeper still onto him. Negan groaned and fucked up hard into her, Mal crying out sharply when he went too hard.

“Shh…” he panted into her ear, seeking forgiveness as her body relaxed again from the sharpness of his thrust. “It’s alright, Mallory. You can take it, just look at me.”

His tongue licked a hot stripe up her neck as her sweat rolled down, like he wanted to taste the pleasure he was giving her. The thumb on her clit worked in soft, torturous circles, never changing its rhythm until Mallory broke apart around him fast and hard, seizing in pleasure. “Negan!”

He didn’t stop thrusting gently up into her, hand gripping her thigh as he did. His hands. God, she really could write operas about his hands. She could sing their praises and cry out at their desires. She could do anything she wanted to, now that she had him as much as he had her.

Negan drew her out from her orgasm, biting her shoulder as he did. Mal could tell he was closer to coming than he wanted to be, through that tension in his back. She didn’t know much of his life beyond his bed but she knew the way his muscles contracted, how his voice broke when she got him just right. There was a world unexplored but what she knew, at least she knew was real. He couldn’t lie to her about the desperate way he thrust his hips up into her body, about how he bit her skin and marked her as his every damn time. Her shoulders were relief maps of their affair.

“Come for me,” she said as her body felt the burn, over-sensitized. “Come inside me.”

Negan roared his released as he thrust up into her one more time, his body shuddering harder. She could feel him come inside her, sticky and hot as he panted and hips stuttered before his body gave out and hit the headboard again. Both were wrecked beyond measure.

Mallory slumped on top of him, her muscles still twitching around his softening cock. She heard nothing but the raging beat of her heart and the sting of rain outside hitting the glass. It was nearing midnight, maybe even later, and she was exhausted.

“Mallory,” he said after a while, her head on his shoulder. “I know you got a lot of questions you want to know answers to. It’s just not what you’re thinking, Princess…” Negan muttered and pressed a kiss to her crown. “I promise you that.”

Nodding softly, she turned her head and stared at an overturned wedding photo on his nightstand. “I just keep thinking about when you walked into my classroom that day. I already had this picture of you in my mind and nothing you’ve ever done has really fitted with what people told me you’d be,” she admitted softly, not looking at him. “They said ‘Negan’s an asshole, honey’. Told me to keep my distance.”

She felt his chuckle this time, rather than heard it. “Whoever they are, you should have listened to them. I’ll ruin your life, and take pleasure doing it.”

“Maybe I should have listened,” Mallory swept her hair back, worrying at her lip. “But they didn’t know me; you were right, you know? I’m not the good girl, I don’t think I’ve ever been good enough. The whole piano prodigy thing? Makes everyone think I was good in school, that I had rich
parents and a good upbringing but I was just as messed up as the next kid on the block. I wanted a BB gun for my seventh birthday, did you know that?” Mal chuckled hollowly, tapping her fingertips on his chest. “They got me an American Girl doll and I’d never been so angry in all my life.”

“Sounds like you,” he agreed, curling the ends of her hair around his fingers wistfully. “Stubborn as fuck with a sneaky streak in you to match it. Making trouble, causing chaos. You and me? We just fit.”

Humming in agreement, she let her hips slide away from him. “I was mean, sometimes. Got into a lot of scraps with other girls, started stealing to get attention. I never stopped playing the piano though. It was the only place anyone was proud of me, when I played. Mom wants me to go do it for real, teach real classes, get paid gigs but I don’t know if that’s who I am.”

He grumbled and ran his fingertips over her head, stroking and rubbing softly. “Ain’t my place to say what you should do, Princess, but if I were you? I’d tell her to fuck off and go play keyboards in a rock band. You’re young. You should be getting messy, making mistakes, taking pills and drinking til you can’t remember the night before. Do shit you’re passionate about doing, no matter who says you can’t.”

“How’d you think I agreed to this whole mess in the first place?” she teased, feeling a sting as he slapped her backside again.

“Hey,” he said, affronted. “This isn’t the mistake, Mallory, it’s just sex. We’re doing something because we’re fucking magic together, you know it, you feel it. Neither of us can give it up, not yet. I’m not giving you up just yet.”

Something inside her skipped over then, a flash of pain that was as familiar as it was unwanted. She had often wondered what kind of woman could make this man fall in love.

Whoever his wife was, whether he indeed loved her still, she had no doubt that he had loved her once. If he didn’t care, he wouldn’t have turned over the photo to begin with. Mallory didn’t want to admit to herself that he was as good to her as she had been to him. They hadn’t negotiated this thing well but he was right – they were fucking magic together. She couldn’t just drain him from her blood and scrub his touch from her skin.

Mallory sat up after a few moments of silence, trying to stop that feeling in her mind from swirling out of control. “Can I use your shower?” She asked quietly.

“Knock yourself out,” Negan muttered sleepily, waving his hand in the general direction of the bathroom. “Towel’s hanging up. Don’t make a fucking mess cos I won’t fucking clean it up.”

She took one more look at him, his eyes already closed as she walked naked into his bathroom.

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“I’ll come,” Mal had relented eventually, tired of trying to fight him. What lessons he was trying to teach her were ones that she wasn’t willing to learn anyway. He could show off, brag until his heart was contented and let him think he had scared her, let him think he could get to her. It was easy to play his little game and make him happy. “Where are we going?”

“You are gonna love it, it’s where your precious piano came from. Let’s get you something decent to wear,” he said, turning and going through the pile of clean clothes he had left on the old desk, flinging the garments one by one with his spare hand. “Ah ha, now this is gonna make those baby blues pop,” he stressed, holding up a deep, royal blue plaid shirt to Mal’s body, thrusting it at her.
until she took it from him. “With uh…” Negan sorted through her clothes again, producing a pair of black skinny jeans with worn patches at the knees and thighs. “Yeah, those will look fucking badass on you, Princess. We’re gonna wow them all today.”

Mallory took the jeans as he threw them to her, looking over his choice of outfit laying in her arms. He was dressing her like his own personal Barbie doll, parading her in front of his people? To what purpose would it serve? “Yeah, thanks,” she replied sarcastically. “Let me just go scrub the blood from my skin and then we can go…”

“Bathroom’s over there,” he gestured, swinging Lucille around the place like he was practising for the PGA tour. “I got all day, Mallory, take your fucking time. I just want my baby to have pretty things.”

The door slammed behind her, Mallory storming into the washroom before she told him to go screw himself. Scrubbing old soap across her skin didn’t feel cleansing; it stung her cuts and scrapes, made her bruises ache like they were all fresh. The more she cleaned, the dirtier she felt; washing herself pretty, just how Negan wanted so he could play ping pong with someone’s beaten, pulpy head. She felt the odd sinking familiarity that someone was going to die because of her, because she simply existed for him to show off to. Guilt had long gnawed at her until there was nothing left and she just pitied whoever was going to die today.

When she looked back at the road that had carried her back to Negan, she remembered each death she’d seen had felt less and less like losses. Losing people was a par for the course, another hit she was willing to take to save the rest. It hadn’t panned out; one loss begat another, a broken heart and broken body led to more mistakes being made. Desperation drove them until it was her and Peter left alone, not seeing any single living soul for weeks on end until she was driven to the brink.

Mallory rinsed her skin and dried herself off with a worn-out hand towel, patting at the cut on her head before she changed into her new clothes. The clean fabrics glided over her skin, feeling softer than silk even though they were only denim and cotton. The shirt was loose around her body and made her look smaller and skinnier, the jeans fitting snug enough but not quite like they should. She had lost so much weight since he’d seen her naked last, she realised, that he had got her sizes wrong. It wasn’t enough to matter but made her pause, looking down at herself as she slid her boots back on sore feet. Despite losing what curves she had, Mallory looked for all intents and purposes the same as she did when she was tutoring.

He was still standing there as she came out with her dirty clothes in her arms, depositing them on the bed. Negan whistled low, running his tongue over his bottom lip. “Who’d have thought you cleaned up so good! Well?” he asked, twirling his finger in circles in mid-air. “Give me a spin, Cinderella. Your fairy godmother wants to see the whole package.”

Reluctantly, Mal complied and turned around once for him, his gaze like hands all over. When her eyes caught his again, though, he was frowning deeply, fixated on her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Hair,” he said, standing up and drawing a pocket knife from one of his belts. “I don’t like it like that.”

Negan sauntered over and grabbed the half-fallen ponytail she’d made of her thick hair, slicing off the only rubber band she had left. Her hair felt in messy waves as he used his fingers to spread her locks down her back, her hair leaning on the heavy side from the humidity. “Negan that was my last tie…” she protested weakly, fussing with his work.

“I’ll get you some real fucking hair ties, Princess, but today I want it like that,” he slid the knife back and admired his creation. “I always thought you were a dye job, you know. Never realised how real
that fucking red hair was until you stopped waxing your pussy.”

Mal cringed away from him as he played with the ends of her hair, putting the curls back after she had fiddled with them. Strands at the front grazed the bottom of her bust, his fingers hovering a path that his eyes followed suit with.

“Let’s just get this over with before you go force me to put on make-up and high heels,” she retorted, leaning away from him.

He walked a few steps, letting her follow him until he stopped dead and back-tracked abruptly, making her stumble over her own feet. “Fuck me, where are my manners?” Negan said, throwing Lucille up enough so he could hold the handle in front of her face. “You got sweet, gentle hands, Mallory. Why don’t you do me a solid and hold on to Lucille for a little while? I know you, you’ll treat her right...” she felt a shiver as he looked at her. “Because if you don’t, I’ll be sure to follow through on my little threat and make you lick your boyfriend’s blood from her beautiful barbed wire.”

Her pale hand wrapped delicately around the warm handle as she took Lucille’s weight from him, struggling with the urge to swing it into his temple and put everyone out of their misery. Mal didn’t think she stood much of a chance with that guard, Arat, outside. She’d have a bullet through her skull before she could try for a second blow. In reality, it was a bad idea that she wasn’t going to indulge in.

Negan led her through a small crowd downstairs, every person kneeling to them as they walked through with wide strides. Watery, pallid eyes watched her carrying Lucille, Mal hearing the whispers as she passed through the building from top to bottom. She understood it better, now, how he made them kneel to him without asking, without ordering. They had seen the brutality of his nature and knew Negan could save their skins or bash their skulls in before they could beg him for mercy. They knew pleading did nothing except rile him further. Penitent, obedient people got a pass because they were white noise.

Mallory bet with herself that she could take Lucille, bash any of those supplicant heads into pulp and Negan would just look at her with that same lust as he had upstairs. Maybe he wanted her to do it, saw that spark inside her from what Peter had told him and wanted to turn the burner up. He’d been so fixated on her, on what had happened to change her that she never realised how much he liked it. Insanity, she supposed, made bad ideas sound like good ones. Everything went in circles, people repeating mistakes and patterns, catching up to their crazy. Once upon a time, she’d fallen into the warm bed of a man with a hard-on for danger and breaking people, and allowed him to break her until she was dangerous.

Negan, in the driver’s seat, started the truck up, the sound rusty. He peered across at Lucille lying coquettishly across Mallory’s lap, locking eyes with her and smiling as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

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Mallory couldn’t think. She washed the touch of his hands from her skin, let his marks rinse away with the soap and heat until she was nothing but herself again. Negan was probably asleep by now, she thought as she washed her long hair. He was probably dead to the world. The storm outside had faded into a sweet drop every now and then, the air outside lifting and fresh once more.

Inside the bathroom, she wrapped her wet body in a towel and squeezed the water out of her hair, letting it drip down her arms. There was still a curiosity she couldn’t sate, the way he’d spoken was
too deliberate. What had happened that made him change his mind about letting her come here?

She wiped her hand across the fogged mirror and searched for a tissue to wipe the remnants of melted mascara from her face. Her eyes were tired and red, sore from the late night and the sex. He didn’t just fuck her, he ate her whole until he’d wrung out every part of her and made her mind stop dead.

Mallory rubbed her eyes delicately with the tissue, wiping away the last vestiges of her day. The tissue crumpled in her hand, she ducked and found a small trash can beneath his sink, half empty with something at the bottom of the can.

*Her body froze.*

*There were, inside, empty pill bottles. Ten of them all told, various instructions dated the same day, medications she didn’t know the names of or what they were for. She saw one name, though, one that stood out to her, calling and coming to her in a crystallising moment of sick realisation – Lucille. His wife. Empty pill bottles that belonged to Negan’s wife, far too many dated too close together. She was sick, gravely ill by the sheer number of pills. She was away. He was… different. It added up to a number she didn’t want to see, and she threw them all back into the trash.*

*Mallory couldn’t stop thinking. Her own reflection looked back at her, its eyes empty and pale as she hunched over the sink. Her hair dripped into the porcelain.*

*How could she live with herself, knowing she’d screwed the husband of a sick, maybe even dying woman? Mal splashed cold water on her eyes to stop the piercing realisations from hitting her, the things she hadn’t picked up on before all coming together. She was in love with a man who was cheating on his sick wife. It was all she could do not to scream.*

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed reading that one. If you want to, come join me on [Tumblr](https://example.com) and ask me anything about Negan, writing, fandom, OC building and the like. Comments give me life <3 Thank you to StrangersAngel and anyone else who has left me lovely words to come home to.

I apologise for nought.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

It's a road trip; someone's going to die, someone's going to line up a shot just right. Mistakes get made, boundaries pushed and poked into the right frame. Negan wants nothing more than to turn her into his mirror image, a Queen to rule by his side but first he has to show her what he's capable of - and it's definitely not mercy.

She hates him. She loves him. She can't stop breathing now.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the love on the last chapter, you're all so sweet and kind <3 It's my birthday tomorrow and I am turning the ripe old age of 27 so hey, if you want, leave me something nice to read?

This chapter is set entirely in the present, so if you were hoping for the fallout of Mallory's discovery in chapter 7.... sorry :x Hope you like this one anyway.

Warnings for creepy Gregory, some badass motherfucker Simon and a lot of gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mallory had buried herself in hating Negan for so long, she had forgotten what it was like when he was alone with her. With no audience to pander to, there was a brazen honesty about him that she wasn’t used to actually liking. Survivors were sneaky people; they lied and hid before trusting anyone enough to tell truths about how they’d lived for so long and what they’d done to get there. Mallory wasn’t pretending she was any different from them; she lied, she hid, she snuck around and had her own interests at heart. Her family – like everyone else’s – was dead and long forgotten, pushed back in her memory until it was like her life had been a movie she saw once upon a time. Lies were comfortable. It wasn’t until she saw Negan again that her mind had even drifted back to what it felt like without the constant threat of fear and struggle, the memories seeming brighter and better. He brought it all back in shamelessly honest packaging and her heart ached in turn.

Before he had found her again (or maybe it was she who found him), she’d despised those lucky people who still had some semblance of their past lives intact; women who still had husbands, mothers who still had daughters. She didn’t have anyone she knew before – like a lot of them, she was alone and trying to get along with people for the sake of sticking together. That had been the case until the universe played her for a fool and brought Negan back into her life like a brick shattering a window. Relationships that were born from extreme circumstances never lasted; somehow an affair didn’t seem so much like an extreme anymore.

Negan was a parody of a man in power, of the man she knew him as. Giving her guardianship of his precious Lucille was him bragging to her the authority he really had, knowing she’d never dare swing it in his face. He was King Arthur, giving her the sword he’d pulled from the stone that gave him ownership.
“I’m ready to try again, if you are,” he asked cheekily as he swerved the truck just to mow down another Biter. Mallory didn’t wince this time, though, not even when the smell of rot wafted through the open window. “We could just pick up where we left off, like nothing ever happened.”

It was difficult to restrain her tongue from biting back the way she really wanted. “I don’t think it’s possible for me to touch you without feeling nauseated, but I’ll keep the offer in mind.”

Negan sucked the air between his teeth as the sound turned into bitter laughter. “Oh, ho, ho. Nauseated? Now that’s a good one... nauseated,” he said, stretching out the word and testing it for good measure on his tongue. “I’ll add it to the pile of insults you’ve flung at me lately. I really don’t know why I keep you around if you’re just gonna hurt my feelings whenever I ask you an easy question.”

“I can’t figure it out either,” she replied without thinking, her eyes darting back from Negan to Lucille. “Our relationship consisted of you pushing me away until I fell off a fucking cliff, so the constant flirting is confusing, I admit.”

There was a beat, a moment when she thought he’d fight her on calling it a relationship, like he wasn’t willing to acknowledge it as anything more than it had been. “Apocalypse changes everybody, Princess, what can I say. It’s changed you too.”

“Made me more like you, just enough,” Mallory muttered, her fingers twitching around the warm handle of the bat. “I’m starting to not care about the day you’re gonna kill me or how long it takes for us to get to that point.” She couldn’t say what made her admit to it; maybe it was the fact he wasn’t looking at her, Negan’s attention trained and focussed once again on another empty road, the sun beaming down as they made their way towards his Hilltop place. “We both know it’s coming, Negan. We’re one big blow out away from you burning my body on a pile with the rest of them.”

She saw his jaw tick. His head tilted and finger twitched as he gripped the steering wheel. “I don’t like killing women, Mallory, never have,” he mumbled in return. “You ever even considered that you survived this long because you are like me now? Cos I sure as fuck have; it’s like looking into a mirror sometimes, when you’re so pissed off it’s hard to tell where you end and I begin. I’m an influence on you.”

Her own eyes were set on the woods around them, trees hiding the dangers that she longed to walk through again. “That not a good thing.” Mallory wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince. “I don’t want to be like you, cruel for the sake of cruel, I don’t want to get that broken.”

Mal didn’t quite see his face but his foot pressed down harder on the gas and he rammed another Biter until its flesh was mush under the tires. “Fucking prissy little Princess, ain’t you?” he huffed angrily. “Stop pretending you’re any less fucking ruthless or cruel than I am. I see in your eyes how you wanna cut my balls off and wear them as earrings. At least I’m not lying to myself about being moral or upstanding or a warrior for the people’s republic of Who Gives a Crap. It’s bullshit, Mallory; lying to yourself only fucks up your chances at keeping your head above water. You dive into no-win situations playing the martyr and you just end up dead.”

“I’m tired of this, having this discussion over and over,” she said, snapping back. “I’ve done bad things, I admit to that but I’m not proud of them like you seem to be.”

“Then that is your fucking mistake, Mallory.” He said, turning and looking at her suddenly. “Be proud of it, be the worst kind of human being you can be. Nobody’s sticking their neck out to save your life, even your boyfriend hasn’t done shit to get you away from me. Own up to it before it ends up owning the fuck out of you.”
Her knuckles were white as she gripped the bat, sorely tempted to cave his head in. Mallory could imagine the blood dripping from the corner of his thin mouth, eyes telling her wordlessly that he was right all along; she was just as cruel, as cold and merciless as he was. Negan winning was more than she could bear.

“Okay,” she said, swallowing her rage and easing her grip. “You want me to own my shit? I have killed people, good people in bad situations. I made shit decisions because I was scared.”

Negan shook his head and leaned back a little, easing up on the gas pedal. “No, no, no. I saw something in you when you told me about killing that asshole who hurt your friend. Something you don’t want to admit but you’re gonna fucking admit it if you don’t want to keep lying about what you are now.”

Mallory’s heart thumped in her chest as she shook her head a little. “I’m not doing that, Negan. You can’t say I’m becoming like the worst parts of you when you weren’t there. I had a choice to make in a moment and I made it, right or wrong, I made it. I might be a little bit like you but I’m nowhere near as sadistic, I’m not enslaving people, making them kneel at my feet for a scrap of food.”

“You liked killing him, Princess, that’s the bottom line,” he said, getting that calmly gleeful tinge back to his voice, ignoring her opinions. “You don’t have to admit it to me, just to yourself. You liked killing him, seeing the look on his face, feeling the power you had back again,” he whistled low in his throat. “That’s a fucking turn-on, that’s why I’m not gonna kill you; you’re more ruthless and cold than I will ever be, because you are un-fucking-predictable. Let that sink into your brain, Xena.”

Her head felt fuzzy, her eyes stinging from the tears she refused to let go of. It was all a mind-game, she told herself; it was his way of getting her to break under his thumb, to prove that she was meek and mild just so he could manipulate her in return. Mallory re-lived that night, yes, but what happened afterwards gave her nightmares - Aimee’s pale face and her dark, dark hair, the dripping of blood from her wounds as she died with anger in her eyes. Mal rested her forehead on the glass window, watching the Biters roam towards the truck as they always did.

“I liked killing him, for a moment,” she said, calm and calculating. Her words were far more measured and deliberate. “I couldn’t let him get away with it. Aimee nearly died that night too but I got to him first.” she swallowed the dryness in her throat. “I wasn’t going to let him touch her for a second. I just grabbed something heavy, hit him over the head. It didn’t feel like enough, so I wrapped my hands around his throat and squeezed until his eye popped out. Then I stuck his own knife through it and watched him die.” The rumble of the truck was still vibrating her skull until her stitches burned.

Negan shifted to look at her, his eyes blown and dark as they locked with her pearly blues. “Is that how you imagine killing me too? With those small hands squeezing the life out of my throat?”

“No,” she said, still calm and measured, saying what he wanted her to say. “I’m not going to kill you, Negan, not until you beg me to make the pain stop.”

He smiled softly, a tilt of his head as he lowered the volume of his voice to a mutter. “They have no fucking idea, Mallory. They got no fucking idea how much you scare the shit out of me right now. Can’t wait to see you with some real blood on your hands. Maybe it’ll be today, huh? Nice and sunny, slight breeze – good day to watch them fight to stay alive, even when they know it’s coming. It’s gonna be a great, great day.”

“No doubt,” she muttered and turned her eyes to the window, skin warming from his stare.
There had, in all honesty, been parts of her life that she wished she could do over again, like anybody else. She couldn’t completely say she regretted the affair with the man next to her though; instead, Mal’s regret lie in falling irrevocably, irreconcilably in love with the version of Negan her mind housed. To look at him now, with his empty love for seeing what broke people to their limits, it was as if she was being taunted with the ghost of a person she would have done anything for. There were glimmers of something inside him, glimmers that shone in her head before the world had snatched them away again; fractions of moments when they were together which she kept locked away in her head, out of his reach and clouded in roses. Mallory’s problem was that she could still reach them, grasp her hand around them and try to make them stick to the maniac who wore his skin now. It wouldn’t work – it just made her miss when life was easier.

She rubbed her fingers against her temple in small circles, wishing for a half-way point between boredom and her natural pissed-off state. He didn’t make it easy to spend any real time in his company, dragging her energy out to its limit.

“I gotta ask you something, though,” he said after a moment. Her eyes rolled. “Why d’you never come looking for me, when all this first went down?”

Mal had thought about that question herself in the beginning, why she hadn’t tried to find him. “I heard about Lucille, how close she was to the end. Figured you were in a hospital near the start of the outbreak. I never heard of anyone who survived being in the hospital when it all started. That’s where it happened, right? Disease spreads quicker in confined spaces, people not knowing what to do to stop the fucking infections. I thought for sure you’d be dead already, I never thought about you after I decided it was pointless to even try.”

“So, you did think about me?” he asked, sounding like an eager puppy. “Lucille turned after she died, Mal. Fucking universe even took a peaceful death away from her. I didn’t stick around.”

“I am sorry, you know,” Mallory replied sincerely, avoiding the first question. “I didn’t handle the whole thing well to begin with but I guess I couldn’t understand why you were cheating on her, what it was like. I understand now, watching it happening and feeling… I really wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

Negan chuckled softly, an almost sad sound. “I am your worst enemy,” he pointed out to her. “It was what it was, and what it was doesn’t matter anymore. You and me, Princess, what we got is a contentious relationship. You hate me now, you remember loving me then, all wrapped up in a bundle of ‘fuck him and fuck you and fuck this’. I think I like you for your fucked-up mind more than anything.”

Gates and fences were on the horizon, made of thick logs, there was a rooftop in the distance too, the sun glinting above it. “Why didn’t you come find me?” she asked, suddenly realising that the opposite was the same for him. “What happened to you?”

Negan laughed again, his back straightening up as they got closer to the Hilltop. “Went off the deep end and didn’t look back. If you’re gonna go insane, just go for it. You’re wallowing in purgatory right now, thinking that you’re serving at the feet of a God who ain’t listening anymore. You never heard the expression, have you? It’s better to reign with the Devil in Hell than serve at the feet of God in Heaven.”

“You want me to take life advice from you?” she laughed again along with him, the absurdity of holding a sincere conversation getting the better of her. “It gives me something to think about at least, being Queen of Hell.”

The truck came to slow down as the gates opened for them, the skinny guards keeping an eye out
from their turrets. “You’ll see it, now, I promise. Just look pretty for me today, Mallory. I’ll show you what a King can really do.” Negan drove into the colony with a more smug, measured smile on his face, the act back down and her feeling that same sick sense of dread.

She sat in her seat, peering up at the colossal mansion ahead of them, the structure dwarfing the people she saw below it; there was a long dirt path winding up the hill towards the mansion, cabins and vast green fields on either side. It wasn’t much of a colony - compared to the Sanctuary, it was meagre at best but the beauty of it was astounding her so much that she missed the man who was suddenly knocking on the door of the truck to shake her from her stupor.

Mallory blinked in slight surprise before she opened the door. He was fairly old and thin, a little gaunter around the cheeks and eyes but on his frame hung a suit with slightly tarnished gold cufflinks and everything as neat as she’d seen on a person. “Sorry,” she said as she opened the door, still gripping Lucille.

The man held out a hand to help her down and Mallory took the aid despite herself, jumping from the cab of the truck. His eyes lingered on the weapon in her hand, smile forced, not quite reaching his eyes. “Welcome to the Hilltop,” the old man said assuredly, her eyes slipping to Negan standing behind him. “Negan’s said that you’ve requested a tour of the place?”

At the sound of thudding bootsteps, she saw Simon, Arat and a few others she didn’t recognise file out the back with weapons firmly on their person, stowed on holsters and on straps over their shoulders. With Lucille in her hand, she looked like part of his army, guarding him. “Uh, sure,” she said, a little dumbfounded by the Hilltop house. “I’m Mal-”

“I know who you are, sweetheart,” the man replied as Mallory slammed the truck door shut behind her. “Trust me, we all know who you are.” He muttered and gave her a frustrated, forced smile in return for her blank expression. “I’m Gregory, leader of the little clan here at the Hilltop colony, we’re pleased to make your acquaintance. Follow me and I’ll show you around.”

Negan grinned almost maniacally and took a large stride forwards with his hands behind his back, leaning in to Gregory’s ear, his voice a playful sing-song; “I think you’re forgetting something, Mr Senator, you’re gonna treat her like the fucking First Lady, remember?”

Mallory’s cheeks flared in embarrassment as Gregory immediately kneeled in front of her at Negan’s command, his head bowed with reverence. “For God’s sake, don’t,” she uttered low in her throat, stepping back to disassociate herself from the kneeling man. Seeing him on his knees made her remember walking through that crowd earlier in the day, how they’d looked at her with fear. “Show me the house,” she ordered instead, to Negan’s delight, gripping Lucille. The weight of her felt heavy as she looked at Gregory on his knees in front of her and she could practically taste the blood on the air. Negan had already picked his victim and was making a show out of it being her kill, her cause, her fault.

“Good idea!” Negan beamed and patted Gregory’s head like a dog before the man rose from his knees. “Let’s go show my Princess what fucking luxury you’re living in down here, Gregory. She already abso-fucking-lutely loves the piano you so generously donated to my bedroom. She makes fucking use of it.”

“Come with me, Marley,” he said and she winced as he got her name wrong, knowing Negan would hate the disrespect and find it amusing in succession.

“Mallory,” she corrected as Gregory led them both up towards the house. Sweat beaded on the back of her neck, something wrong prickling at her senses. At first, she’d thought it was Gregory or Arat maybe, burning a deep hole into the back of her head - but it wasn’t. She couldn’t figure out why she
felt like someone was walking over her grave.

“Her name’s Mallory,” Negan reiterated, chuckling at Gregory’s fatal slip. “Fucking Hell, Marley. Fuck me sideways, that’s a good one.”

Shaking off her feeling of strangeness, Mallory once again focussed on the mansion in front of her, its grandeur reminding her of the colonial homes her grandmother would take her to on vacations up north in the summer, making her trek through decades of history for the ice cream at the end of the day. “It’s a beautiful house,” she enthused, ignoring how close Negan was next to her – all that was missing was his arm around her shoulder. “How old is it?”

“I’m not sure. At least 1800s, maybe even older. The records were destroyed for fires in the winter, you see, there’s not much use for history now, is there?” Gregory straightened his back as they walked past people who immediately dropped to their knees in front of Negan and Mallory. She noticed that only Simon was walking – limping slightly – behind them with his gun over his shoulder, the rest of the Saviours down by the truck still. Negan winked at her as she glanced at him, her eyes sliding back towards the cabins to the side of the house.

“What’s it called?” she asked softly, trying to mitigate the charade. “The house?”

“Barrington House,” Gregory replied curtly as the door swung open and he led them all inside.

Mallory gaped as they stepped over the threshold, the place looking like the apocalypse never happened at all. “Barrington… wait, I heard stories about this. A FEMA safe zone in Virginia, Barrington House. This is the safe zone?” Survivors who found her group in the beginning would talk about the Virginia safe zone like it was mythical end game and she’d always believed it to be so, never really believing that any government would do much to help.

Negan barked in laughter at her, “Fucking FEMA safe zone, fucking bunch of pussies, ain’t that right, Gregory? They fucked off and left you all here to rot and die.”

“FEMA did set up the colony here, at the beginning of the outbreak,” Gregory explained as he walked them down the hallway, stopping to gesture up at the ornate ceiling. “It was a beautiful house, the land was good, the site was on high ground but they soon realised that there wasn’t going to be an end to it so…” he said, looking at Mallory dead in the eye as she looked back down. “They left. We stayed and this is all we have now.”

“What Negan has now,” she corrected, looking at the man next to her, who shone with pride at her words. Mal fixed him with a stare and felt Simon rustle behind her, the tension thick enough in the air to taste. “This is where the piano came from. Those chairs match the ones in your office…” she pointed with Lucille, Gregory’s cheek twitching visibly as she raised the weapon. “Paintings on the walls, too?”

Negan was nonchalant; “What?! I thought the war room needed brightening up. I can’t have good décor now?” Negan tutted, using two fingers to push Lucille back down to Mal’s side. “Calm down, Princess. We don’t want you getting overexcited. This isn’t just a field trip sanctioned by the Principal, we came here to find furniture.”

“You did?” Gregory asked, the panic evident in his voice.

“We did?” Mallory said at the same time, sceptically.

Negan waltzed past Gregory and into what looked like a parlour, the gaps of missing objects evident by the change of colours; walls around the missing objects were slightly faded, the carpets brighter in
squares. Mal had noticed before where her piano – the piano – had stood in the entrance way and the parlour was no different.

Negan started inspecting the dining chairs in the centre of the room, brazenly turning them over in his hands like they were made of nothing but air, though they looked solid and carved by hand. “These real cherry wood? I fucking love cherry wood, man.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Gregory said in an instant, running his hand over the back of another chair though his eyes lingered on Mallory for a moment. “Cherry wood with mother-of-pearl around the base of the cushion,” Gregory added beseechingly, reaching for reasons for Negan to take the stupidly pointless chairs. “The table is solid cherry wood as well, with walnut wood legs, old but built to last.”

Negan inspected the chair intricately, running his bare fingers across the grain. “Do you like them Mallory? Too fancy?” Negan asked after a moment, sounding sincere.

“They’re fine,” she replied, her expression laced with confusion. “Are we shopping or something?”

Gregory fixed her with a glare for just a flash before his charm was back in place with a placating smile. “There’s some uh, rooms, upstairs if these aren’t to your liking.”

“We came here to furnish your new bedroom, Mallory!” he replied, coming over and cupping her face tenderly. Her fingers itched again. “This is not for me, Princess. If you’re gonna be staying up there, you’re gonna have the finer things in life! Now pick out some fucking furniture to take home.”

“Or am I going to have to take it all from Petey, make him sleep next to the rats in the basement instead?”

“I don’t need an eight-seater dining table, just a bed that doesn’t creak,” she said, trying to find a compromise as he let her face go. Mallory looked up to Gregory, nodding once. “Let’s look upstairs, okay?”

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Touting her around as another prize he’d taken as his own property, Mallory stood quietly as Negan sorted out his new presents. Instead of feeling like a prize, though, she felt like a prisoner held to the gun pointed behind her. Simon had remained fairly quiet so far, simply watching and keeping a close eye on Mal but, fuck, he gave her bad vibes, there was no doubt about it. With Negan, she knew what he was thinking but Simon was a wild card she couldn’t pin to the wall. Mal could see the lust in his eyes for power and for danger, more than his own boss, but his loyalty and obedience never once wavered despite his obvious ambitions. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t as imposing as Negan, because nobody was as imposing as Negan. Simon hadn’t liked her the first time they’d met, back in that cottage when she’d taken a swipe at him with her bowie knife. Mal often replayed that little victory in her head whenever she felt the least bit scared by his guard dog.

Negan was busy talking to Gregory in a corner, laughter lilting, when Simon stepped up imperceptibly closer behind her and muttered quietly with the tiniest grin on his lips; “How’s the head treating you lately? Nice and fuzzy round the edges?”

Her hand twitched around Lucille again, a habit she had begun to form. “Fine, thanks,” her face twisted into a sick smirk. “How’s the nice thick chunk I took out of your leg? Feed it to a Biter yet?”

“Don’t get ideas, kid,” Simon said quickly. “He might tolerate his little Princess now but unless you screw his brains out soon, he’ll be burying you with that asshole’s corpse.”
Mallory glanced to her side as Simon brought the barrel of his gun up to point at the base of her spine. “Sure you wanna do this here?” she asked, not scared in the slightest by his dickless threat. “Pull the trigger, see what happens. He’ll beat your head to a fucking wet mash if you so much as look at me funny and you know it,” Mal grinned sweetly, swinging Lucille in her hand. “Else I’d have been dead a long time ago, that’s the thing. You want to impress Negan, you want to be his right-hand man, because everyone needs a sidekick. I want you to lay a finger on me, creep. See how far you can get before Negan breaks it off.” Her heart hammered as the gun pressed in further to her back, almost biting, goading. “Go on,” she hissed to Simon. “Try. See if you know him as well as you think you do, who he’ll choose between.”

“One day,” Simon promised. “You’re going to regret ever taking a swipe at me.”

She held her breath and her nerve but Simon backed the gun away from her body, his own looking as tense as she felt. Mal’s smile only grew as Negan winked at her again from across the room.

“You like this one, Princess?” Negan called, holding up a landscape painting of a sunny field and trees with a meandering river.

“I love it,” she replied sincerely, looking at the gorgeous painting. The want for useless things had long left her but the painting he had chosen was beautiful; Negan still knew her taste, knew what she liked. Gregory wouldn’t miss a painting, she reasoned.

“The lady loves it, see!” Gregory enthused, walking over to Mallory and eagerly pulled open a box a velvet box from a side dresser. “Here, you like this too, don’t you sweetheart?” Gregory pulled out a silver chain from the box with a locket on the end that he looped around her chest, his fingers skimming her collarbones with a slimy tenderness. “That is a fifty-year-old piece of craftsmanship around your beautiful neck,” he said, gripping her shoulders with intent, angling her towards Negan. “Isn’t she a true beauty now? Sets off her eyes just nice.”

Negan’s cheek brow twitched, his gaze burning as he saw the locket settled above her breasts and then Gregory’s hands on her shoulders, fingers having lingered a little too long on her skin for even her liking, let alone Negan’s. There was a roaring fire going on underneath his iciness, judging by his gaze. “Like it was made for you,” he agreed, the stony tone of his voice ever-so-telling. “But uh…..” Negan said, picking the locket up from her chest and turning it over in his fingers. “I think we can do a little better than a locket, Gregory. Mal’s a fucking lady, you treat her with some motherfucking respect. Diamonds, rubies, fucking sapphires to match her eyes.”

Gregory nodded just once and let go of her shoulders, Mal feeling his resentment at her presence. “Of course, I have… uh… some…” he frantically searched the dresser drawers. “Maybe there was something in the other bedroom, I’m not sure.”

“No, I want the locket,” Mallory said softly, turning to the side and glancing between Negan and Gregory. “Please, it’s fine. I never liked diamonds or anything, this is perfect.”

Gregory stifled for a moment, looking between them all with slight confusion about who to obey. Mal couldn’t give a shit about Gregory really; all she wanted was to make sure Negan saw that he was winning without having to bury someone else. She pleaded internally for Gregory to just let it go, give her the locket and never touch her again if he wanted to keep his hands. “But-”

“Hey, you heard the woman,” Negan grinned as he gestured to her, bouncing on the balls of his feet when Gregory relented and handed her an empty velvet box. “She wants what she wants, what the fuck do I know about jewellery.”

Mal curled the fingers of her spare hand around the locket and aligned it right above her cleavage,
eyes hardening again when Negan wouldn’t stop staring at where it sat on her chest. “I think we have enough stuff now, Negan,” she said carefully. “Let’s get back, to the room, see how it all looks together. You’ve done enough.”

Simon behind her, Gregory to the side, they melted away as Negan leant into her ear. “Lesson’s never over, Mallory,” he whispered before kissing her cheek. Straightening, he announced. “I should really have had this place as my summer home, what do you think?” Negan questioned as he led them all out and down the stairs again, Simon almost grinning behind him at her trepidation. “Clean out the filth and it can be a real fucking beauty again. Not much work there, is there, Simon?”

“Not much,” the man said as humid air hit Mallory again. “But there’s zero chance of wiring the place up for a generator – it’s way too old, I checked a long time ago.”

“Fucking shame, ain’t it? All beauty and no fucking substance.” Negan chuckled as he stepped outside into the light again, signalling down to the truck that was still being packed with items he had picked for Mallory and himself. “Would you like it if I stuck you here, Princess?”

Mallory went to reply when Gregory cut in; “Of course she would, Negan. All your wives would love to stay here in the summer time, the view from the top of the hill is still something.”

“God, do you never fucking stop…” Negan groaned dramatically and hung his head, stopping in the middle of the dirt path outside the house. “She’s not my wife, are you?” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “She’s turned me down. Me! I’m a goddamn catch.”

Mal rubbed the back of her neck in frustration as Negan began another one of his rants, staring upwards at the house. There was a glint of something reflecting in the sunlight, a beam that hit her eyes and movement that accompanied it. Piercing eyes stared back at her from the roof – a man with lank, pale brown hair and the visage of determination. Mallory stared into his soul as she saw the barrel of some kind of rifle in his hands, pointed towards them with fucking intent. No. Not towards them, she realised, towards Negan. Panicking, Mal wasn’t thinking as she stepped in front of him, taking a risk on instinct, on guts without glory. Her mind was blank as she let her body shield his, unsure why she was blocking the clean shot. She wanted him dead, but not now. “It’s nothing personal, Negan,” she lied, keeping his body closer to hers, to make sure he kept himself behind her. “I’m not the marrying type, too much of a wild card.”

Negan’s eyes focussed on her, a slight tinge of confusion lifting his heavy brow up. “Wild card… too fucking right,” he replied and walked back down the hill, Mallory tagging along close behind him, still shielding his body as much as she could. If the man on the roof had a conscience – and he did if he hated Negan – he wouldn’t risk hitting a woman he didn’t know. If she could just get Negan far enough away, the shot would be lost, a pointless waste of ammunition and he’d be none the wiser as to her involvement.

She didn’t bank on a rough hand around her arm, pulling her out of the way of him with a hard yank. Gregory looked calmly at her, though she knew he would burn a hole through her body and out the other side if he could, frustration sweet to taste.

“Maybe you’d like to see the rest of the colony, sweetheart. There’s some other women here too, I know how you gals like to chat,” he said, keeping his hand around her arm twisted as Negan fixed Gregory with a cold, burning ire.

Her heart thumped as she looked back towards the man on the roof, his gun only just visible. Another few feet and maybe, just maybe, she’ll have kept Negan alive. “No, thank you. I have to get
back, arrange my new furniture,” Mallory hissed and pulled her arm from his grasp.

Gregory’s eyes flared as Simon held the gun up to his head as she broke free of him. Her heart hammered in her chest when Negan came up the few steps forwards, his body now shielded by Simon and Gregory in turn, Mallory’s eyes darting frantically between the roof and the men. She stepped backwards, feeling the weight of what was about to happen as if she was lifting Lucille above her head.

“Why, oh why, oh why, I wonder,” Negan said to Gregory, a nasty sing-song tone in his voice. “Would you be so fucking stupid as to touch my Princess like that? Hmm?” He rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip as mirth touched him. “You know the one thing I don’t like is a man who treats a woman like she’s a piece of meat. There ain’t no point in rebuilding a fucking society if you can’t keep your hands to yourself. So, I ask myself, does this mean Gregory’s just stupid? Or does it mean something else? Maybe you want to get your own winkled-as-fuck hands on her milky skin, huh?”

Lucille was heavy in her hand. The sniper watched carefully and she hoped his patience was running out fast, waiting as he did to take the shot. Waiting and waiting. Tick tock.

Gregory’s face paled as he realised what he’d done in his snap move, touching a woman Negan considered precious. “My apologies, Negan, Miss,” he said, throat sticking on her name in his panicked confusion. “If I caused you any offence, it wasn’t intended.”

“Offend?” Negan asserted, chuckling and slapping a hand on Gregory’s shoulder while the other landed on his own hip. “Why would it be offensive? You saying she ain’t worth touching?”

“No!” he snapped immediately, eyes darting. “She’s beautiful, very beautiful.”

He turned Gregory to look at Mallory dead-on. “Even more so with that locket around that beautiful neck now, huh?” Negan replied, clearly having the time of his life. “Silver’s a good colour on Mallory, right? Gold would be better on me, what with my gorgeous brown eyes.”

“I don’t have anything gold here…” Gregory answered nervously, glancing at Negan.

Negan blurted into laughter. “Fuck, you have a short memory, you idiot,” he said, pointing towards his wrists.

“You want my cufflinks?”

“Well I certainly don’t want your dime store suit, those cufflinks are fucking beautiful as Mallory here,” Negan’s grin now wild and dark, tingeing with madness at the corners of his mouth. Mal held her breath. “I think I’ll take ‘em.”

The world slowed for a second. Negan lifted his knife from the holster and slid the blade into the side of Gregory’s chest with force, the bones of his ribs splintering audibly, the light sparked and faded like stormy nights in Gregory’s eyes as he died in front of her face, his deadening life draining out his body. Blood bubbled and gurgled from his mouth before the knife was finally yanked out of his body, coated in a thick film of viscera, Gregory crumpling to the floor at her feet once more. She couldn’t stop watching, couldn’t tear her eyes away from him as the light fought for dominance over the darkness enveloping him in death.

“Negan…” she whispered, shaking her head, angry in her impotence, refusing to look back to the man at her feet. “He was just a man.” She felt pity more over sorrow, guilt over mourning.

Simon lowered his gun to the floor as his boss stood over Gregory, a man made of pain as he bled out into the dirt in an oozing trickle. “Nobody’s going to miss this asshole. Nobody’s going to shed a
tear for him, there won’t be anyone crying over him at his grave. There’ll just be a vacuum, empty space. That’s how it’s gonna be now, that’s all he is.” Negan wiped the blood from his blade on Gregory’s cheap suit before he stowed the weapon again. “He made a mistake and paid for it, touching you, the disrespect he has. I can’t fucking stand for that.” Negan watched her staring at Gregory stoically, knuckles white once more. “You are mine too, Mallory. He broke the rules, and now he’s nothing but a stain in the dirt where he came from.” Gregory looked up at her as he was, curled in a pile of slowly dying man, once a leader and now nothing but a victim. “Give her to me, Princess. Let’s put him out of his misery and give her something to drink; it’s hot out here.”

Numbness entered her at his words. Conceding, defeated, she handed over Lucille to its rightful owner, watching in gory, horrific detail when blood and brains splattered over her skin again, painting her with her mistakes. She turned back to glance at the house while Negan dealt blow after blow after blow to the mush of Gregory’s face. The man on the roof had vanished. She shouldn’t have stood in the way, the colony wouldn’t have survived but she would have – she’d have her pride, she would have her armour.

Negan smirked as he dealt one blow more to the vacuum that had been Gregory.

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He had loved her once before.

Perhaps it was a fleeting moment, just a fraction of a second in a space of his heart that was long dead, but he did. She knew he had loved her for a second like she had loved him back.

And there was no doubt of her love for him now; a love for the viciousness, for the savage way he took what he wanted unapologetically, for the way he conquered and owned and controlled. Mallory convinced herself he was a different man but she was wrong – he was more than that. She still loved him. She hated herself more for it. He had tried to break her down again and again, nearly succeeding every time before she pulled herself from the brink to bring herself back to righteousness, piety. She cleansed her soul in hating him.

It was a lie. She had carried his child until she hadn’t, he was a part of her now and it wouldn’t die as long as he was alive. Her hands could have wrapped around his neck, she could have killed him a hundred times and died alongside him when his men came for her. Negan would feel victory in his death at her hands.

Lucille stained her hands bright red, the barbed wire sharper somehow. Her own throat felt his hand squeezing the humanity out of her, piece by piece, little by little. She dripped on her boots. She felt the locket hang heavy on her skin. Sharp edges slicing open soft curves.

“I wasn’t sure how you were gonna react, if I’m being completely fucking honest,” he said, his voice more human than she’d heard. “I didn’t know how it was gonna go.”

“Gregory was a dead man the minute he forgot my name, wasn’t he?” she asked robotically, rubbing the blood into Lucille’s handle. “What could I have done or said to stop it?”

Negan let out a sort puff of laughter, shaking his head. “No, no, no I didn’t mean him,” he said as he drove them back home. “I was talking about the man on the roof.”

Cold ice ran down her back. “You saw him too?”

“I have ways of knowing, Princess, eyes and ears everywhere. I was just so fucking curious about what you’d do if you saw,” he said softly, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to a silent
rhythm. “And I must say it was fucking illuminating. I thought if you saw him, you’d just let it happen, watch me die at someone else’s hands and be happy but nooooope,” Negan effused. “Wasn’t enough for you was it? You had to be the martyr, had to shield my precious little body from their last bullet. I bet he even carved my fucking name on it.”

“You were gonna take the risk of dying to… what? See what I’d do if I saw him?” she asked, flabbergasted at the balls on him.

Negan rolled his eyes, “He was never gonna shoot me today. It was practice, see if he had the nerve to pull the trigger.” He glanced over at her. “Or maybe I just don’t care anymore either. I was just so fucking curious to see what you’d do.”

“Negan…”

“It wasn’t enough for you, was it? Don’t lie, now. You might want me dead, you might want me alive, I don’t know that yet. I only know one goddamn thing for sure, Mallory, I know that you want fucking control over it, you like having power over my life,” he chuckled again, mowing down another Biter. “And I know that if you want me dead, you want it on your terms and not anybody else’s…” he chuckled again. “I really should send Rick a thank you card for that stunt. It’s been an enlightening day, hasn’t it, Mallory? Fucking bright sun shining day.”

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think of a *gasps* no-smut chapter?! It took a few re-writes but I think it turned out okay. Leave me a comment below, or come talk to me via my Tumblr page and ask me anything. I am thinking of participating in Negan smut week, though I have yet to write much, a Negan/OC/Simon fic is in my head....

Anyway, happy Sunday! *runs away*
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Mallory makes a colossal mistake and pays a hefty price for a moment of pleasure. She couldn't imagine seeing the destruction he brings as a comfort but when the world around her tastes like sunshine and laughter, what does the method matter.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos so far. I hope you like this one because it was incredibly cathartic to write out my own anger and frustrations into Mallory and Negan and their fucked up relationship.

As always, please let me know what you think. Flashbacks (yay, the flashbacks are... back) are in blocked italics. Some smut but yeah, mostly the violence and gore and medical warnings too.

Happy reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Gregory, after the lesson and his spite, Negan had done what was promised and thrown away the key to that fucking little cell.

Mallory had always missed the sunshine even more when winters fell into place in Virginia; cold was like death in comparison to the life that came with summer, even before the end of the world. Leaves made slippery paths on roads with forests skirting them on either side like fortresses, the whole earth sprang into the best of itself. It was sweeter now, now that the sun shone when summer came again and the earth breathed; there was fruit on trees and a clear stream if they were lucky, maybe even a rabbit or deer if they were quick too.

Summer was when the world wasn’t so hard to live in, to survive in. She had always loved the radiant light in her face, warming her blood and keeping her human enough to persevere. It was even more important to her – to them – now than ever it had been before. She hated winter, she hated the deathliness of quiet, hated the company of only her memories or thoughts of revenge or escape to keep her sane.

Two days cooped up inside her little homey cell made her skin itch like mad. They had gifted her with new clothes and a better bed, fresh food and running water but the way Negan kept her caged drove her insane, and he rode out her anger like a wave crashing to its peak. Mal tried her hardest to get a rise out of many nameless, faceless, gutless people who ran his errands, but nothing worked – they were all tight lipped on orders from above so he could stick a knife in her gut and twist it just the same. They were all so fucking intimidated by the big, bad wolf and his nasty whack-a-mole addiction that they were content to let her scream out her frustrations and kick the wall until the plaster crumbled at her feet. She’d trash the place and burn it to the ground, given half a chance. Arat and Simon taunted her when they guarded her in turns, the odd person she heard and didn’t know
laughing through the locked door. She broke her new painting in half after the third time they
laughed.

On day three, though, the cage clicked open again. Instead of lunch, in strode Negan with that doctor
behind him closely, carrying some kind of bag. She saw the hard line of Arat’s form beyond the
threshold for just a moment before that, too, was snatched away and she was caged with a hungry
predator once more.

“Up,” he ordered casually, making her skin itch again. “Doc’s gotta take out those stitches and get
that head in proper fucking working order, miracle that that is.”

Rolling her eyes, Mallory robotically complied and sat up on her bed. “Just give me a pair of scissors
and I’ll do it myself.”

“Like I’m trusting you with anything sharp,” Negan muttered in reply, sitting down too closely
beside her as the doctor got out his kit. “Two days, huh? I gotta say, you’re looking better on it,” he
smirked, running a knuckle over her bare shoulder. “Got the colour back in your cheeks, putting on
weight again in all the good places. Almost look like I remember, and ain’t that just a kick in the
crotch for you, that this is doing you some fucking good.”

She hadn’t been so dumb as to reject food again, knowing that she needed to build her strength and
put on the weight and muscle she had lost while out in the field that last month or so with Peter,
barely scraping by.

“Does it make you feel better?” she muttered as the doctor angled her head to get a better look at her
healing cut. “To lie to yourself that you’re helping me?” Mal feeling the cool slide of scissors as they
snipped at the stitches and she saw his eyes glance towards the ruined painting up against the trashed
wall. “Women aren’t your pets to keep. I’m not your exotic little bird, no matter what you keep
giving me to feather my nest.”

“Princess, you wound me,” he replied in deadpan. “I’m here just trying to look out for your best
interests, and you behave like a spoiled little brat.” Negan watched her still and unmoving form for a
moment, his eyes now trained on the doctor’s hands at her tender skin. “Was Gregory not enough?”

Her body flinched as Negan went to touch her again and he backed away just enough to let her
breathe. “It was enough for me to see just what you’re going to do to people who piss you off. How
many ants do you have out there, gathering food for you?” she muttered. “How many do you think
it’ll take for them all to turn against you and swallow you whole?”

“Actions have consequences, good and bad, even for me. If they come for me, I’ll be ready, don’t
you worry.” Negan tucked her hair back from the other side of her face, letting the strands fall
between his fingers in an oddly calming way. “Without me and the Saviours, it’d all be fucking
anarchy. You never come across those assholes, Mallory? The bands of men who carve their initials
into your flesh because they think you’re their property? Men who rape women, men who enslave
women, slaughter children.” He spat the words as if they were bitter in his mouth. “You have no idea
how many girls I saved from that fate, maybe it would have even been you too, eventually. I got no
doubt you’re as good a killer as any I got in my ranks but not even you can take on a gang of
Claimers.”

Mallory blinked rapidly at the fear lodged in her gut. She had heard stories from various travelling
survivors, stories of Wolves, of rapists and cannibals. The lowest forms of human savagery. They
scared her more than the Biters, more than Negan.

“Yeah, I heard of them,” she looked across at him. Conceding that he was a better option wasn’t
something she was willing to admit to the man himself. “How many women here have you seen like that?”

“More than I fucking should have had to,” he said in a deep growl, glaring at the doctor as he turned her head to get a better look at how her wound was healing. “Any man who touches a woman without her fucking consent should have his balls pecked off and his eyes gouged out. That hasn’t changed about me, Princess. They are the lowest form of human scum and I will wipe out any man like that with pleasure. I could kill men all day fucking long.”

“It’s the women you don’t like killing,” she echoed his words. A thumb pressed into her cut too hard and she inhaled sharply, pulling her head away from the doctor’s firm grip. “Shit…”

His response to her pain was immediate, Negan’s eyes flaring in rage before they settled into eerie calm. He rose from the bed next to Mallory, getting between her and the doctor like a human shield.

“Say it,” Negan threatened brazenly. “Say you’re sorry to the lady.”

To his credit, the man didn’t flinch like she expected but there was no defiance in him either. “I apologise if I hurt you,” he parroted, looking past Negan to where she sat on the bed. “Your cut will be fine, just keep it clean for another day or two and there won’t be any risk of infection.”

Mal nodded softly and pulled her hair back into place over her forehead, words stuck in her throat.

“Good,” Negan grinned suddenly, clapping the doctor on the shoulder. “Now get the fuck out of here before I break your arm off.”

It wasn’t until the room was quiet and silent, the doctor gone, that Negan sighed deeply. In a moment, she saw the weight of it all on him, crushing whatever it was that she had loved about him. His freedom, his devotion, his unrelenting need for control - they were being suffocated by the weight of his own power. “It’ll just be easier once you realise… you, all of them out there, all the people in the colonies, they’re better off under me. People used to fear the police, fear God and his wrath, that’s what kept them in check. They need someone to be scared of, someone to kneel to or it’ll be even worse than what you’ve heard about. I know what worse looks like and I don’t want to see that again if I have to. It’s better to be scared for a moment than be hurt for the rest of your life.”

She didn’t know what to say, that odd sincerity in his voice that made her wonder whether this was the real him or another mind game to screw with her. “I know too,” she muttered barely beneath her breath as he packed up the doctor’s kit.

“Get some rest,” he said, his back stiffening as the veil fell again over his form. “Eat your food. It’ll be better if you don’t starve to death in here, you’ll just stink out the place.”

And he walked through the door again.

Mallory belonged to Negan, of that she and everyone here was sure. She could see the way he stormed out of her room, crossing over the threshold as it transformed him into another man, a vicious man. She was back to being his property once he was Negan again. Any person who treated his property with anything less than absolute reverence was a dead man walking, and even the Saviours were forbidden from really hurting her or threatening her. In that, she had some power at least.

A strange sense of apathy for other people had begun to set into her in those three days, she realised as the lock turned back into place. Anyone aligning themselves to him knew exactly what he was capable of; it was why she had to see her imprisonment through to the end of the week and get back to her fucking piano. At least there, she had felt human again. It seemed like months ago, when she’d
last heard the hauntingly faint melodies that she played over and over again. The only thing her mind
heard in the quiet of her room during the day now was the crack of Gregory’s skull splintering to
mush at her feet.

Three fucking days incarcerated and she was the one starting to crack at the edges, tiny little fracture
lines that made everything worse. The memories played in her head over and over, tripping
constantly on Negan’s insults and his berating taunts, his sheer love of cruelty, on Peter’s lack of
action to help, on Arat’s smirking silence and Simon’s gun on the small of her back.

Negan didn’t want her dead, but it was little comfort when he would simply break her instead. Every
night that she’d slept in his comfortable cell, she heard him fucking his wife like crazy in the room
next door, every time louder, every attempt more blatantly posturing. She had to feel sorry for Amber
– Mal thought that was her name, at least; his wives blurred into one mass of fuck toys. She only
heard his voice through the walls, his laughter worse somehow. Three goddamn days of mental
torture bought its own harsh cold.

And then, on the fourth day, he allowed her to taste sunshine again.

“Get out,” Arat had said that mid-morning, her jaw locked in an uncomfortable way. “Before he
changes his mind.”

Mal almost gaped at her in still silence, convinced that Negan was playing another trick. “Is that a
trap?”

“You,” she said, pointing through the door way. “Out. Don’t get your fucking hopes up; even
prisoners get exercise for good behaviour.”

Mallory sauntered out of the room with a victorious smirk poking at the edges of her lips, as she was
led to the sunshine outside by a seething, pissed-off babysitter. It had tasted sweeter than she could
remember anything tasting, that moment. It even blocked out the scent that Gregory’s blood had
lingered on her skin; all of his death had settled into the tiny cracks of her dry skin for hours after.

The Sanctuary bustled with life around her as she let her lungs fill with sweet summer air, her chest
bursting to scream in relief and happy victory. Children laughing and playing with each other and
their mothers who watched with a cautious eye. Gardeners tilling the land for whatever it was they
were growing, wiping off their brows in the heat and smiling as they talked to one another like it was
any normal day. The earth felt alive again, it felt young and free compared to the room she was
staying in upstairs. And Negan was right – she’d fucking earned every second of her sweet sunshine.

Her happiness fractured again when Arat walked up to stand next to her, a hand trained on the knife
handle at her belt, her face stony and cold as though nothing around her meant anything.

“You don’t have to keep babysitting me, you know,” Mal muttered as the joy faded and sunshine
waned with Arat’s shadow. “What am I gonna do, exactly?”

“You’re dumb enough to try anything,” the woman muttered, her tightly curled hair blowing in the
slight breeze. “You’re desperate to prove a point and the right amount of stupid to go through with
it.”

Those weren’t Arat’s words – she could practically hear Negan’s pissed off calm behind them. He
was probably right, too, but there was no way she was giving in now. “You believe everything he
says, don’t you?” she asked softly, wrapping her arms around her chest in defiance. “Of course, you
do. Puppets always move in the direction the strings pull them.” Mal thought about Simon, his half-
cocked threat and Arat’s casual violence, her thumb stroking the handle of her knife. “You’ve been
the one watching my door for three fucking days,” she laughed in her face, feeling cockier than she probably should in her delirium. “Three fucking days, he puts his right hands at my door, like I’m a fucking terrorist in maximum security.”

“You are a fucking terrorist,” Arat remained impeccably calm on the outside, a model of a good soldier that just played on Mallory’s nerves more. “If you think I’m going to let you out of that room for more than the hour he wants, you’re gonna have to start by kissing my fucking boots.”

“I’m not kissing anything,” Mal replied, just as calm and casual. “We both know that no amount of me pleading will get you to do anything more than what he tells you to,” the exhaustion melted into an insanely cheap thrill. “Don’t wanna piss off the big boss and give him an excuse to fuck you up too.”

To her annoyance, Arat just stood there, unmoving and unflinching. “You have absolutely no idea about us, about this place, do you? Before you get it into your arrogant little head that we’re mindless drones, look around. Who do you see?”

“I only see you,” Mal said, fingers itching to form a fist at the look on her guard’s stoic face. She wanted to beat the crap out of his minion just to prove she couldn’t really be imprisoned and force-fed his rhetoric. Nothing could scare her now. “He’s manipulated all of you into serving under him. I’m not going to kneel at his feet like you do, like I can’t make my own goddamn choices. Fucking puppets.”

Snapping into action, Arat pushed Mallory backwards with a hard thrust, away from the mass of people giving them glances. “I don’t kneel,” Arat said, unsheathing her knife and pressing it into Mallory’s sternum. “I make them kneel and they do it willingly.”

Her eyes locked with Arat’s and the taste of freedom didn’t suddenly taste sweet, it tasted of copper. “I’m not kneeling for him, and I’m not breaking,” she muttered, not scared of the threat at her throat. “Not ever.”

Smiling faintly at the corners of her lips, Arat slid the knife back into place. “They all keep talking about him wanting you as a wife but they’re wrong. You’d make a better Saviour, maybe you will one day, when you learn your place.”

Disgust pitted in her stomach, settling there and festering more than any insult thrown between her and Negan. He’d chosen his guards well. “I’m not on his string anymore,” she said, defiant. “Your boss is an egotistical, psychopathic piece of shit,” Mal said as quietly and as calmly as the man himself would. “And I’ll see him dead before I walk out of this shit-stain of a Sanctuary.”

“Interesting,” Arat said, narrowing her eyes in focus. “You’d leave your boyfriend here to rot. That tall, handsome drink of water you came in with? Stone-cold bitch.”

“What?” Mallory asked, blinking in angry confusion at her.

“You said ‘I’. ‘I will walk out of here’, ‘I will see Negan dead’. You would, wouldn’t you? You’d forget about your boyfriend in an instant, given half the chance of revenge.” Arat chuckled then, the first real emotion she’d seen pass through the woman’s face in days. “Guess it makes sense. He ain’t done shit to save you so why would you do anything for him? I think you got it bad for men who walk all over you,” she licked her bottom lip, perusing Mal’s face like an open book. “I’m starting to like this version of you, little girl. The not giving a fuck, the whole independent act, pretending like you’re so much better than everybody else here. I just can’t wait until Negan gets bored and lets me at you. I’m thinking maybe a month more, probably. That was how long the last infatuation took before he moved on. I’m surprised you’re still here now, probably because you haven’t fucked him
yet, just guessing. I don’t think you’re the type to take the easy route all those other bitches take.”

“I know that he’s got you all muzzled when it comes to me,” Mal sneered. The tiredness, the isolation and everything built up inside of her until it exploded. “You’re not allowed to throw up all your tired tricks, I mean honestly?! Threatening me with a fucking knife?” she barked in laughter. “You know how many times I had one of those in my face, you think you’re the only person who’s ever done that, even in the last goddamn month? It’s boring. You know it’s the only thing you’ve got that he’ll let you get away with. You’re not allowed to hurt me, to lay a finger on me; the God almighty hasn’t permitted any of you sorry fucks to do the only thing you know how to do. All you have left is trying to break my mind but you know that’s not going to work either. You can try. I got four more days to go under your thumb before I can go back.”

Arat just laughed, chillingly warm and easy. “You actually believed Negan when he told you it was gonna be a week?” she shook her head. “Oh God. You’re never getting out of there alive. Not until you go back to being what you used to be; his whore.”

Mal whipped her fist back and slammed it into Arat’s face with a wonderful, sickeningly audible crack as her nose broke. Her fist collided and for a moment it was sheer joy and relief to be getting some of her anger out and she rode the wave like Negan would, taking intense pleasure in her revenge, in the pain she had caused.

That high faded away in an instant the second that Mallory realised she had done something monumentally stupid. In an isolated room, it was different; no eyes could see what power she had over Negan, however little, and the Saviours’ impotence in punishing her. Only this time, she’d gone that step over the line, cold-cocking one of his best soldiers in front of a crowd of people who fell silent as Arat staggered back from the punch, wiping at her bloodied nose and grunting in pain. It wasn’t going to be written off and her guard grinned in nauseating happiness at the realisation; all bets were off now.

Arat slammed her own fist back into Mal’s face, pain blossoming at Mal’s lip as it split and bled until she tasted copper. Mallory launched herself at the woman in turn, slamming into the ground while Arat fought back with vicious abandon, kneeing Mallory in the gut when she tried to reach for the knife at her belt. Her stomach lurched in agony and she felt her breath constrict.

“Little bitch! Fight me!” Arat yelled as she pinned her prisoner’s whole body to the ground with grunting effort, Mal struggling against her weight and sheer strength. She fought against Arat, managing to wrap her calf over hers and kick at her ankles. She just grumbled in pain and kept her pinned to the ground harder, straining and struggling against Mallory’s spite and hate.

As she screamed in frustration, Arat’s hand flickered and suddenly the flat blade of her knife lay with the tip pressing into Mal’s cheek. Mal stopped dead for a moment at the look in her guard’s eyes, a sheer hatred that spoke more threat than the knife ever could.

Footsteps thundered, shouts of chaos and screams as those women around them gathered up their now scared children. Her head span out of control as Arat trapped her legs and pinned her wrists to the concrete with a single hand, all of Mal’s bravado and cockiness dissipating at the familiar clink of buckles and boots.

“Let me fucking go, fucking cunt!” she cried out, uncaring as the knife nicked the skin of her cheek and jaw in a line.

“Make me and I might,” Arat spat back, her eyes wild and free, though Mallory saw a hesitancy in there as well, a strain in her arms that was like she was holding back. Mal spotted the scars on Arat’s limbs now, a deeply carved in ‘C’ on her forearm and the marks of bindings across both wrists that
made Mallory falter enough for Arat to bring her hand around her milky, vulnerable throat, pressing enough to restrict the air.

She couldn’t breathe in anything but gasps, great lung-fulls of air drawn up into her body denied by the precise pressure of a taut hand that wanted nothing more than to see her dead. She heard him before she saw him, the Negan she never wanted to see; a posturing man with a smirk on his face and the tick at his jaw.

“Princess, if you wanted to get my attention, this weren’t the fucking best way to go about it,” Negan grumbled as he appeared above her head, a little out of breath and mad as all Hell. “Liability, fucking mother-shitting li-a-bil-i-ty.” He brought Lucille down slamming into the concrete a few inches from her head, roaring out all his anger.

Mal’s vision swam as she gasped for air and scrambled at the hand on her neck, her vision going black at the edges until the pressure was suddenly released from her throat. She coughed the oxygen back into her burning lungs and felt the weight of three days fall on her like a ton of bricks crushing her chest. “Negan, please…” she spluttered, coughing again, feeling true fear.

“What have you done to yourself now, Mallory?” he tsk-ed at her as he calmed down, squatting down by her head. “You get all up your own ass, got cocky? Hmm? Old habits die hard, I guess. You always thought my world revolved around you and your sweet little pussy,” he grinned sadistically. “Oh, baby, you know what you done now, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes that you know. I could let Arat cut that face up to ribbons but I, for one, think it’d be a waste.”

“You do what you gotta do,” she said, heart hammering in her chest as blood trickled down her jawline. “Nothing’s going to change that now. You wanted me to break and so I broke, in front of all your little ant farm, such a shame.”

Negan sat back on his heels, looking to a person she couldn’t see, making some kind of silent gesture. Footsteps raced off again as his attention turned back to her. “You still don’t fucking get it? Punishment comes from the hand of the righteous man, Mallory. Obviously, I haven’t been fucking graphic enough about what the rules are here; number one being that you don’t act like a fucking savage.”

“She provoked me!” Mal defended, earning herself a knee to the gut again in spiteful retaliation from Arat.

“Do I really look like I give a shit? But Daddy, she started it!” he mimicked, smoothing her messy hair away from her face. “I don’t have time to deal with this crap today, honey, I really don’t. I should just let Arat do something since she’s the one who got her nose literally bent out of shape. Why’d it have to be a fist to the face, Princess? I’d have much preferred if you two got along nice, seeing you both tangled up like this is giving me a very fucking confusing hard-on.”

“She doesn’t play nice enough,” Arat replied, spitting blood next to Mal’s head. “Let me cut her scalp off.”

Negan chuckled and shook his head softly, “Won’t work with this one. No, no, no, I got no fucking choice this time. Just remember, this is your fault, Princess.”

Mallory was suddenly flipped onto her side on the concrete with her hands trapped behind her back, the motion jarring enough to make her stomach turn. “Fuck you!” she struggled vainly against Arat’s grip.

Her bravado fell, though, as Peter was unceremoniously dropped to kneel at Negan’s side, a mere
foot away from her own face. They had a gun trained on the back of his head too, with the Negan she hated – this Negan who held Lucille at the ready, the Negan with that self-same smile as when he caved Gregory’s head in. People died when he was angry.

Tears burned in her sliced-up cheek as Peter looked across the concrete at her. “Allie? What?” he asked just before Simon kicked him in the stomach again and again until she heard a rib snap and crunch at the blows.

“No!” she cried and struggled even harder, her mind shattering as Lucille rose to Negan’s shoulder. “No, God, please no! Don’t you fucking dare! It’s not his fault.”

Negan seemed to take pleasure at keeping Mallory in suspense, helpless, bound, at his mercy. It reminded her too much of before.

“That’s not how this works,” he replied, swinging Lucille at Peter’s head. Peter flinched and Mal screamed at the blow that never came, the bat stopping an inch from his head. Negan chuckled and brought Lucille back onto his shoulder. “I told you, actions have fucking consequences, I never said those consequences would be on you. People fall into line when you hurt something they love.” He spat the last word.

“Please,” she said, the word bitter on her mouth as she said them. “Don’t kill him. You know it won’t make me fall into your line, it’ll just piss me off more. Don’t you dare fucking kill him, Negan.”

“Kill?” Negan asked, confused. Simon and another man she didn’t know pulled out Peter’s left arm from his curled-up body. “Who said the word kill?”

Mal screamed and struggled as Negan smashed Lucille down onto Peter’s left hand, the bones and flesh sticking to the wire as he did it again and again. Peter screamed in agony, held down to the ground like she was, tears streaming down her face and mixing with the taste of her own blood as she saw his hand eviscerate into a streak of nothing.

Three kisses of Lucille and his hand was a smear on the ground and a puddle of blood, the bones turned to fragments of dust. Mal cried still and thrashed pointlessly against a smirking Arat. Her fractures turned into splinters.

Negan shook the blood and flesh and bone from Lucille, a red stripe appearing across the concrete. He huffed and leaned back to admire his work as Peter still howled in pain. “Fuck me, this one is a tough little nut. Most assholes pass out by now!” he laughed. “Get him to the fucking doctor before he pukes on my boots.” She couldn’t see as he was hauled away, Negan crouching down in front of her face. “Oh, you got a mean look in your eyes, Princess. Thought I couldn’t get to you? Thought you were the only thing safe in the entire fucking compound?” He laughed and brought Lucille up to meet her face. “Look! She just loved that little sip of your boyfriend. I guess you’ve still got his right hand to go, and both legs too. Maybe kick the shit out of Simon and see if that kills your boyfriend. He’ll be a torso by the time I’m done.”

“Go fuck yourself,” she seethed, inching away from the dripping Lucille. “And fuck your bat, too.”

His face fell and eyes went cold from the mirth they held a moment before. “I think you better kiss her and apologise for that. Kiss her, Mallory,” he said, shoving Lucille towards her again. “Or she might want another taste of Petey so soon.”

Her eyes trained on Negan, she reached out and kissed the bloodied shaft, spitting out an apology. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice full of spite and scorn. “I’m sorry for everything I have ever done.”
Negan seemed to look into her, past the anger and the bullshit, her ego and her pain. “I accept your apology and so does Arat. She’s going to escort you back to Peter so you can say your sorrys to him and then, my Princess, you are going back to your room. If you’re lucky, I might let you out in another week.”

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She had slept in his bed the night she realised his wife was sick. Every second with his arms wrapped around her felt like a vice that constricted but Mallory was happy to have the pressure of his grip around her body, hating herself for the way it warmed her. Mallory ran her fingers over his hair, wondering whether she would ever stop the sickness in her own stomach at what they had done, at what she had done.

Lucille’s illness made sense, when she went back over every time he had fucked her senseless. There were sweet moments where he smiled, where he laughed and then there were those times he had painted her body with bruises and bite marks, times where she hadn’t been able to say no and the one where she almost had. Whatever was wrong in his head, she was being as used as much as she was being lied to. He had promised her that he couldn’t love her and yet she had only come to realise how brazenly honest he’d been – he couldn’t let himself love a woman who wasn’t his wife. It was a betrayal too far.

Having stolen one of the empty pill bottles she found in his garbage, Mallory sat on her bed the next evening with her own crappy, slow laptop open, typing in the name of the medication into a search engine, waiting for the answer she already knew. Morbid curiosity, a need in her to know what kind of man she was fucking, came over her as she looked through its various uses, pictures of sick and dying people and their testimonials. The results didn’t surprise her – one word stood out, a word she already knew would be the answer; cancer. It could only be cancer. Of course it was fucking cancer.

His precious wife, his beautiful Lucille in the photographs she had seen, was fading from his eyes. Mallory had seen that woman and her sharp cheekbones and soft warmth, painful reminders of what her and the woman’s husband had done to each other on every available surface. He was a brute and she a beauty, and there was Mallory stuck in the in-between, keeping one from falling apart and preventing the other from having her husband with her near the end of her too-short life. It was a gut-punch; a pain and guilt that rotted her away from the insides, to know that she had helped this man cheat on his sick, maybe even dying, wife.

Her thumb worked over the label back and forth as she contemplated her own breaking, naïve heart. She couldn’t love that man, she couldn’t even stand to look at him anymore and his face, his hollow eyes just before he buried his groans of pleasure into her neck and wrought out her own. Yet he kissed her like any man should kiss a woman he loved, with his whole being and nothing held back – nothing made more sense than that. They had laughed and kissed and fucked as any two people should. That spark between them wasn’t a lie, of that she was sure. He owned her body and now he owned her mind at what he had made her into. Mal was a whore when she’d thought herself a lover.

Negan didn’t knock anymore. At 8pm that next night, he let himself into her apartment and stood in the doorway, statuesque and imposing, looking like his body was carved from marble. He stared at her on the unmade bed across the room as he closed her door behind him.

“You skipped work today,” he muttered and leant back against the closed door, crossing his arms over his chest. “They’re not gonna like it when I tell them you’re playing hooky.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” she asked, standing up. Her bare toes hit her worn carpet as she padded straight past him and into her tiny kitchen, throwing the pill bottle in his face with a casual glance. “Never mind, don’t bother, just get out of my fucking house,” she said, tired of bullshit. “Go
“She’s not home,” he said, his eyes trained on the bottle in his hand, having caught it easily. “You stole trash? Fucking Hell, Mallory, my fucking bathroom isn’t a playground for your kleptomania.”

Blanching, she laughed and shook her head, “God, it’s only fucking trash. I know, Negan, I know about Lucille,” she said, slamming a cabinet door as she fetched herself a bottle of wine to drown her anger in. “Fucking around on your wife when she has cancer – yeah I fucking Googled it! Low life piece of crap!” she yelled as he opened his mouth.

For his sins, he looked hurt for a millisecond before a veneer went back down. “So what? It’s not your business, it’s not your life. Why are you acting like a fucking child?” he demanded, stalking into her kitchen after her when she refused to give him attention. “Hey, you look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Mal’s shaking fingers unscrewed the cap from cheap-as-shit wine and she tipped some haphazardly into a scratched glass. “I said to get out, didn’t I? So, get out and go back to Lucille. I’m not doing this – or you – anymore. This isn’t even a conversation; go home, Negan.”

The storm roared in his eyes. Negan tossed aside the fucking pill bottle and clenched his hand into a fist on her kitchen counter, his body taut and tense. “I told you, she’s not home.”

“What are you saying, she’s dead? Not even you would be so fucking callous.” Mal sneered, shaking her head, “Oh no, you, you’re a fucking joke. You’re not a man, men don’t go fucking around on their dying wives. They care for them, they look after them, they hold their hands. You’re nothing and you made me even worse than that. What the Hell excuse do I get?” Mal shook in anger and disgust, downing half a glass. “No, you get the fuck out of my apartment and out of my life and I’ll do you the same courtesy.”

He wrenched the glass from her hand and smashed it into dust on the kitchen floor, red liquid pooling in the cracks of the linoleum. Mallory shook in fear and excitement when the sound reverberated, a sick remnant of his fucking devotion to her body.

“You said your piece, do I get a fucking turn now, little miss perfect?” he growled, crowding her into her own cabinets. “You and that smart mouth are talking shit you don’t know anything about.” Negan pinned her hips to the counter behind her, grabbing at her wrist as she went to slap his face. “Use your words like a big girl, Mallory, I know violence is nice for some revenge but let’s not be fucking savages here.”

“Use my words to say what? How much I hate myself, how sick I feel knowing… knowing what I did to your wife?” her eyes teared up and she shoved him hard from her body so she could breathe. “I can’t believe I let you get to me. You turned me into your whore, I feel sick.”

“Whores get paid, Princess, I never promised you a dime, I never gave you anything but what you wanted. I got the fucking claw marks on my back to match the bites on your ass so don’t talk as if I made you do anything you never wanted.”

Negan was panting hard, his eyes dark again and she got a sick thrill from it. Her voice dropped to a whisper in reply, “I nearly loved you, that’s what you did. You made me nearly break myself in your sick, twisted games. A good person like me can never, ever love a monster like you. Not even in your fantasies.”

The thin lips on his face twitched into a smile. “Good person? Good person, right. Interesting bit of bullshit you’re saying there, Mallory, preach it louder for God to hear and then maybe you’ll believe
it too. Since when were you a good person, exactly? When you stole money from your Mother’s purse, when you turned your back on your parents, threw your future away because you just had to keep that little kleptomaniac side alive? Face facts, sweet peach, you are not a good person.” Negan laughed joyfully. “You can keep pretending that you want the white picket fence, the three kids and an honest job but that’s such fucking bullcrap, I can smell it from here.”

“You don’t know me,” she panted, leaning away from him as he crowded her again. “I never wanted the life you had, I just wanted to be better and you dragged me back into the gutter.”

“I didn’t drag you,” he said, reaching out and tucking her hair back once more. He would always do that, always touch her in the most gentle, intimate of ways to make her think there was more meaning behind the gesture. “You loved every minute of it. You’re just as fucked up as me, sorry to say. We are a beautiful disaster together. I don’t love you, Mallory, that isn’t real. Love doesn’t matter when there’s this beautiful fucking disaster, masters of chaos.”

Her head span as he reached up and held her jaw lightly, her heart hammering as he touched her. “Negan, don’t,” Mal muttered when he ran a thumb across her lip. “It doesn’t matter what I want when this is so wrong. I don’t want to be that person anymore.” Pale blue eyes watered as her voice broke apart into pieces.

Negan looked at her sadly for a moment and she was lost again. “We don’t get what we want, not really. There’s nothing right or wrong, you just make your own choices and die by them. Don’t lie to yourself that I coerced you, that I let you down a bad road again. It’s who you are, you’re mine – selfish, naïve, spoiled and you are all mine, we both know it now. You can’t push me away even if you tried.”

“I am trying,” she gripped his t-shirt in her hands, keeping him away from her and preventing him from pulling back too. “Negan, I… I can’t keep pretending I don’t hate that you’re married.”

“And I won’t pretend I don’t want you,” he growled and pressed her body into his. “You tell me to walk away and I will, but I won’t act like you don’t drive me fucking insane in the process.”

Mallory closed her eyes for a second and let her heart break into jagged pieces. You had to be more than broken to love a man like Negan in all his fucked-up glory. He was a beautiful disaster, a cruel man capable of more tenderness and empathy than anyone she’d ever met.

“I hate you,” she blinked and bit her lip, the untold anger still festering under the surface. “I should hate you more.”

“You should,” he replied, “But that’s okay too. Hate me if it’ll make you feel better.”

She fractured and he pressed forwards, their lips meeting in a bruising, hard kiss. Mallory would always hate his choices and always love the man he was deep, deep beneath it all. He was a person of passion and instinct, his hands roaming her body in practiced terrain that elicited gasps and moans of pleasure even over her clothes.

“Mallory,” he groaned into her neck as he sucked on her tender flesh. “Beautiful, beautiful, Mallory, fuck,” he lifted her up enough so she could wrap her legs around his waist until her ankles locked at the small of his back. “Tell me again.”

She felt him press, hard and throbbing through his pants and hers but it was so familiar, so real and true. “I hate you,” she muttered, catching his lips in another fiery kiss. “Fuck me, make me scream, please… I want it.”
Mallory wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he lifted her effortlessly, like she was made of air. Glass crunched beneath his boots as he laid her on her janky kitchen table, warped Formica and metal legs scratching, Negan unwilling to walk any further. Mal didn’t want comfort anyway, not when he ripped off her sweat pants and underwear in a single grunting tug, and not when he covered her half-naked body with his.

Her cunt throbbed at her thought of being filled and stretched by his cock, pounded into the table until her legs and back burned and she was as punished as he wanted her to be. Negan fumbled with his own zipper and pants until he was suddenly pressing into her wet warmth with an unforgiving slowness, drawing out her frustration and need.

Mallory writhed and brought her hips up to meet him as he sunk into her willing body. Pin pricks of tears beaded in her eyes as she thought of his wife, of the pain and the suffering and there Mal was, fucking her husband with a will and a need unlike she had for man who had been her lover.

“Stop that,” Negan growled, still and shaking as he pressed to the hilt inside her body. “Stop fucking thinking, just fucking feel. Thinking never helps.” Negan pulled out and slammed viciously back inside her body, watching her face as she gasped and grunted, body rippling, table screeching at the weight it had to bear. “Let me in.”

She let her mind go. Her body washed over with pleasure at the burn, him filling her perfectly over and over in draw-out thrusts. Negan fucked her deep and hard, Mallory grunting with him in pleasure when he hooked one of her legs over his arm and doubled down, letting her scream his name in the purest of desires.

They came one after another, crying out names and hoping that it was enough to make the guilt burn away.

Hours later, Mallory watched him sleep in her bed, as naked as the day he was born with his arms back around her own bare body like before. Her delicate fingertips trailed down his arms, back and forth, staring blankly at his face as he held her. There wasn’t the stab of guilt or pain, there was no regret or malice. She was broken, yes, but her pieces fit with his to make a picture neither wanted to really see. It wasn’t love, she’d decided, it was so much worse than that.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that was as therapeutic to read as it was to write. Please leave me a comment below and let me know what you think so far.

Did anyone miss my entry for Negan smut week? If so, head on over and read my pure filth Negan/OC/Simon one shot starring more fucked up OCs and a heaping bowel of asshole!Negan. It's called Wickedness in the Heavenly Places if you want to read.

Also, my Tumblr is still up and running though I am not.. awesome at it.

Have a great day, bust some fucking heads open while you conquer the world.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

After a devastating loss, Mallory feels herself cracking under the strain of Negan's oppressive rule. He won't relent until she's finally seeing things his way but she's far too stubborn to go quietly into the good night. Before she's done, Mallory will tear his reign of tyranny apart and suffocate under the weight of it falling on top of her.

Chapter Notes

*Waves* Did you miss me?

So I took a little break after a bit of stress at work and I've got this chapter here for you all as recompense. Your support on here and on Tumblr has been awesome, thank you all so much for the comments and kudos. I've never put so much of my time into a project like this so I think I needed a break from it just to get my own head on track but the people poking me to get another chapter up were the MVPs - this one is for you. Plus, TWD came back last week and I'm on a two-week vacation from today so I'm riding the happy train again. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, I'll see you in my dreams.

Anyhoo, I've forgotten how to write. Hope this is something to tide everyone over; it's not action packed and there's no warnings (I think?) but some low-key injury descriptions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chaos slowed the world down as Arat hauled Mallory up from the floor, barely letting her find her feet before dragging her limp body away. A bitter burn of bile coated her throat at the taste of Peter’s blood and flesh on her lips and Mallory spat it out on the ground away from Arat’s boots to get rid of the taste, tears beading in her eyes. The adrenaline that had coursed through her veins was waning impossibly fast, the anger dissipating into sick fear and guilt and shame, painted across the concrete like that splattering streak of flesh. Noise faded away as her eyes fixed on the brightness of his blood. It shouldn’t have gone down that way – Mallory knew she should have been grateful it hadn’t been his head or his leg, but Negan had to keep Peter alive so he could threaten to smash other parts of him so it was meaningless. God, she wouldn’t forget that iron-rich taste like liver, the screams crawling at her skin and seared into her mind along with all the horrors she’d seen. Hot tears fell unbound down her cheeks, running over the scratches and bruises and the remnants of what was left of her.

Stomach churning, everything numb and painful at the same time, dragged by a twisted arm to the med bay. Mallory vaguely heard Arat’s scornful words but they didn’t even register with meaning – it was a blur, the same threats and insults, the same bile thrown up at her, they didn’t matter. This time… this time was too much. There were screams of pain echoing around the walls as Arat drew her closer still. She didn’t want to do this, to see him, to look at her last hope bleeding out in agony
on a gurney. After everything, Peter had been a constant. And now? She might as well have swung that fucking bat herself. Mal killed everything in the end.

“Apologise,” Arat spat out as she shoved Mallory into the room. Peter was howling out in pain, thrashing violently as he was held down by two people who didn’t look like Saviours.

“No, she’s not coming in here!” the doctor yelled, his clothes painted red. Mal’s eyes blurred with tears as the doctor glared across at her, his face full of hatred and anger. Mallory thought he was yelling again but she couldn’t hear it above Peter’s screams, blood forming a waterfall down his body as it spilled from his stump.

“Peter,” she choked out, finding the drive to shove herself past one of the men holding him down to cup her friend’s face. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…” her broken voice pleaded, trying to hold herself at the seams, her heart thudding and shattering into jagged pieces of glass.

“Fucking fuck bullshit!” Peter yelled, veins popping in his neck, wheezing for his life. “Go screw yourself, you and your fucking Negan!” His shout of searing agony ripped her in twain as his left arm and its bloodied stump were pulled straight, elevated above his heart. “This is your fault, you and your fucking hypocritical crap! Get the fuck out!”

A piercing scream rang out and shot down her spine, a sizzle of flesh, a sickeningly familiar smell of cooked meat as the blood vessels were sealing shut. Peter grabbed Mallory’s wrist with his only hand, yanking her away from his face as he grunted and screamed, gripping her arm with a viciousness she’d never known, burning deep, deep into her flesh. Lungs blackened, her eyes screwed shut for a second, away from the sight of his arm getting roasted.

Peter slumped unconscious on the bed, limp, pale. He could barely breathe and she felt her world shift again.

Mallory fell forwards, brow knotted as she shook Peter desperately. “No, no, no, Peter please…” she begged, pushing him upright again, smacking his face so he’d wake up, shoving off the cloying hands of whoever was trying to stop her. Her stomach plummeted and the world shifted further, her vision blurring at the edges again. “Wake up, please!” she shrieked, chest tightening.

“Get her out of here! Now!” the doctor snapped, going to work on Peter’s dead arm, looking haggard. The smell made bile rise again in her mouth.

“You heard the man, honey,” Simon growled gruffly, dragging her away from Peter’s unconscious body with force, Arat watching with folded arms and a sick smirk. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Get your fucking hands off me!” Mallory growled in response, shoving at Simon like an elastic band had snapped inside her and stung. She felt rough arms wrap around her stomach instead, pulling her away, jerking her whole body backwards.

Simon groaned in frustration as she kicked back, struggling against his vice-like grip. “Okay, Jesus Christ, that’s enough now,” he ticked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Calm the fuck down and let that man do what he does. Unless you can grow limbs back for people, you’re useless.” She could feel his smile against her ear as he muttered, “I warned you, kiddo. Welcome to the real world.”

Mallory grunted in anger and frustration, letting go of herself just enough so Simon could drag her away from Peter’s slumped body. Arat shut the door to the med bay behind her, giving a sarcastic little wave before flipping her off.
“Fucking bitch,” Mal spat under her breath as Simon let go of her, her feet faltering backwards. Everything around her span out of control, her heart hammering at the ribcage, her body seeking every seeping bit of pain out and letting it all fuel her. Mallory cried out in anguish and kicked an iron railing repeatedly, imagining the damage she could do with Lucille in her sweaty hands – she could raise her own Hell, she could fight and fight and chip at the walls day by day so the house would come crumbling down.

“Yeah, yeah,” Simon muttered in reply, sounding bored as he caught his breath back. “We’re all fucking assholes, it’s all our fault, not yours.” He grabbed at her arm again, leading her back in the direction of her cell like he was walking a dog back to the kennel. “You were the one dumb enough to start a fight–”

“I didn’t–”

“Yeah you goddamn well did,” he snapped back, striding confidently along the walkway. “Just think about what the Hell you’re doing before you do it. Cos that back there?” Simon grunted, yanking Mallory as she turned at the sound of screamed pains. “He should be dead. Or you should, that’d be better. Negan’s the best offer you got, and he’s taking it easy on you, for whatever shitty reason, and you’re biting his hand off for feeding you.”

Mal swallowed at the thickness in her throat, letting Simon pull her back into her room as his rhetoric rattled in her brain, seeping through the cracks like it hadn’t before. She’d met far worse people than Negan in the apocalypse and eviscerated all of them, but – fuck – if there wasn’t something in her that wanted to tear her ex apart piece by piece until there was no more of him than a walking sack of bones.

“I’d rather that than standing in his shadow, scared to step out of line,” she whispered, her adrenaline gone. “I’m not a Saviour…”

“No, Princess, you most definitely are not,” Negan chuckled suddenly, making her jump out of her skin. He stepped out of her wash room with a shining, spotlessly clean Lucille, using a ratty towel to dry the shaft. “She apologise to Peter?”

“Yes. Broke my goddamn heart, too,” Simon replied, his jaw set a little harder as if he’d been rattled by Negan as well. “You need me to guard the door?”

Negan waved his hand dismissively. “Do I look like I need a fucking guard?” he said with a slight roll of his eyes. “Just go round up whoever’s left, finish what we were talking about this morning. And make sure Arat’s nose isn’t all bent out of shape,” he laughed at his own joke slowly, holding Lucille up to the light to inspect her crevices. “Since this one probably broke it with that pointy elbow.”

Simon chuckled too, letting his eyes roam down over Mallory once. “Arat lost that one. Radio if you need anything, boss.”

As his right-hand man stalked out, Mallory just stayed standing in the middle of the room, staring at Negan increduously as he methodically cleaned Lucille from hilt to head. He looked far too fucking put-together, clothes cleaner than she remembered from before, his hair slicked back again and didn’t that just piss her off.

“You are a fucking sight, Princess,” Negan said, voice calm and patient. The cloth rubbed over Lucille slowly. “You know, fresh blood’s really a bitch to clean. I gotta get it before it sets in the grooves or she won’t be the same. Biter blood? Now that’s different, that shit’s too thick to really set anywhere. I still have to bleach her after that, though, my poor baby. She doesn’t like being
You had to... clean her?” Mal asked quietly, her temper even and withdrawn. “In my sink?”

“My sink,” he replied, tossing her the cloth. “That’s better, isn’t it? Got Petey’s fingertip stuck in the wire so I had to get it out. You know how it is, getting dried flesh off anything.”

She dropped the rag on the desk and sucked in a lung full of fresh air, exhausted by his presence. “If you came here, expecting an apology for the fight, you’re not getting it.”

Negan chuckled and shook his head, setting Lucille down on the desk now that she was back to her full beauty. “Not an apology I’m waiting for, actually. I’m anticipating some kind of rebellion from you, now. Maybe grab a gun from someone and go apeshit everywhere like fucking Columbine? I had you pegged for that after I made you kiss my big, thick bat.” He grinned lasciviously but it fell when she didn’t so much as move. “Oh, come on, not even a half-hearted slap to my face? I’m being an asshole, I deserve a good smack.”

“You’d only enjoy it,” she said in defeat, wincing as she moved to the wash room, ignoring his presence. “Can’t you just leave me the fuck alone for once?” Mal’s voice broke a tiny bit, wrecked as she was of putting up a front of strength when she really didn’t feel any. “Why are you even here? To gloat? To rub it in my face?”

His smile faltered slightly at the catch in her voice. “I was a teensy bit worried about that beating you just took,” he grunted, following her into the wash room, though he lingered in the door. “You shouldn’t have poked at Arat like that. She’s too much like you, never gonna back down from a challenge.”

Calm settling over her, Mal nonetheless seethed in pain as she pulled off her shirt, not caring about Negan seeing her when he’d become intimate with every inch of her body anyway. Decency didn’t exist in the apocalypse and part of her wanted him to face the damage he’d done too, to look at every bruise, every scrape and cut in glorious gory detail.

“You think you know that much about me? About her?” she asked quietly, wanting so desperately to dip herself into a hot bath.

“Arat’s a survivor, same as you,” he replied, his eyes stuck on the back of her torso. “She’s been through Hell backwards doing cartwheels.”

“So’s everybody,” Mallory muttered bitterly. The plug in the sink allowed lukewarm water to fill the bowl, the blood flecks on broken ceramic dissolving into nothing. “D’you mind?” she asked, peering over her bruised, battered shoulder. “I can’t let anything get infected, remember?”

“That one nearly fucking is,” Negan said through a gritted jaw, nodding to the space between her shoulder blades. “Lucille got you good there, didn’t she?”

Mallory sighed as she reached her slender hand back to feel the cut just below her bra clasp; it was indeed hot to the touch and sore in a way that she’d not noticed before, her attention taken from her own body. “Fucksake...” she muttered, wincing when she poked the scrape with the tip of her finger.

“You forget to wash?” he mocked, a tension in his voice that made part of her wince.

Soaking a washcloth in the lukewarm water, Mal wrung the excess out before placing it over the swollen skin. “Not really a priority...” she stated, arching her back and stretching her arm enough to reach the awkward spot. Mallory managed to dab at the surface, sucking through her teeth as it stung her tender skin.
“God, would you just fucking let me do it if you’re gonna be a pussy about it.” he announced after her second attempt only made a slight dab at the sticky wound, Negan shucking off his leather jacket angrily as he stalked forwards. “Never thought I’d have to teach you how to treat an infected wound, it’s like having a fucking kid.”

Mal almost froze in place at the familiarity of having his fingers splayed out over her back, telling herself that whatever he was doing meant nothing to either one of them, cold and emotionless as she tried to make it. “Can’t be that bad,” she said, pulling away from him. “I can do it on my own, Negan.”

The man dropped his hands from her back and gave her a smile laden with frustration. “On your own, huh? Worked out real well so far, being on your own up here, letting cuts get infected…” he pulled her limp red hair away from the scrapes on her back, fingertips grazing the tops of her shoulders. “I keep lobbing shit at you and you take it, hit after hit after hit. Brings a fucking tear to my eye, it really does.” His voice was gravelled when he leant himself a little closer to her bare back, meeting her eyeline in the rusty window. “Arat was wrong - you’re not a Saviour, Princess, you’re far more like me than you care to fucking realise.”

She pulled away from Negan as if he had burned her too. “I am nothing like you,” she whispered, the cracks in her armour widening. “I never killed someone I didn’t have to.”

Negan just chuckled humourlessly, reaching to the sink in front of her for the washcloth. “Mallory, Mallory, there’s always lines you cross and reset after you cross them. I bet that, once upon a time, you said that you’d never kill anybody human. Then it goes to ‘I never killed someone I didn’t have to’. Next step is ‘If I didn’t do it, he’d get us all killed’. It’s just another step and another and another.” He dabbed the washcloth tenderly over her skin, not touching her directly beyond it. “It keeps going up a ladder, like you’re playing one long game of trying to remain human.”

Her skin shivered when water dripped down the facets of her back, curving with her spine, Mallory ignoring how right he was. “How am I having this conversation with you when you just… you just…”

“Just what?” Negan tested, raising his brow at her before going back to look at her cut. “Just took a baseball bat covered in barbed wire and smashed it repeatedly over your boyfriend’s hand until it was jello? That’s the long and short of it, sweetheart, and it’s the nicest thing I’ve done in a long-ass time.” He laughed at the look on her face and it made her stomach churn. “Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed every second of that but it doesn’t help that they all think I’m soft on you, Princess…”

“How is that soft?” Mallory asked, wincing as her back throbbed. Her fingers gripped the edge of the sink until they turned paler.

His breath was warm on her arm as he leant over to grab a tiny sliver of soap. “Cos it would have been his head if you were anybody else in the world. Hell, Mallory, have you even heard about the shit I’ve done?” he said it proudly, averting her hot, simmering glare. “I kill people if their friends even think about stepping out of place. And you go and body slam my tough motherfucker Arat to the ground and break her face, and I only took your boyfriend’s fucking hand in recompense?” Negan whistled low, laying the soapy cloth over her cut to soak the crusted flesh. “I got to save some face now, you know. Show them all how it is since you’re making me all soft and melty.”

“Why?” she said, her voice ragged through guilt and the pain at her back. “Why’d you have to do it like this? This is chaos, Negan, it’s not society, and it really isn’t fucking Sanctuary.”

Her heart jumped into her throat at the fiery look of his eyes, how they raged at her, mirrored in rust. “Chaos? I told you, lines, boundaries… they move. This isn’t chaos anymore, this just a new kind of
order and it’s the only one they all know. People are animals, Mallory, you’ve seen it. People like you put down the dangerous animals after they’d already done damage, and I’m taking them down before, that’s the only motherfucking difference here. I’m taking the hits they’re too scared to make. Or…” he switched tone, lathing the cloth over her cut. “Or maybe I just got a thirst for it now. It’s kind of fun, after a while. Watching the tough nuts take the hits, try to talk with half a brain on the ground. They never beg for mercy anymore, I kind of miss that.”

Her eyes screwed shut as her back started to sting in pain at the soap being pushed into her cut, drawing out the crud and the filth inside. She wanted to blank out Peter’s eyes, his screams and the taste of his blood and took the pain Negan gave her. “You’re a monster,” she gasped as he pressed harder, letting her feel it seep out.

“I have to be, Princess, so the rest of them fucking aren’t. Before he met me, that sniper friend of yours took a bomb to my people. Snuck up on them, killed them, and didn’t even blink twice about it. I had a lapse in my judgement of that assfuck and it cost people their lives. I took a few of his friends, turned them into sushi and then he was cowering at my fucking feet. Nobody, nobody else fucking died, Mallory. He took dozens of lives that were my fucking responsibility and I made it so he’d never take any more. I know it’s just a matter of time before he finds his balls again and takes that shot but we’ll be ready. I just hope he doesn’t kill you first; it wouldn’t end well for him if he did.” Finally relenting, Negan released the pressure from her back.

Mal’s shoulders sagged just a little, her fingers flexing on the sink. “It doesn’t have to be like this. I don’t want anyone to live in fear.”

Negan scoffed and rinsed out the cloth again, shaking his head. “Fuck me, when were you this naïve and stupid? Fear keeps your senses sharp.”

“No, no, it fucking doesn’t, it makes you do stupid things, take dumb choices,” she protested quietly, relaxing as his palm settled on her sore shoulder blade, the ache somehow alleviated. “I thought I could keep everybody safe and look what happened, look where I wound up.”

Her eyes watered as he stepped imperceptibly closer to her nearly bare back, thumb swiping across untainted skin. “Back with me. That’s where your fucking choices got you, Princess.”

Looking back on it, the decisions she’d fought for and the ones she’d demanded, Mallory couldn’t say in all certainty that ego wasn’t a factor. She thought she knew so much more about the world, and they had all looked up to her the way that Negan’s Saviours looked to him now – for guidance and leadership, for the path with the biggest reward. Her ego had clouded her choices in a way that his hadn’t – his ego had brought safety when hers had brought death.

“You don’t know what happened, though, like I don’t know what happened to turn you into this,” she looked away, back down into the sink with dirty water stagnating as she stood there. “The shitty thing in all this is that you’re fucking right,” she said, wiping a tear angrily from her cheek. “If I was like you, even a little bit, they’d be fucking alive right now, they’d be safe downstairs and maybe I’d be with them.”

Both were silent for a moment, though she could feel the smile and pride in his body behind her, through the way he kept his fingertips still. Her body broke into goose bumps when he shifted the hand to her clothed hip for a fraction of a moment before he rinsed the cloth again.

“I lied to you,” he muttered quietly, avoiding her eyes, a faint trace of that talked-about fear in his gruff voice. “Before, I lied when I said I didn’t look for you. I did look for you, in the beginning. I went to your parents’ house and your apartment but... well, you know.”
Mallory didn’t know what to say. How could she believe him when he would say anything for her compliance? “You did?”

“Youp,” he said, popping the word on his lips. “Place was ransacked, looked like. I saw your Mom’s body in the living room but nobody else was there. Went to your apartment and it was covered in dust, scratches around the door handle, like someone tried to break in.”

Her voice caught in her throat. “You saw her?”

“Yeah, I saw her,” Negan replied quietly. “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Mal jerked away from him suddenly, turning around and wrapping an arm around her stomach. “Why did you come looking for me?” she said angrily, deflecting the pain she felt still about her mother. “Why did you even try?!”

Negan was calmer, stepping back to give her space enough to move again. “I had nobody else, you know that. Lucille was already fucking dead, and she was it. When people tell you their whole family was wiped out by this bullshit apocalypse, it doesn’t usually mean just one fucking person, it’s kids, it’s friends and parents and neighbours. I had Lucille and I had you and that was it. Soon as I saw those scratches, I knew you were long gone, I just couldn’t stick around to see if that meant dead or alive.”

“So, you fucking left?” she argued incredulously. “Am I meant to be touched that you took a whistle-stop tour of my pain on your way to establishing modern slavery?”

He blinked before he burst into laughter, eyes crinkling at the sides. “Fucking drama queen, knew the guilt angle wouldn’t last long with you, Mallory.” He picked up her ruined shirt from the floor and looked at it with weary disgust before tossing it to her. “What the fuck happened to your stomach?” he asked as she lifted her arm to catch the shirt, eyes snapping to just above her bellybutton.

Truthfully, Mal had forgotten about her scars, long giving up pretence of hiding them from anyone. “I got shot with a shotgun. There’s also a scar on my thigh from where a guy stabbed me to get the last can of chilli in a mini-mart, maybe you wanna see that too? Oh, and one of my now-dead friends had to pull broken glass from my foot when a court building blew up with half of my group inside. I got scars, Negan, you got scars?”

“Not like that,” he replied, his eyes fixated on her dimpled skin as he glazed over. “You’ve got more than most I see come through here. Sorry for staring at you like this, but all this time I had some idea of you in my head, I was remembering the person you were before, every time I touched you. Different skin now, though, isn’t it? All those scars and dimples and rough skin.”

“Is it that ugly?” she asked, pulling her shirt back on with a rough tug. “Thought I did a pretty good job of sewing all those holes up by myself.” Mal realised he was still staring at her torso and thought she might as well have been naked. “I got those at the start, Negan. When everybody was panicking, and screaming, before they realised that we’re better together than apart, I took a hit in the gut and went down hard. Not my last lucky escape.”

He was quiet again, a pulsing of the vein in his neck standing out. “I should have looked harder for you. Maybe you wouldn’t have got shot or stabbed in the first fucking place.”

“I’d never have gone with you anyway,” Mal replied, looking away from him as she drained the sink, realising she only had a day or two’s soap left that she wasn’t wasting on a scrape.
“I’m too soft on you,” he said with a hard set in his jaw for a moment before he broke into an empty smile. “You really can fucking take a pounding and come out on top. Arat should have known better than to try it on with a badass motherfucker like you, she shouldn’t have even touched you.”

A spark tingled in her brain for a moment. A realisation clattering around her head. Arat had been snarking remarks at her, trying to get a rise from Mallory and she’d only parried the verbal blows back before she snapped. “Did you tell her not to hurt me?”

He growled then, caught out. “Girl’s got an ego the same as yours, wouldn’t take no for a fucking answer.” Negan leant back against the doorjamb, just looking Mallory up and down. “I gotta say, Princess, you and that attitude of yours, you’re driving me fucking insane. Amber can’t walk straight in the mornings now,” he proclaimed pridefully.

“Get that idea out of your head,” she said, feeling her nerves settle back into a hard layer around her. “We were always a bad idea from the start, no use dwelling on the past now, Negan.”

He scoffed and grabbed his jacket where he’d dropped it on the floor, walking back out of the room. “Who are you trying to kid, Mallory?” he asked, grinning ear-to-ear. “I seem to remember a lot of begging and pining, and you telling me I was the best sex you ever had in your life.”

Following him tentatively, she kept her distance. “That wasn’t a lie. Doesn’t mean it was a good idea, I was young and so fucking dumb about you. I should have seen that dead heart from the beginning. It was my mistake, and I’m the one paying for it.”

“Oh, you’re just bitter cos he can’t make you come like I can.” Negan slipped back into lewdness, shrugging on his jacket again.

Rolling her eyes, Mallory rubbed her neck in exhaustion, spent and tired of being near him as if he drained her life away. “For the last time, Peter’s not my fucking boyfriend. I’ve not been in a goddamn relationship since you turned your fucking back on me. I don’t get burned more than once, Negan, and you got me good.”

She kept her distance as he picked Lucille up from the desk, holding her down by his leg. Mallory watched that pride swell in his chest as his costume slipped back on, tongue rolling lazily over his bottom lip and eyes dark, almost playful. Her body tingled at the way he looked over her now, like his name was stamped all over her.

“Well ain’t that a nice little piece of information to warm me up at night…” his eyes flickered over her from top to bottom. “Thought everybody was fucking now. Seems threat of death makes everybody want to celebrate being alive.”

“Call it experience,” she said, waiting for him to leave her in peace so she could collapse in a heap and try not to think about Peter. “Peter’s a good man, underneath it all, he’s just scared of what you’ll do. Now he doesn’t trust me, now he hates me. You win, I guess. I’m alone again, because of you.” Peter wouldn’t forget what she’d done, Mallory was sure. Nothing was more frightening than desperation and a last resort.

“Love’s not worth your time, Princess,” Negan announced, like he had shrugged off her pain like a fly. “It makes you weak, and it makes you stupid. I saw it everywhere, people in groups, loving each other so much that it made them easy. You’re the tough nut I can’t crack and now I know why. You don’t love that dipshit, you can’t love full stop. Smart girl, keep it up.”

She was about to bring up his wives when she bit her tongue, holding back her opinion. She knew what he would say anyway; that he didn’t love any of them, that they were warm, willing bodies he
could slide into. Status afforded him that privilege, a beautiful woman or five to call upon. He wouldn’t have allowed himself to love any of them – or her – because it was weakness.

“I’m not just a pretty face,” she muttered sarcastically, keeping her distance from him.

“You were always beautiful, Mallory,” Negan said in reply, walking up to her with a confident stride and Lucille stuck to his hand. “You make me crazy, but I fucking love that, I always did. Now, if anyone touches you again, I’ll take their hand too.” He was barely an inch from her now, pulling her crossed arms apart with a soft tug. “I’ll show you the rest of this place myself tomorrow, see how many hands I can turn to mush. Can’t trust you not to get in another fight, can I?” he asked rhetorically, looking at her bruised knuckles.

Her breath caught in her throat as he placed an almost tender kiss to the back of her hand. “If Peter dies,” she whispered, trying to cover her shivers. “I’ll come for you and you’ll have to kill me yourself.”

“Don’t doubt it,” Negan muttered, winking softly before he strode out of the room.

It wasn’t until the footsteps faded away that Mallory sank to the floor, her body giving up in exhausted angst. Maybe Peter was right; the only way to beat Negan was to let him win, to let him be weak and take her back so she could gain some control. She stared at the cracks in the plaster of the wall next to her, a hand on her flat, scarred stomach.

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“When was the last time you ever just stopped thinking?” he had asked her one evening, kneeling on his own bed with her foot in his hands, rubbing deep circles into her heel to draw out the tiny aches.

Negan hadn’t given up on getting her to forgive him again, despite the walls that she’d built around herself in protection. Ever since their fight, she’d tried her hardest to stop that quickening of her heart when he kissed her or smiled at her. The man made her laugh, and made her into a lot of other things too. Mallory’s walls protected her from the inevitable time when everything would change and she’d be alone again, wondering what the Hell had gone wrong. Her relationships never lasted, and this wouldn’t either, but it didn’t mean she’d never feel the aftershocks of the earthquake.

“Is it even possible to stop thinking?” she replied with a victorious little smirk, pushing herself up on her elbows to get a better look at him. “You try it, see how far you get and call me if you figure it out because I have no fucking clue.”

Moving to get up, he instead yanked on her ankle and watched her fall backwards onto the bed again, bouncing on the mattress like a child. “Where’d you think you’re going?”

“It’s like 2 o’clock in the goddamn morning,” she said with a whine, turning and looking at an alarm clock blinking on the side of the bed she’d tried to ignore. “I’m gonna take a shower and get home, I have a private garden party to work tomorrow at 4.”

Negan pretended to think about it for a second before shaking his head. “Nope. Not gonna happen tonight. I haven’t seen you for a fucking week since you took that trip, I’m not letting you off that easy,” he laughed, kissing her instep and making her giggle. “It’s been for-fucking-ever. I had to put up with working without a distraction in a tight skirt for a whole week, you owe me.”

Mallory scoffed but didn’t try to get up again when he kissed her ankle. “It was a weekend in Hershey, Pennsylvania with my Mom, not a month in fucking Calcutta.” He pressed another sweet,
pointed kiss to the skin of her calf, looking at her with those dangerous eyes. “All we did was eat chocolate for four days and talked in the car.”

“And to make it up to me,” he smirked, kissing up her leg, leaping his kisses down the warm skin until he reached her knee. “You aren’t going anywhere.” Negan leaned over her and reached down the side of the bed, Mal confused as to why until his hand wrapped around a cord and tugged. The alarm clock shut off in an instant, and he grinned widely. “Problem solved.”

“Idiot,” Mal laughed, before kissing him deeply, cradling his head in her hand. “I have to leave eventually, can’t keep me naked in your bed all week just because you missed me.”

There was a flash of something across his face before a barrier was back down, and a more measured smile in its place. “I did miss you, Mallory,” he said, running his lips down her collar bone and over her chest. “Don’t fucking leave without telling me again,” the man growled into her sternum, his hands around her waist as he purposefully avoided her breasts.

Fingers spread in his hair and played, her eyes darting upwards so she couldn’t see his face, putting up another wall instead. “I’m sorry. It was kinda sprung on me at the last moment, you know, mother-daughter road trip…” she trailed off, knowing her excuses were simply that. “Do I have to make it up to you?”

“Yes, you fucking have to make it up to me,” he had murmured, the pressure of his hands on her waist increasing. “I spent a weekend on my own, rattling around, going out of my fucking mind.”

Mallory tried to keep herself from smiling but it tugged at the corner of her lips nonetheless, the image of him in his own home just waiting on her to get back so he could get his hands on her. Why he was alone, she didn’t want to know. “Okay. What would recompense you for a weekend with no sex?”

Negan looked back up at her then, the weariness and longing back and unguarded. “A bath,” he stated simply. “Let’s take a fucking bath.”

Whatever Mallory had expected him to say, it hadn’t been that. She laughed aloud, thinking he must have been joking. “What?” she chuckled, levering herself up a little. “Big, bad old Negan actually wants to soak in bubbles and let his cares float away?”

He ignored her reaction and tugged her up from the bed as he stood, unashamed. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Princess. Nothing better than a bath full of bubbles and a hot, naked lady sitting in my lap. You really oughta look at your stereotyping of manliness. Someone’s been reading too much fucking Hemingway.”

That was how Mallory found herself a half hour later; encased in soft, creamy bubbles that were tinged with a scent that lingered in the air, a curious mix of floral and fruit, stronger than normal bubble bath usually was. Negan had taken down a pretty bottle specifically, tipping half of it under the running water until the foam was thick and the smell just enough to make her feel like she was floating on a river of lillies instead of suffocating on lavender pot pourri. The water was just the perfect side of hot, like she liked though he complained he was being boiled alive. Mal just laughed and played with the mesh of bubbles floating around them.

“I can’t remember the last time I had a bath,” she murmured, having settled back into his chest, letting the water in the huge tub pool around her body and wash away her aches. “Probably not since I moved out of home at least. Probably… ten years or something.”

There was a soft chuckle behind her, fingertips lifting from the water and running up and down her
arm, washing the soapiness away. “I’m usually the 10-minute shower guy,” he admitted, shifting so she had more room. “There’s just something about having a wet woman in your arms, though, smelling like she’s fucking Aphrodite on the sea foam,” he murmured against her temple, looking down as if he was mapping the contours of her body. “View’s fucking awesome too. I could motorboat the fuck out of you right now.”

Mal ignored him, biting back a laugh. Negan’s voice faded away into nothing as she lay in the water, able to stretch out as much as she wanted, her legs not reaching the faucet end of the tub. How he afforded this bathtub – even the whole fucking house – was beyond her comprehension. The furniture was quality stuff, the bed soft and solid, bathroom beyond means… the whole house was a domestic suburban dream, a dream he didn’t… fit. Negan, as far as she knew, was a teacher and this place wasn’t bought on that salary; no, the only thing that seemed off about his own house was him.

A steady heart beating against her back was comforting in a way she hadn’t expected. His arms didn’t feel cloying and his touches on her silky, wet skin were enough to make her feel adored. Mallory sighed softly. “I concede. This was the best idea you’ve ever had, including that time we had sex in the stationery closet at school.”

Negan trailed his fingertip around the bottom curve of her breast, back and forth, “I have plenty of fucking good ideas, Mallory,” he replied, voice dreamily soft, like it was in her memories. “I could spend hours doing this, lying here with you.”

“We don’t have hours,” Mal muttered, closing her eyes for a moment. His fingers trailed over her body from collar to stomach, simply wandering lazy paths that she missed and he must have missed too. “We have until she comes back tomorrow morning.”

He stiffened slightly behind her, gruff. “You know how to fucking kill a mood.”

Mal winced at that but pressed on regardless. “It’s true,” she said, her head still swirling with guilt over Lucille. “This is loaned-out time, I have to get out of here and go home eventually.”

“She knows how it works,” Negan grunted out, cupping her breast with his palm and squeezing softly. “Lucille… you don’t have to worry about her hating you or some bullshit like that. She knows what I’m like and it’s fine between us. She’s my wife, Mallory, she’s not stupid. I told her about you a long time ago.”

He kissed her shoulder tenderly and her eyes slid open, feeling that pit in her stomach widen enough so she felt sick again. “What did you say?”

He groaned in frustration, slipping his hand down into the water, pulling her thighs apart. “I told her that I saw a woman,” he muttered, making her inhale sharply when she felt his fingers softly probe between her thighs. “This bright, brilliant, spoiled little Princess who was getting under my skin. You had on this plaid, pleated skirt and those fucking legs of yours went on for days…”

Frowning in confusion, she turned her head to look at him. “I wasn’t wearing that when I met you.”

His fingers arrested their movements and he smirked. “Might be because I saw you before you met me. When you came to the school for your interview with Principal Douchebag, I saw you waiting outside, jitterbugging around like you were nervous, wearing that schoolgirl skirt. Fuck me, it was like boner at first sight, baby.”

“Don’t call me ba-” her words broke into a whine as he rubbed at her clit softly with a single fingertip.
“I’m telling the story, don’t fucking interrupt me,” Negan growled against her ear. “Like I said, you were sitting outside that dickhead’s office, tapping that foot up and down so your whole fucking body was jiggling.” He let out another growl and a shift of her hips and she felt him hard against the small of her back. “Looking like butter wouldn’t melt, and fuck, those pouty lips painted up that nice sweet pink colour. You knew who was interviewing you, didn’t you? Thought you’d grease the wheel a little with that old perverts?”

Mal grabbed at Negan’s wrist as he teased her beneath the water, her heart racing. “I fucking did not.”

“Yes, you fucking did!” he mocked, “I even saw you perk up your tits so he’d hire you. Princess, it was love at first fucking sight. Innocent and sweet on the outside, playing the game, dressing to fucking impress. You were mine before you even said a fucking word, I was always gonna try it on with you.”

He pinched her clit and she yelped, making water slosh around as she jumped. “Ass!” Mal chuckled despite herself, catching her breath again as he relented. “So, what, you told Lucille about how you wanted to fuck another girl?”

“Yes,” he replied nonchalantly, using his other hand to pinch at her nipple. “She knew my type anyway. I like ’em fiery like you, willing to give as good as they get.”

Mallory didn’t know which way to turn, whether to be flattered or outraged and her body betrayed her again when he sank two thick, demanding fingers into her tight pussy suddenly, stretching her enough to hurt after their night of freedom in his marital bed. “Fucking fuck…”

“Like that,” Negan said raggedly, shifting her body closer to his. “That was all I could think about for fucking weeks until your classes started, Mallory. I thought about what the sound of your voice was like, if that red hair was real, whether you’d even be fucking receptive to the idea. Lucille knew I was different after you came into my life, and that she couldn’t stop me from doing it again. I’m a fucking asshole, Mallory, it’s who she married. I love her in ways that that you can’t understand.”

Her head fell back against his chest as he played with her body, his mouth on its own run while her throat was clogged between pain and pleasure, feeling her heart break as her body told her to go another way. “Negan…” she panted, lifting a leg from the water to rest on the ledge of the bath. “I can’t keep it up…”

“You can,” he growled and pumped his fingers slower, dragging his rough fingertips over every crevice inside her cunt. “You fucking can and you fucking will. You feel bad, I get that, Princess. Guilt’s not gonna change how you feel, though, is it? Just take pleasure in life where you can cos it’s all gonna end someday.”

Both of them knew, Mallory thought, that the day would come where one would walk away from the other and that would be that. He took his frustrations about Lucille and her cancer out on Mallory’s body, crumpled whatever he felt and funnelled it into all he wanted from her instead. She didn’t know if any of it was true but she desperately wanted him, wanted to believe him, wanted to be the one he confided in, even without him saying a word about it.

“I don’t want it to,” she panted and cried out as he pressed a thumb to her clit. “Can’t end.”

“Shh,” he said, latching his lips onto her neck. “You’re still mine, Mallory. Nothing changes that. Twenty, thirty years from now when I’m a fucking geriatric old asshole in some nursing home with a tube in my dick, I’m still gonna be thinking about you. Can’t forget how you taste, Princess, you’re seared into my goddamn mind. You’re too good for me, I know that. I won’t stop.”
Her body seized as she came around his fingers, clamping down with a brutal force, a cry ripped from the base of her throat. He watched her carefully, how her body sought out his and begged for more without words, tugging him back to where he belonged; with her.

“Negan,” Mallory panted as he slowly slid his fingers out after a few moments, her heart hammering. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this.”

His sigh felt like an assent, Negan giving up part of what he held back. “That’s… that’s up to you.” He granted out, sounding like he was trying desperately to hold his head above water. “Your choice. I won’t ever walk away from you again, Princess, not if you don’t want me to…” when she didn’t say anything, he kissed her shoulder in apology. “I can’t say I’ll love you like I love my wife but I’ll be here until you decide you don’t want me anymore.”

The smell of the bath water faded away slightly as the warmth seeped into her bones. Mallory shifted her body to lie flat against his, his arms wrapping around her stomach gently, encasing her.

“Oh kay,” she whispered, knowing somehow that this would be the worst decision she’d ever made, to not walk away right now and leave with a remnant of her dignity. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: trying to read your own stuff to find a character voice again is just awful. I found like twenty billion things I'd change. Is anyone willing to be a Beta or know a good one?

If you like to, I'd love it if you left me a comment here on come talk to be on my Tumblr page. I can't guarantee another chapter next weekend because my best friend is flying in from Connecticut on Monday to spend two weeks here but I hope you'll stick with me. I'm not quitting on my plan.

Thank you! <3
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Mallory comes to a singular choice in what it means to take down Negan - she can't destroy his people, she can't take down his Sanctuary but she can do one thing.

No real warnings here and no smut in this chapter (don't hate me) and flashbacks as always are indicated by blocks of italic text.

Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope everyone missed me just a little bit. My vacation is sadly well and truly over but it does mean that I can get back to Negan and Mallory and their domestic bliss. There is also a tiny, tiny shout-out to one of my very favourite Negan fics out there - 10 points to anyone who spots it.

First I have say thank you for all your lovely comments so far - they have definitely kept me going through the drought when I was scratching my head at how to write this thing. Please keep them coming!

I have to also say a big personal thank you to my new beta Mayboo13 for all her incredible help in getting this particular chapter into shape. Honestly, if you'd seen the first draft of this one, you'd think I'd lost my mind. Also thanks to my friend Amy for giving this a once-over and telling me it didn't need any sex scenes.

On with the show...

Night seven. Nightmare number twelve.

Blood – dripping, thick, angry blood – stained her shirt as something grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, a faceless head of grey skin that split into a grotesque smile, an arm reduced to a bloodied stump and mass of quivering flesh below it, the stench burning her nostrils, fetidly leeching all the life from her lungs. Hands scrabbled and a voice screamed, torn from her throat when it started to rip into her.

Everything was infected with darkness, clammy, rotten hands seized at her arms and shredded the muscle from her bone, ripping her to pieces of pustular sinew and meat before her own eyes. She shrieked, shoving at the thing with her half-eaten body. It had desperate claws, bones scraping against hers. Laughter - sinister, raucous, childish laughter and dark eyes flashed until she suddenly ripped a knife from its head, its face revealed in gory detail.

They were consumed by bright, pale light. His eyes oozed as she pulled the blade out with a heft, the
wet sucking sound reverberating in her mind. Hard lips pressed to her own and swallowed her whole.

Mallory’s eyes snapped open, her skin prickling with sweat and heat as her lungs filled with blessedly clean air. All of it hit her at once – the lingering aches and pains drowning her as she woke up from her nightmare, heart thundering in her chest and rattling her limbs. Before he had thrown her back into her cage again, Mal hadn’t dreamt anything – good or bad – in so long that it had taken her more than a few breaths each time to remember where she was and who she was, even as her hand still shook, even as she wiped beads of sweat from her forehead.

Sitting up and shoving the damp bedsheets from her body, all of her hoped beyond hope that she hadn’t been loud enough for anyone to hear again – it would be worse to admit that she still had those kinds of nightmares, the ones that she considered weakness. Biters were second nature, they were common as rats, another plague on the earth that kept people sharp. Why she had to have bad dreams now, she had no idea.

Light had yet to break through her tiny window but there was a relief in being bathed in darkness and silence still, the entire place dead in the middle of the night like it was just another temporary home. For a week – she thought it was a week – she hadn’t spoken to anyone. She hadn’t seen anything except the walls around her: books had been stripped away, art ripped from the walls until she had a bed and a desk and that was it. Sometimes she heard the normal people, or Arat or Simon or another guard talking and laughing, she heard Negan next door chatting to his wife, and their hushed whispers and sweet epithets too low for her to really make out.

Mallory wasn’t getting used to the isolation she’d feared, even when silence made it easier to think that nothing had changed and she was safe. In the dark and the quiet, she could pretend that the world was just dormant, another night of unbroken peace and ease. Then minutes stretched to hours, turning to days without end.

Sleep wouldn’t come back any time soon now either, so she levered herself up and untangled aching limbs from the sheets, sitting up in her bed. Except, as Mallory reminded herself, it wasn’t really hers. Nothing in the room was hers, except for her own body and the photograph hidden inside the mattress stuffing, pushed inside a tiny hole she’d found in a seam. That photo was too-worn now, she supposed. Every moment Mal imagined what her baby might have looked like, what colour its eyes might have been, she felt just a little more broken. She’d survived so long without that pushing into her head and now that he had locked her away for a week with nothing, she had only that image to dwell on. She hoped it had been a girl but that future had been taken away from her a long time ago; it didn’t achieve anything, dreaming of her baby.

That past life was fading – faces of her mother and her father, of her friends and the music of her grandmother, laughter of people she knew. No matter how much Mallory had strained to recover her memories of home, crudely describing them to people along the way, they had slipped away from her vivid mind. She would go over the same process repeatedly, when people in her groups died and others joined, an endless cycle of story that felt more like a lie the more she told it, playing Chinese whispers by herself. Negan was the only memory that hadn’t faded completely before she had met him again and now it was a cruel taunt to what she’d lost; a middle finger being waved at her by her own brain because she wasn’t allowed to remember people who loved her, just the asshole who had betrayed her.

A soft sigh escaped her lips as Mallory forced herself to move from the bed, the lingering sting between her shoulder blades lessening as she stretched out, joints popping into place when she stepped gingerly into the washroom to look at herself, almost reluctant to see what was there.
Poking at her own cheeks, there was a weird contrast between her yellowed bruises and scabbed cuts and the new pillowed feeling of her skin that had come from eating actual food; what was once dry, chapped and wind-chafed skin was soft and smooth, new and healing better than before. She even looked like a human being again – pink and warm instead of sunken and grey. Food wasn’t just fuel, it was prepared by someone who obviously cared about what they were making – two days ago, there had been a tart and sweet berry crisp with honey that had made her weep with joy. She had tasted the ghost of it on her tongue ever since.

Mal rubbed vaguely-cold water into her eyes and washed the vestiges of her sleepless nights away down the drain. There’d be more nightmares again, she was sure, but they hadn’t broken her so far – why would one now? She could deal with whatever Negan or anyone cared to throw at her.

She waited for the sun to rise.

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“Did you miss me, sweet peach?” Negan declared through her locked door a few hours later, when her head was clearer and the sky much lighter. “I’ve been the rudest of assholes in not giving you the full and proper introductions around this place.” She heard rattling keys and panic rise in her stomach as she frantically stuffed the sonogram back into the mattress just in time for the door to swing open dramatically and bounce off the wall.

“Negan?” she asked, sitting up straighter. Mal knew she looked like a hot mess and didn’t care because it didn’t matter.

He stood in front of her like Jesus himself had risen from the dead, arms spread out wide in a friendly gesture that wasn’t friendly at all. “You and I are going to have some awesome fun today! I thought you might be going a little coo-coo-bananas in here, so I am your fucking entourage.” He waltzed forward and grabbed her arm unceremoniously, dragging her from the bed. “Get your fucking boots on, Mallory, fucking Hell. You look like Don King dragged through a bush backwards through Bitters.”

Silencing her tongue, Mallory pulled on her boots slowly just to antagonise him. As soon as she looked up again, he was slinging an arm around her stiffening shoulders, the smell of his cologne or whatever it was wafting through the air like a warning. Mallory kept her own arms wrapped firmly around her chest in a silent protest, the sleeves of her sweatshirt tugged down.

“It’s not like I’ve had much of a chance to get out, since I spend my nights away from everybody,” she pointed out sarcastically. “Makes it hard to be socially included. It’s important for me to fit in, Negan, really. A week’s a long fucking time to stare at the ceiling.

“Could not agree more,” he replied in a chipper tone as he slipped his arm from around her shoulder, pulling her own from her chest and taking her hand in his instead. Mallory ruffled, her back straightening when he gripped her as tightly as he would Lucille. “It’s fucking done the world of good for my fucking reputation though,” he laughed and her eyes flared in flat-out-fire. “I am no longer a melting little marshmallow for my redhead girl. I owe you for that.”

“Glad to be of service to you,” she said, trying not to explode.

“I think you’re starting to smell though, and the first thing we normally do for newbies – after taking half their shit,” he chuckled “– is introductions and the all-star tour. I haven’t even let you say hello to anybody, have I?”

Mal resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him, instead settling for more sarcasm. “Hey, d’you think
maybe that’s why they all hate me so much? I thought they were jealous of my new digs.”

Nonplussed, he carried on, pulling her behind him like one of those old-fashioned toys. “No, Mallory, it’s totally your hair. Not everybody can pull off that colour in the apocalypse.” His fingers squeezed around hers in admonishment, begging her to step out of line again as they passed a guard. Her lips clamped shut. “It won’t take too long and there might even be a surprise waiting for you. Can you guess what the surprise is?”

It said a lot about her that her first thought was that it’d be something fucking awful – maybe he’d skinned Peter or gone back for her mother’s corpse and strung it up on the roof as a flag. His surprises weren’t really ones she wanted these days.

“Is it a lollipop?” Mallory said quietly, not wanting to push her limits, or his, too far to deserve a whacking.

His dark eyes sparkled in mirth. “No, but I can give you something to suck on later if you want.”

“Well that one’s my fault,” she mumbled to herself.

Negan walked her down another set of metal stairs, the railing shaking with his booted thuds until she could hear life. There were voices, stilted but happy laughter and the sound of humanity, of normality, that grew louder to more they walked towards it.

“First stop’s gonna be the kitchen. Can’t you just smell that fucking bread cooking?” Negan said, answering a question she hadn’t asked. “Swear to Jesus himself, tastes better than it used to from that Kroger.”

There was a nervousness in her stomach suddenly as the noises grew louder, Negan pushing open a door with frosted glass and chipped wood and everything stopped. All the sounds vanished from the vast room almost instantly as they stepped inside; everyone in the canteen-like kitchen suddenly dropped to their knees at the sight of their all-glorious, fearless leader and his pet. Her eyes darted around, people and faces she didn’t know looking back up at her with expressions ranging from curiosity to disgust to nonchalance. It was unnerving to be the only one besides Negan to be standing even as she refused to kneel for him.

The man himself simply gestured with his free hand and everybody got back onto their feet, returning to their jobs – she noticed there was no more talking, no more laughing, like he had sucked the life from the room and put it on a ventilator to keep it barely alive.

“Does everybody do that all the time?” she said as Negan was presented with a tray of fresh baked bread, still steaming slightly. Her mouth watered. “The kneeling has to cut into productivity.”

Picking a roll before the young boy ran off, he tore off a chunk and offered it to Mallory before taking her hand once more, seemingly unwilling to let go for more than a moment lest she run. “I’m willing to sacrifice a little productivity for some fucking appreciation,” he grumbled with his mouth full.

“How many people live here?” she asked, reluctantly taking a bite of the bread; it was chewy, but warm and good and smelt too much of Thanksgiving at home. She ate most of it within a minute, her stomach achingly empty.

“Fucked if I know,” he replied. “Don’t keep count; people come in, people die… we aren’t exactly that fucking choosy. Hell, we kept you and that dickweed up in the med bay.”

Mallory felt another stab: so Peter was still in the makeshift hospital, probably seething and full of
bitterness in her direction. Mal slipped her eyes away from Negan’s, staring endlessly at the floor. “You don’t know the name of anyone here, do you?” she asked, looking back up at him after composing herself. “If you can even remember one, I’d be surprised.”

“That tall son of a bitch is Steve,” Negan gestured randomly behind him, not waiting to defend himself from her accusation. “Nice guy, kind of dumb sometimes but his girl loves him so that’s all that matters, right? Plus, he knows how to make good home brew.”

Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile or outright laugh. “That’s such bullshit, Negan.”

Rolling his eyes, he whistled at the tall guy, who came over almost instantly, nearly tripping over his own gangly limbs. How this giant had survived hordes of Biters without attracting attention and getting eaten, she didn’t know.

“Introduce yourself to Mallory, tell her what you do here,” Negan ordered lazily, chewing another hunk of bread from his roll.

The guy and his wide eyes looked almost scared to answer, piping up after a moment. “M…my name is Steve, ma’am, I look after the yeast cultures for the bread and I brew some beer. Working on a nice batch of bourbon now,” he said in a thick accent, maybe Kentucky given the drink he was making. “Another couple weeks and it’ll be ready, sir,” he added to Negan. Mallory felt the bread heavy in her gut: Negan couldn’t know everybody and the idea of it being possible made her bristle.

“That’s my guy,” Negan grinned, eating the last of his bread. “My kitchen MVP. Now, fuck off back to work.

It was amazing how quickly Steve scurried away, burned by the friendliness shown by his boss. “I take it that guy was a plant?” Mal asked after a moment of quiet.

He simply laughed and lead her back out of the room, the talking resuming as they walked through a different exit, strolling through the whole kitchen and watching the people. “Jesus, you really hate to fucking lose, don’t you?” he asked, shaking his head. “Can’t even begin to think that maybe I do actually give a shit about something.”

Mal had another easy retort on her tongue when he tugged on her hand almost painfully and pulled her along. “Okay, fine, fuck, you know people,” she admitted reluctantly. “Doesn’t mean they like you. There’s a difference between respect and making people so scared of you that they go silent in your presence.”

“Yeah, I’m the big bad wolf, baby,” he replied almost proudly, taking her down another wide hallway towards large, double doors. “I’m an asshole, I’m a vicious psychopathic, murdering son of a bitch for feeding all these people,” he muttered, parroting every attack she had against him. “But listen. Just fucking stop, Princess; stop talking and listen. It’s time for your surprise… and I really can’t fucking wait til you see what I got for you.”

She could hear it between the beats of her heart, so clear that every other thing fell away to the sides. Piano keys were twinkling, juvenile as someone tried to play Chopsticks. Negan seamlessly let her hand go and she stood frozen to the spot, her eyes pallid and trained on the object set back from mismatched picnic tables. He simply watched her face and broke into a tiny, twisted smile, one of victory and empathy. Just looking at the damn thing, it brought it all back. The last time Mallory had set a finger on a piano key was his bedroom and the world had spun too far out of control. Her fingers twitched uncomfortably, only missing his hand now that she was faced with his so-called present.
It was a joke. It was all a fucking joke.

“Is that-”

“Oh, I know. I’m far too fucking kind,” he replied quietly, the feeling grazing her neck even as he stood back. “I had some guys bring it down from upstairs, it’s all I been hearing for days now, that fucking racket. Chopsticks and motherfucking Für Elise and random shit I really don’t care to hear anymore. Nobody can play except you, right?” Negan asked her almost mockingly. “So, get in there and play something. I want you to.”

Every time even a bad note was played, it was like her whole brain fired up every synapse, the good memories that had faded and the new bad ones criss-crossing until she didn’t know how to feel.

“Is this a test?” she muttered, tearing her eyes away from the piano and back to its rightful owner.

“It’s a gift,” Negan replied, bringing his hands up to squeeze both her shoulders and push her forwards. “You love pianos, Mallory. It’s not a trick; I just want you to fucking play.”

Smiling faces and happy memories flooded her back in and drowned her, drawing her in towards the large space full of benches and children’s toys, books on the tables, a wall full of crayon pictures, groups of people talking. When she taught, when she played before, it was nothing but glee and talent from her fingertips. One panic attack at his piano had rendered her hesitant.

Negan pushed her forwards without another word between them. Mal shook herself out, trying to focus on the faces of the kids as she walked up to the thing, taking in the steady, practised breaths she took after her nightmares. Negan, who was simply watching through the glass, waiting for her to sink or swim again, went unnoticed by her or anyone.

Three little kids, and one older one, fought and scrapped over who got to play the piano next, poking random keys and trying to make a coherent song appear out of thin air. Everything she saw was like the nightmares she had now and the dreams she dreamt not long after she’d lost all her hope for a peaceful ending, watching it leech out of her with Aimee’s blood. People glanced at her as she made her way towards the piano, proudly set back from the benches, a lighthouse calling her home and warning her of rocky shores.

Mallory watched the kids mess about and argue for a moment, almost scared as she was, before she leant over them all to play a one-handed scale; a simple, three second scale, notes flowing from her trepidation. It was ridiculous how easy her fingers found the keys again, as if the time she’d spent away from it after her breakdown was a blink of an eye. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips and she laughed, the sound catching a little as the children parted, like they just wanted to hear her play. Her panic ebbed away slowly as she found home.

“You can play that thing?” one little girl asked her as she looked at her tentatively; she couldn’t have been more than six years old.

“A little, yeah,” Mallory said to her in a soft voice, sitting on the stool as they all made way for her. Why was she so scared of something she loved? “Want to hear me play?”

All her audience nodded in reply, backing away as Mal took another breath, focussing her head on the good that piano had brought her. Her head cleared as she played her upbeat song, fingers slipping over the ivory keys with remembered ease. She played a random Disney song, the children’s smiles widening, begging for more as it ended and she started another. It wasn’t until after she’d finished playing a song from The Little Mermaid that the scrabbling started again, small fingers pressing random keys with her and laughing as they got more into real piano playing. Every song, every note
she hit took away a tiny bit of the rocky shore.

“I want a go!” a boy with dirty blonde hair asked eagerly, standing at one end of the piano, looking like he’d burst if he didn’t get to poke a key soon.

“No, it’s my turn!” the little girl argued back just as vehemently.

Mal smiled easier now, ignorant of the adults all watching her with curiosity as they talked amongst themselves. “How about we start with me showing you all a song. Anyone remember any lullabies?”

“Twinkle, twinkle little star?” the girl replied after a moment, tentatively asking for something so normal, so child-like.

Nodding, Mal set to playing and let the song roll off her fingers like water down her throat now that her head was clearing. They were songs she’d learnt from her grandmother – she had learnt to play lullabies first and it had become second nature to play them, easy notes, easy words, easy tunes. She got the children singing the verses, too, until everything went deathly quiet; the adults stopped talking, the children had stopped singing and her piano music echoed lonely in the room, music without ears listening avidly. It wasn’t until she turned around that Mal remembered Negan.

“You didn’t have to stop on my account,” he said, his arms folded over his chest and a strange smile on his face. Everybody had paused what they were doing and kneeled to him in a second, with only Mallory again caught in the space between supplicant and protestor. “I was listening from the door and just had to come inside; pretty nice to hear some actual music, isn’t it, kids?”

Not waiting for a response from anyone, he simply crooked a finger in her direction and Mallory reluctantly complied, standing up and walking over to him. Negan towered over everyone in the room – even her – with that powerful air as he levered her to stand in front of him with his hands on her shoulders once more, presenting her to the crowd as a prize.

“We were just playing-” she protested softly so the kids didn’t hear, thinking she was in trouble again for not breaking like he wanted and instead taking pleasure.

“Everybody!” Negan called out, watching as every soul stood up, as stiff and silent as Mal. “This is Mallory and she is probably the best damn pianist you got, which really isn’t saying much round here, huh? Since everybody’s been on their best behaviour lately, I’m giving you a gift – this girl and that thing.” Her eyes darted around to the people staring at her warily now, while her cheeks reddened imperceptibly from the attention. “She is here to play for you every fucking day between 7am and 9am, starting tomorrow, so you better put her to some good use and be nice to her; she’s my absolute-super-duper favourite.” He squeezed her shoulder tenderly, a thumb rubbing down the back where nobody could see. Her skin chilled. “Work starts in a half hour so I suggest you get your shit in order and the kids to school.”

Steering her away, Mal let out a breath she didn’t realise she was holding, everyone jerking back into animation. “Negan, I don’t understand,” she said quietly as she looked up at the giant of a man. “You’re just giving them your piano? And me?”

“‘It was just rotting in my bedroom, going to waste, just like you’re going to waste stuck in that room for night after night and day after day,’” he replied, his features softening from the commanding Negan into the one she knew too well, now that his attention was entirely focussed on her. “‘I keep noticing that about you, especially in that fucking bathroom, all pissed off and uppity,’” he whispered, voice dropping low enough that she had to strain to hear him. “Then I realised something: I have never ever seen you really fucking smile. Like fucking ever, isn’t that crazy?” He leaned back, tipping his fingers under her chin. “I liked seeing that smile back again today, that’s the hot little
Mama I remember.” She watched him swallow thickly in his throat before he reached out to push her hair back behind her ear, Mallory unflinching. “Does this make you happy, Princess? I so want you to be happy, even if it means you squeezing my nuts. Well,” he smirked, “I’d have preferred it if you were nicer but I’m amenable to a squeeze or two from time to time.”

Mal was silent and still as she looked at the man, trying to remember to look him in the eye. He’d attempted sincere with her for years and pulled off a fake-out well; well enough that she never trusted his sincerity. “I love playing for those children,” she cleared her throat, hearing the kids playing the notes tentatively in the background. “So I guess you can say that it made me happy. If you want to say that.”

Suddenly, Negan laughed with a bark, just looking at her. The man was a pure-blood pro. “God, that was fucking intense, wasn’t it? Makes you wanna jump my bones, all this goddamn anger. I feel that burning off you, Princess. Why don’t you take today, walk round here, talk to people if you want. Maybe with a little taste, you’ll see then, what this place does to people like you. I’d really fucking hate to disappoint you in that regard.”

Mal didn’t know or want to know the real reason – if he was hiding another motive – because it would always taint the happiness she’d had in the last five minutes of her life. Even if he hadn’t meant to, he had given her back her happy memories and a chance to feel them again every morning. It made her sick that she owed him one.

“Fine,” she replied, though her throat felt closed-up. “I will.”

“Yeah, well, you’re fucking welcome. Come knock on my door at 5, I’ll be waiting for you,” he chuckled as he stepped back. “We’ll talk about everything you want over dinner and you can tell me about your day. Just do me a favour; no more fucking Für Elise, please.”

And that was how he left her, with her heart hammering and a taste of freedom on her lips.

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Mallory hated to lose. It was inside her type A personality, a kind of throbbing need to be right, to win, to control; she’d credited that and that alone with how she’d gotten so far into the apocalypse without getting herself killed. Sitting in with the kids and their lessons, an ache grew inside her that she squashed – Negan had no way of knowing what this was doing to her but she blamed him all the same for the tightness in her gut and the future she hadn’t had. When she’d found out about her own pregnancy, she’d contemplated telling Negan but it seemed wrong to even involve him. She couldn’t stand to be near the man, let alone raise a child with him. Nature had resolved that issue though, and the pain still throbbed.

But now, there were these kids around here. Ones who were still learning their states and the capitols, how to read and do some math too – everything they should be learning in the old world. Everybody in the Sanctuary seemed to have some semblance of a job or a purpose in the least in earning their points; some people talked to her and others didn’t, preferring to keep their distance away from her even when she tried her hardest to look like anyone else.

All morning she had ignored the siren call of the med bay and the man who was, according to Negan, still inside it. The kids kept dragging her back to the piano when their lessons broke up, making her play songs by offering her points for the service, which Mallory flat-out refused to take. Music wasn’t something she was willing to trade for their equivalent of an allowance – not when she realised how it made her so fucking happy too, and gave her an excuse to prolong the inevitable. The fear that had come when she played last in Negan’s bedroom disappeared when Sarah, the little girl, asked her to play another lullaby.
Mal knew she was prolonging the inevitable when the children went back to their guardians with animated smiles and she found herself at a loss. The steps she took towards the med bay were heavy and dragging, the noises desperate to swallow her new fear of seeing her only friend. Peter had to hate her. He had every reason to, when he was stuck in there with one hand missing and she’d just spent the day laughing and having fun, not much of a care in the world. Mal would hate that girl too, even if she’d spent all week locked in a room. He had no way of knowing that, and might not even believe her. The whole thing was an exercise in self-punishment.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing here,” Peter croaked out when she saw him, hooked to some kind of tubing that went into his good arm. He looked like she felt. “But you should get the fuck out now before Negan sees and I lose the other hand.”

Mallory stood defiantly, glancing around for the doctor. He could tell Negan whatever he wanted now, nothing was secret here. She didn’t particularly care. “He let me out this morning. You’re not losing anything else, Pete.”

Her friend looked gaunt and seemed to pale more as he lay there in his hospital bed, struggling with something. “You haven’t called me Pete in months, Allie.” He replied through gritted teeth as he moved to sit up further, Mallory rushing to help him.

“You have to be like this?” she muttered as she slid her arm under his chest and helped him sit. “I can’t undo what I did, never have been able to. I can’t give you back what I took.”

“You talking about my hand or my sister?” Peter choked out, gripping his left arm with his only palm. “We should have never gone into that fucking house, never should have hid from them. We always did the smash and grab and run, why the fuck did we hide? It’s been driving me goddamn crazy.”

She shook her head, feeling the happiness at spending the day with the kids seep out of her bit by bit just by looking at her failures. “I… I don’t know. Maybe I wanted to make that place work as a home, or just do something other than run. I can’t remember the last time I ran from a living person now.”

Peter sighed softly, shaking his head. “What are you even doing here? It’s been a week and I haven’t seen you. Why now?”

Grabbing a wooden stool, she sat back from his bed and rubbed her palms down her thighs nervously. “He kept me locked in my room alone for days. Today he just came and got me out,” she muttered, daring to look into Peter’s eyes. “I’m not even sure why today, let alone why I’m here.”

She sighed under her breath. “I think it was to make me see this place, meet the people so I’d break after all that time alone. I stopped and smelled the flowers – literally, I stopped and smelled the flowers outside.” Mal almost laughed, tears beading up again as she recalled the smell of the gardenias they had grown for no reason she could think up. “They’re damn good flowers too, you have to see them.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them,” Peter said warily, looking at her intently. “Met the people, talked to them, played with the kids. None of it made me sound like you fucking sound now. What’s going on?”

“I’m sick of his games, I’m sick of being alone. I went fucking insane in there, Peter,” Mal muttered softly, feeling the weight fall off her chest as she admitted what she had denied for days. “I think he wanted me to taste what it was like to fall in line, you know? It felt nice but… he’s still playing games, trying to get under my skin. I put you in here, I killed Aimee, I did so many fucking bad things, Peter, I know that,” she said in a hurried, hushed whisper, afraid of her own words. “But nothing’s stopped me from still feeling happy that this place exists for those kids.”
Peter shook his head, eyes pale and lost. “Stop it.” He glared at her, his anger and pain simmering under the surface. “Listen to yourself. You sound like some moron with her head in the clouds. Wake up, Mal, it’s all a fucking manipulation and you’re letting him walk you to it.”

“Don’t you think I don’t know that?!” she sniped back, leaning in closer. “I know what he’s trying to do? The isolation and the kids and a piano and letting me walk around on my own? Negan is smarter than me, he’s ruthless when it comes to what he wants.”

“And he wants you,” Peter shot back. “To own you.”

Mallory gave a short nod, wiping her wet cheeks. “What you wanted me to do before –”

“No, I –”

Her fingers clamped over his mouth, knowing that if she didn’t say it now then she never would. “What you wanted me to do before, I think I can… I know a way. But…”

Peter used his hand to tug her palm away from him, looking up at her like she was a bomb to diffuse. “You have to stop yourself from falling for that asshole again, Mallory. You can’t let him back in to your head, no matter what. He’s poison.” Peter sat up now, the tubes tugging along with him, his face desperate. “You’ve always hated being on your own,” he demanded, her energy draining along with his. “Negan put you in a cage, drip fed you, punished me to spite you and still you could end up thinking ‘maybe it’s not so bad’ because you can’t bear the thought of being on your own and there’s that man who you loved once upon a time. It’s not a fairytale, Mallory, it’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

Denying it wasn’t any use. She simply nodded and set her jaw. “You’re right. I don’t want to be on my own and I don’t want to be a puppet.” Her tongue dashed out to wet her dry lips, blue eyes pale and watery again. “I used to think about deserted islands where Biters didn’t exist, when we were holed up together. And then we learned that everyone turns into one of those things, eventually. It’s in our blood now, isn’t it?” Unable to help herself, she pushed Peter’s messy, dark hair away from his clammy skin. “Maybe it changed us as people too – nobody’s the same anymore, are they? Cages aren’t like cages, they keep us safe. Boundaries keep moving, you go further and further because everybody else does. Well… what if I don’t do it like that?” she said, eyes wide and innocent. “If I keep pushing, the world’s just going to push back like it always has.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked with a panicked look on his face.

Biting her lip now, she shook her head. “I can’t blow this place up. I can’t… I can’t keep pushing those kinds of boundaries but if I get him to think I love him again, I can do some real fucking damage, can’t I?” Her voice seethed, the timbre so low that she could barely hear herself. “I can win.”

“Be careful.” Peter replied excitedly, turning his head to check for eavesdroppers. “If you still love Negan…” he practically spat the name. “Even if you think maybe you could love him one day, then you should just run. Get out of this place and don’t look back. You were pregnant with his baby, Mallory, that doesn’t just go away.”

Her heart stung again and hardened in an instant. “That baby was never meant to be,” she stated carefully, slipping backwards away from Peter. “When he finds out, it’ll be because I told him and nobody else. What he’s doing to me now isn’t anything as bad as what he did back then, believe me. I’ll win, Peter. I promise you now, even if it means he kills me for it.”

There was a silent moment between them both, a slide of eyes meeting and parting. Peter could have
been a man she loved if Negan hadn’t come along again, whistling as he swung his bat. Mallory thought that maybe that was what her friend was angriest about, that Negan hadn’t just hurt them but had ruined any possible future too. She could see the good in Peter as easily as she saw the yearning and wanted to make him happy after all she’d taken away from them both. If she took a step backwards into a lion’s den, maybe they could both move forwards into some semblance of safety.

“Just be careful,” he muttered, slipping back into the bed, his eyes distant.

“I have to go. I have to –”

“Bye, Allie,” Peter said pointedly before she turned to leave. Mal didn’t say goodbye back as she slipped away, wondering if it was possible to pretend to love Negan again and not feel it for real, even a little bit. That was the risk she had to take, she supposed.

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“I fucking love gardenias,” Negan grinned as Mallory handed him a bunch of them with a matching smirk on her face as they stood together in the flower section of a grocery store. “You treat me so good, baby.”

“I just want you to have pretty things,” she cooed, pinching his cheek playfully. “Can’t say no to that face.”

His smile and laughter was infectious, having spent most of the weekend in each other’s company, only venturing out now because they were running low on supplies and her car was crapped out. Instead, like a gentleman, he’d offered to take her. Her hair was messily scraped into a clip at the back of her head, falling in wild tendrils around her soft cheeks, Negan just as chaotically put back together again. If you knew what you were looking at, it was obvious what was going on.

Mal pulled some tubs of salsa from a high refrigerator shelf before slipping them into the cart he was pushing along the aisle for her. “Gardenias, chocolate spread, walnut loaf and salsa. You are just awesome at grocery shopping. Remind me to introduce you to a thing called ‘being an adult’. It sucks but you get used to the concept.”

“I just love that you think you’re so funny,” Mal retorted, lining up a shot and pitching a bag of tortilla chips into the cart. “Wait until we get to the lubricant section, you won’t be talking about responsible shopping and budgets then.”

He chuckled and threw a box of cookies into her cart as they turned into another aisle. Luckily the place was almost deserted at 9pm, just stressed out business people and new fathers hunting for diapers and the right kind of Cheetos. It reminded her of high school and her shoplifting days, prime time for sticky fingers and lazy watchmen.

“You do this often?” he asked, eyes roaming down to her ass just because he could in that setting, as near alone in public as was possible. “Run out of everything and forget to buy food?”

“Don’t have enough money for it half the time,” she admitted, almost reluctantly. “Rent comes first, then bills if they’re past due, then food. I usually steal from my parents or the teacher’s lounge.”

Negan narrowed his eyes at her, “Was it you who took the bag of Reese’s I hid in a box of granola?”

Mal bit her lip and laughed, putting candy on her list so that she could repay him. “I was living off eggs, I was desperate for something else.”
“So why can’t you fucking afford real food?” he asked bluntly, putting a few more items into her cart – sensible things like coffee, sugar, dried pasta. “I thought you were getting all those gigs from the rich assholes.”

“Turns out rich assholes got rich because they don’t pay their bills on time,” Mallory replied flippantly, not looking at him. “Plus, the school cut some funding to my programme so I agreed to take a pay cut to keep the class going til the end of the year.”

Silence wasn’t a good sign with him, she’d learned. His head ticked into overdrive and she waited for the inevitable.

“How is it legal to take a fucking pay cut when you’re on minimum wage to fucking begin with?” he growled, gripping the bar of the cart.

Regretting bringing in the subject of money, Mal sighed. “Look, I get that you’re well-off but I’m not. I have to pick my battles because it was either take a cut or they scrap the whole thing and I’m out of the only steady pay check I get.”

“That’s not fucking legal, Mallory-”

“I know that, Negan,” she parried, slipping her hand over his tense shoulder. “I’m picking the battles I fight, okay? I’ll see the money from the private gigs soon, it’s just that you caught me on a bad month, that’s all.”

The fire seemed to go out of him at her reassuring touch, his anger melting into a mere possessive streak – those she could handle. “Fine,” he grumbled, “But I am paying for all this food, okay? Don’t you dare argue with me on this, Princess, you won’t appreciate the fucking consequences.”

Thinking of better things to do than argue, she leant up on her toes and kissed his cheek softly in silent thanks for the gesture. Mallory knew when he was being an asshole to control her and when he was just being kind in his own way, and was mature enough to appreciate when it was the latter.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “I can think of a few ways to repay you when we’re back at my place, if you’re up for experiencing at least some fucking consequences.”

He couldn’t keep his hands off her after she said that, snaking his rough fingertips down to the back of her shirt until he hit her skin, stroking in teasing flicks. “That a promise?” he asked with a soft smirk, completely focussed on her.

“I just said so, didn’t I?” Mal replied, taking over the pushing of the cart. “Go grab me some milk? I’ll meet you at the checkout.”

A swift hand smacked her ass as he stalked off laughing, leaving her rolling her eyes at his childish antics. He’d been so fucking tactile, touching her and kissing her but it was a different kind of change in their dynamic. He smiled brighter, laughed louder, made her laugh and talked about himself more. She burst into laughter as he skipped towards the dairy aisle while she pushed the cart to the back of the only open line.

“Your husband’s kinda cute, honey,” the middle-aged woman in nurse’s uniform in front of her said, her voice lilted with a southern accent. “If I was ten years younger, mmmmmm…”

“Hands off,” Mallory winked at the lady, not bothering to correct her as she loaded her own items onto the belt. “He is all mine and then some.”

“I don’t doubt it, he following you round like a smitten little puppy dog,” she laughed as she handed
the guy on the register her cash, eyes sparkling in mirth as she spotted the contents of Mallory’s purchases, holding up a hand in placation. “You do you, honey, ride his sweet ass. Nice to meet y’all, anyway.”

Mallory chuckled wryly to herself as they loaded up the bags, Negan’s hands still cupping around the edges of her ass and skimming her ribcage. When he took her hand in his as they walked back to the car though, a simple gesture, her heart thudded for a flash of a moment.

“Negan?” Mal asked in that tone, bags in her other hand.

“Motherfucking… is this going to be about something I don’t wanna fucking talk about?” he groused mockingly in readiness.

“Maybe?” she bit her lip. “It’s just… this is so fucking domestic.” She laughed at the absurdity. “You one had me bent over your desk and whooped my ass with a ping pong paddle, said we had to keep this on the down-low and now here we are.”

“Yeah, here we fucking are,” he replied nonchalantly. “Things change, Princess, just roll with it.”

Her brain, the asshole that it was, was poking at her to ask what their relationship was. “When you say that things have changed…” she asked as he fished his car keys from his jeans pocket. “Does that mean we’ve changed too?”

Negan practically ripped open the car door, dropping her hand in the process. “It means I like fucking being with you, Jesus…” he pulled the bags from her hands and dumped them onto the back seat of his car before slamming the door shut again. “You always gotta push it, Mallory?”

Rolling her eyes and squashing down her feelings again, she pushed past him to reach for the handle, getting the car door open an inch before his palm shoved it closed again. “Negan, what the fuck?! What is this, I can’t ask what the fuck’s going on with… this without you acting like a child?”

“I was having a great night tonight, we were laughing and having some fun, why you ruining it with all that ‘where is this going’ bullshit?” he said pointedly, staring her down. “I only went to fetch you some fucking milk and now what?”

“I don’t think you’ve ever held my hand in public before,” Mal admitted tenderly, loathing to say it now he was mad. It’d just make him madder. “I liked pretending, so sue me. I liked it. It’s not real, why do you care?”

Instead of answering, he pressed her swiftly up against the car and kissed her until her skin tingled. Negan would often do this, distract her with his lips and tongue and teeth until she forgot what was bugging her and was instead reminded that nothing mattered except them. It never failed to work; not when his hips pressed into hers insistently and her skin stuck to the metal of his car when he pulled her shirt up a little.

“Mallory,” he muttered breathlessly, that cocky smirk back on his lips like nothing had happened. “I never said you couldn’t hold my fucking hand, okay? Hold it whenever you want….”

“…when we’re alone,” she added after a moment, her face falling. “Yeah, I know.”

He looked at her like he wanted to say something but thought better of it and looked down instead, thumbs trailing along the soft skin of her stomach that he’d exposed. “I’ll make you a promise, Mallory. One day, I promise on my grandmother’s grave that I will take you out for a real date. Dinner, dancing, fucking in the bathroom of the restaurant. I think I owe you that at least, don’t I?” Negan smirked as she smiled again. “There we go. That’s better. You are even more beautiful
“What’s better?” Mal asked, slipping her fingers over his jacket lapel.

“You smile. I hate fucking disappointing you, Princess. Breaks my goddamn heart to see you looking so sad. I know I’m a motherfucking catch and everything.” He leant in to kiss her again, reaching for her shirt.

Mallory’s hands stopped him, laughing as she pushed at his wrists. “I am not having sex with you up against a car in front of a Kroger.” She shook her head and patted his chest. “You’re good in bed but not even make-up sex is worth getting arrested for public indecency again.”

“Again?” he asked as he backed away like she requested, turning his brow at her with curiosity. “Oh, you are telling me that story when we get home.”

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Mal had lived under the pretence of a false name for as long as the Biters had been walking, and even the first real few people she’d met – and lost – only knew her by that name. At the time, she’d told herself that calling herself Allie was a chance at a new start. Maybe Mallory had died alongside her own mother and she was somehow different in comparison when the truth was that she really, really wasn’t.

She hadn’t banked, in all honesty, on seeing Negan again and contemplating what she was contemplating when striding towards his office like a woman on a mission. Months upon months, year upon year, she’d kept that blurry, faded sonogram picture by her side as a reminder of what she had survived, even when there was no hope and no end in sight – there was always the miscarriage and her broken heart. The edges of the photo were tattering now, the picture creasing down the middle since she had folded and re-folded it so many times. The wavy lines traced with fingertips like patterns her own mother had stroked over her forehead when she was a child. Mallory would never get to do that to her baby – she would never have anything like it.

Part of her wanted to share that loss with the rose-tinted version of Negan that existed only in her memories. The man he proclaimed to be back when she loved him would support her if he knew; Mal had imagined over and over again the look in his eyes when she told him that she was going to have the child he’d always wanted with Lucille. It was the one thing Mallory could have given him that she couldn’t. Telling the Negan that existed now, the one with a barbed wire bat, wouldn’t be so rosy, she thought; he would find out, one day, and everything would shift and change yet again. Another firework to add to the celebration. She’d save it for the finale.

Guards littered the walkways as she grew closer to his office, remembering the same paths with well-worn soles. Paranoia must have filtered through that thick skull of his, she reckoned, with the amount of armed defence he had, even if he didn’t show a single strain of fear to the public. He hadn’t until that night in the bathroom. Mallory had felt it then, a tension and a fear for the briefest of seconds when Negan touched her wounds and cleansed her skin as tenderly and chastely as she needed. Allie, or what remained of her, had died completely that night and she was Mallory again, reclaiming herself to put everything back on the line and stride back into his office with a real plan, to deceive the only man she’d ever really loved. She couldn’t bring down Negan’s oppression, she couldn’t wreck the Sanctuary or blow the people to pieces – but she could fucking break him like he tried to do her.

Passing yet another guard with yet another gun, she felt the loss of her own weapons like a missing limb. There could have been a knife at her hip and a reflex to grab it but he’d killed that too and she didn’t even flinch for the absent weapon when faced with the barrel of a shotgun. The guard – face
familiar and yet so generic it could have been anyone – nodded once like a good little boy and let her pass forward, neither having to say a word to the other.

She knew, deep down, that what she was doing would be the make or break. Either she would hurt him or she’d fall back in love with him.

Mallory raised a fist and knocked.

Chapter End Notes

Well now what's a fanfic without a cliffhanger at the end? Hopefully I will be posting a lot more regularly now that my vacation is done and the voices are much stronger in my head. My current plan is for roughly 20 chapters so we have a fair few to go.

If you liked reading, please leave this poor writer some love. I write fics so that you can have a place to escape and it'd mean everything if you said something nice back.

Come back next week (hopefully!) for another installment and in the meantime, come and check me out on Tumblr. I'm up to a total of 40 followers from 3 when I started this thing.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

As first dates go, it was an eventful one. Mallory had wine, she had a good meal, even the company wasn't being such a total asshole. Now, if she can only get through it without wanting to kill him.

A lot more smut in this chapter with a warning for some dub/con if you squint and flashbacks as always are indicated by blocks of italic text.

Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the unexpected hiatus. I have been down with the worst head cold and sinus infection I've ever had (technically I still have it) so this chapter was more of a struggle. Hopefully you like it enough to leave me a comment down below or even a kudos. I just want to keep this thing going forever.

Beta'd heavily by Mayboo13 and Moomus. I love you both

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The knocks felt hollow; one, two, three.

Her heart fell into her stomach as the door to Negan’s office swung open and the man himself stood there in front of her, leaning on the jamb like he’d been waiting at the ready. The visual of him towering over her – immaculately presented – brought her hurtling back to every single time she’d run over to his house over the weekends for a quick fuck. He even had the same stubble on his cheek, the ever-present five o’clock shadow peppered with flecks of white that made him look more human. And there she was, dressed limply in ratty clothes with lank hair and scars. She couldn’t have looked more out of place if she’d tried.

“Glad you decided to turn up, Princess, just like old times. Me waiting on you to knock at the door…” he uttered lazily, without hesitation in reading her expression though he blocked her view of his office. “Now I am not the type of guy to sleep with a girl on a first date but you play your cards right and maybe I’ll walk you home safe after dinner.” Negan leaned into her ear a little more and smirked. “I got them to bring up something special just for us.”

As he stepped gallantly aside to let her through, Mallory realised that when he said the word ‘date’, he meant it; the lights inside were dimmed just enough so that her eye caught the candles glowing in the middle of the room, a table set for two with giant silvery dome cloches hiding their dinner. The scene was painted there as if it had always existed, a little round bistro table with a white tablecloth and a short bunch of gardenias in a vase in the middle as decoration. He had built them a first date in the middle of his office and had done a half-way decent job of it too – more than he’d ever done when she loved him.
“You did all this?” Mal asked hesitantly as she stepped inside, walking the line in her tone of voice somewhere between mistrust and disbelief. Her rose-tinted Negan would never have done anything like this for her benefit.

The door snapped shut and the man himself brushed past her, his belts clinking as he did. “Since when did I ever fucking do anything by halves?” He asked, pulling one of the chairs out and gesturing at her expectantly, that playful smile on his face again though there was a hint of something in his eyes she couldn’t – or wouldn’t – place. She didn’t move. “For fuck’s sake, Mallory, sit the fuck down, it’s not gonna bite. I might, though, if you keep being so gosh darn rude.”

“I guess I wasn’t expecting you to actually go to any trouble. Especially for me.” It was after a moment’s hesitation that she decided to take his proffered chair, Negan tucking her in close to the table and brushing her shoulder with little fanfare about doing so. “I don’t think you’ve ever done anything as… un-you before.”

It was just so fucking domestic. Mal’s hand reached out to touch the gardenias in the vase, wondering if he had gone down to the garden and cut them himself or whether he had someone else do it for him. Where did he find matching silverware and cloches? Had they come from Hilltop too, just like her own décor? How long had he been collecting things like he expected to have a date? Maybe she was getting the cast-offs from his wives.

“You and me both know that I have owed you a real fucking date for a long damn time,” Negan muttered as he pulled a wine bottle from a bucket of ice on the floor. He had white and rosé, because of course he remembered that she hated red wine. “In fact, I think I made a fucking promise to you. I keep my fucking promises, don’t I? I’m fairly sure I do.”

She snorted in mock-laughter as he poured them both a glass of white, Mal shooting him an incredulous look. “You most certainly do not. Technically you don’t even break them, Negan, it’s that you move the goal posts all the damn time. Nobody can fucking keep up with you. One second, you’re beating some asshole’s face in and the next you’re making him dinner.”

Negan laughed outright to her face and shrugged with nonchalance at her accusations. “Maybe, but at least I’m not boring as fuck. Always leave ‘em guessing, Princess.”

“Can’t disagree there,” Mallory mumbled a little bitterly, sipping at the wine – she had to remember to go easy on the alcohol since it had been a long damn time since she’d had anything that strong to drink; it wouldn’t go well, being drunk in his vicinity. Her tongue got loose enough as it was.

“I don’t have a lot of regrets,” he said, downing half his glass in a mouthful like the admission burnt his mouth. “But I am man enough to admit that I should have done this for you a long time ago, treated you better and all that bullshit. Men in general don’t treat their women well enough, do they? Or, maybe they did and it was just me who was the bastard son of a bitch.”

Looking down at the wine glass in her hands, she thought about how she used to want so desperately to be treated as more than a dirty secret, even though they both knew that he would never have done it while Lucille was alive. She had kidded herself for months that he cared about her as anything more than a glorified sex therapist. The fact that he was – in his own mind – rectifying a regret now didn’t mean shit for her own feelings. That was a certainty.

“I know,” Mal agreed, washing away the lie with more wine. “But it’s not like I expected you to think of me as anything more than your mistress. We knew what that whole shit-storm was, promises or no promises, just that… it was what it was. Acting all romantic and lovey-dovey is more of a lie.”

“Oh, that hurt, that really hurt my feelings,” Negan said with a chuckle, leaning in towards her
expectantly. “You’re saying that you never thought that maybe I’d treat you better one day? I was a
fucking asshole to you sometimes, back then, I know that. I was the prick with a dick! Even now, I
keep expecting you to knee me in the balls for it, Princess.”

Mallory snapped her eyes up to meet his gaze, forcing down her ire. “I never thought you cared
even enough about what we were to think that I’d be kneeing you in the balls over it, Negan, I mean
fuck… you treated my apartment like it was your own personal brothel and only once did I object. I
know I definitely never expected you to pick up a pizza on your way there, let alone take me out to
dinner among people with eyes and everything. We weren’t dating or playing Ken and Barbie’s
dream house together, it was just sex.”

He grumbled in response and she thought maybe he wasn’t buying her disinterested rhetoric. “Well,
you know what, Mallory? This is a fucking date now,” he said, slapping his hand on the table. “I
went and ordered your favourite and everything, don’t think I don’t remember.” Negan swiftly and
deftly lifted the silver cloche away from her. It was filet – mid-rare, juicy, salty meat with thick cut
fries and béarnaise. She could have wept at the sight of it.

“Jesus… that’s actual… am I dead?” Mal said, completely off-kilter. When had she even told him
that steak and fries with béarnaise was her favourite? “I feel like I’m dead.”

“Not dead. Unless being at dinner with me is your idea of heaven.” Negan replied with another
ubiquitous smirk. His plate held the ubiquitous bloody prime rib, with onions as well as the fries and
sauce, glistening on the plate. She hoped he brought dessert too.

Mallory practically dove into the meal, licking her lips as she sliced into the steak. “I should have
paid you back by at least showering,” she muttered, pulling out her napkin to play along with his
scenario. “All this fancy food, fancy silverware, and I’m wearing three-day old clothes.”

He barked in laughter, watching her eat her first mouthful with something akin to rapturous delight in
his eyes. “Like I give two shakes of a fuck stick what you look like,” he replied, sliding his knife
across his own steak. “I seen a lot worse than… that,” he gestured with the tip of his knife towards
her.

The food, in her starved opinion, was the best thing she’d had since he’d fed her bacon. It was a
strange consequence of being without good food for so long, that you cared when you got something
so perfect. The person who had made their meals had obviously taken great love and care in cooking
it all perfectly, even seasoning the pink insides of the meat. He had a good life here, she couldn’t
blame him for wanting to keep it up.

“You went all out, huh?” Mallory said, swiping a thick cut fry through her sauce. “Why you doing
all this, Negan, really?”

“Well fuck me, Mallory, I thought you’d be the slightest bit happy for once,” Negan said with half a
mouth full, licking his lip. “I can put you back into your room if you want, get Simon to keep you
company and serve you fucking fish sticks.”

She almost laughed, the corners of her pink lips turning up. “Simon hates me,” Mal replied, reaching
for her wine. “I’d be better off eating dinner with Arat, at least she respects me.”

“Oh because you beat her ass down, that’s how it works with her,” Negan grinned, giving Mallory
a salacious wink. “You’re a leader, not a follower and Arat fucking respects leaders. But Simon? Oh
boy, you are giving him the big run around.” He stated proudly. “That man of mine, he is mightily
pissed off about that chunk you took out of him. Simon ain’t had the jump put on him for a long
fucking time – he wouldn’t be my guy if he had. It’s understandable that he’s not exactly happy
about you being here, worming your way into my dinner table. I don’t do this for fucking anyone, you know.”

Mallory remembered with great pride how she’d swiped at Simon’s leg with a knife before he’d knocked her out cold, right when everything happened and the world changed again. “He’s still pissed about that?” she asked, her cheeks going pink at the edges. “He’d still get me hand-to-hand.”

“Don’t matter,” Negan shook his head and pointed his knife towards her again. “That’s not my fucking point, my fucking point is that he had you on your back, in pain, trapped with a gun, right? Least from what I heard.” He continued when she nodded softly. “And you still managed to get in a stabby-stab.” Negan whistled low, sounding impressed. “I would’ve liked to have seen that, I really would. Simon’s still being a pussy about it – it’ll be worth making you his second in command just to see the look on his fucking face.”

“I’m happier downstairs playing piano than I am with your army,” she replied, tempering down the idea of her viciousness in a fight, not wanting to stir Simon’s ego any more than she did Negan’s. “You should trust me on that one, I’m no leader.”

His deep eyes narrowed imperceptibly at her and she kept his gaze. “Well that’s utter bullshit, Princess, but you’re probably better off anyway,” Negan said quietly, taking a large sip of wine. “When you’re the dog with the big balls, someone’s always trying to bite them off you.” His knife sliced expertly into his beef, the bloodied juice running over the plate. “Every fucking day, Mallory, it’s every fucking day. Some asshole comes for my balls, trying to get revenge or step into my boots. S’why I need guys like Simon, like Arat. They respect the fuck outta me and they toe the damn lines I set down on them. Fucking alpha male bullshit…” he trailed off, mumbling as he chewed vociferously.

“And you’re not an alpha male?” Mal asked incredulously, her brow raised a little as he ranted and raved.

“Big fucking difference between thinking you can lead and actually putting your money where your mouth is,” he said, chewing again – his mother had obviously never taught him table manners. “None of them have the fucking stones for it. You gotta know all that, you were the leader of your group before you ran them into the shit pile and got everybody killed, right? Least that’s what I been hearing.”

Cold ran down her spine and she froze, her breath catching in her lungs. “How do you know that?”

The chill down her back matched the coldness in his eyes as he grinned, leaning on his elbows. “Loose lips sunk your ships. Petey’s got an awful loud mouth on him, Mallory. Definitely disloyal – I’d nip that in the bud before he fucks you over completely.”

Peter. There had been a week or so between his injury and her being allowed out of her room. Negan had all the time in the world and took his full advantage of it. Her fingers wrapped around her knife imperceptibly tighter, her eyes snapping up.

“He told you all that, huh?” she said, jaw clenching slightly. Mal didn’t know who to be angrier with, Negan or Peter.

Reaching over the table, he wrenched her fingers from around her knife, loosening her grip. “Calm the fucking fuck down; you ain’t gonna stab me at the dinner table because I got a couple secrets out of your boyfriend.” Negan patted her hand condescendingly.

“No, I’m not,” she snapped, unable to keep her head straight. “I’m gonna stab him. Asshole.”
Negan chuckled again, sitting back right in his chair. “Told you; there’s always something to deal with when you got people to look after, even in people you think you trust. Maybe Petey’s coming for your balls.”

“He hasn’t got any of his own if he’s going this route,” she said, forcing her racing heart to calm down. Mal hoped to God that Peter had been under extreme duress – no matter what it was that he told Negan. It was fucking unforgivable, not when he had ample chance to warn her when she’d gone to see him.

Mallory felt the heat coming from Negan’s eyes as he looked at her, him draining his glass in one mouthful. “People just make dumb choices in the heat of the moment. You remember our little sniper friend you encountered at the Hilltop?” he asked, his face bathed in the candle light as he leant forward again. “The one you blocked from knocking my brains out the back of my head?”

“I remember,” she mumbled, getting at her food a little viciously.

“Sniper-Rick has been after my sweet ass for a long damn time and I’ve exercised a lot of fucking restraint when it comes to him, I swear on Lucille herself.” Negan made his own fingers into a gun shape and aimed a fingertip at his own head, miming a shot firing into his temple. “He wants my head on a goddamn silver platter, he’s crazier than even you are. Still didn’t have the guts to pull the trigger on me at Hilltop, though… and why’s that?”

Mal knew back then. She knew now. “Because he wasn’t willing to go through me.”

Negan poured himself more wine and topped her glass off too. “Because he wasn’t willing to go through you yet,” he added pointedly. “For him, that was a dumb fucking decision he made in the heat of the moment and he’ll come to regret it. You miss all the shots you don’t take, Mallory. He didn’t give a shit about you, so why was the point in fucking hesitating? Dumb decisions, they’re the end of you.”

She felt suddenly full and reached for her drink, clasping the glass tightly as she sipped. How many glasses was that? “So that’s why you’re not scared of him? What if he takes the shot and doesn’t care who it’s got to go through to hit you?”

“Because that prick will always hesitate, Mallory,” Negan replied casually. “You do it once, it’ll keep happening again and again; he hesitated and made a dumb choice and now I know that he will always hesitate when it comes to me.”

But Mallory had stepped so intentionally in front of that man’s line of sight, keeping Negan out of harm as much as she could without trying to alert him. It was her God-given right to pull that trigger on Negan, and no sniper was going to take that away from her. “What would you have done if I hadn’t stepped in front of you?” she asked, trying to sound like she was concerned for his judgement.

“If he wants to kill me, he will, not much I can do about that,” Negan shrugged, brushing off her alarm though Mallory had a strange feeling he was withholding information from her. “Besides,” he chuckled darkly again, shaking her from her thoughts. “If Rick shoots you instead, he better make fucking sure he kills me too or else I will rip his world apart.”

The smell of burning wax filled her nose as the candles burned. The flicking light in Negan’s eyes made them look like they were on fire too; his face was contorted by the light until he looked like the Devil himself. She was scared for the sniper on the roof – Mal would have gone through herself if she was that guy. He’d never get another shot like that now.

“What the Hell really happened to you?” she muttered after a moment of silence, taken aback at the
virulence she’d seen in him. “And none of this bullcrap about going insane; I know you’re not insane. You never gave this much of a shit about my safety, or anyone’s, before so what’s happened?”

He flashed her a bitter smile, hollow around those fire eyes. “Everything happened, Mallory. Lucille died and everyone died. I killed half of them, for fuck’s sake, and I’m sure you did too. Shit like that changes a man, better or worse. You know, I never really fucking forgot about you, sweet peach.” The rarer nickname made her stomach clench. “Maybe what we did have back then was just sex, but fuck me, you were one of the only friends I had. Whole fucking lot of who I could count on ran away when Lucille got sick. You and her were all I had.”

Her eyes prickled and she looked away, not needing or wanting to dredge up that time of her life just when she was meant to be pretending to soften; it just made her angrier at herself. “Negan, don’t—”

“You and me… we were friends, Mallory. I forgot what that was like until I saw you on your knees in front of me again, snapping, pleading for mercy because of some limp dick motherfucker – I got a little jealous about that, if I’m being entirely honest. You and me, we’re not over yet. I’m all you’ve got left when he betrays you. So, if anyone hurts you – really fucking hurts you – I am not sure what kind of man I’ll turn into but I tell you, it ain’t gonna be a nice one. Sniper-Rick’s never gonna see me coming.”

It was there in his voice – a pride in his violent honesty. They were away from his Saviours, from his enemies and his almost-friends. Beyond the bullshit, Negan was still an asshole but he was an honest one. She still hated him, hated what she’d turned into because of him, but he hadn’t ever lied to her like other men, other people, had. Mallory looked away from him them, almost feeling the tiny thread of shame at doubting his honesty regarding her. She constantly had to remind herself that he was a monster now and was a monster then; no love had ever been or remained still. Their relationship was almost irredeemable.

“Losing people does that, turns you to stone,” she whispered in kind, forcing the honest words out because Negan would spot lies on her like she was covered in lesions. “People die too much, it’s screwed up. I got them killed. I made some bad choices in the heat of the moment too but other people took the hit. It didn’t seem fair.”

“Because it’s not fair,” Negan replied as if it were obvious, draining another glass of wine. “Nothing about this is fair.”

Mal shook her head. “But those were my consequences to take, nobody else’s. When Peter found me, I was on my own and his family, his people, they took me in. His sister hated my fucking guts, more than I ever hated you. She pushed and pushed and pushed me with every choice I made.” Mallory tipped the last of her wine down her neck, savouring the cleansing burn. “I just snapped. It was too many times and I… I killed her and…” she trailed off, her jaw and body stiffening as she remembered all her bad decisions, her failures towards everyone in her group barrelling down at her.

“So, what, you think you made a bad choice in killing someone you were meant to be protecting?” he asked quietly, pressing her just enough for her to break.

“No,” Mallory replied almost casually, locking her gaze with his. “The bad choice was not doing it sooner – I hesitated and she got everyone around me killed.”

Negan just smiled slowly through the fire in his eyes.

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The crash of broken glass woke Mallory, the clock blaring 02.24 at her as she rolled over to look at the thing on her nightstand. She snapped up, turning on her bedside light and expected to see someone standing over her with a knife, ready to plunge it into her chest and rip her heart out. Nothing. A second later and sounds of rustling and footsteps echoed outside her apartment, thick and heavy and very fucking familiar with a soft grumble through the thin wood.

He knocked three times, to his credit – given that she hadn’t seen him in over a week. She wrenched open the door, standing there wearing nothing but a vest and some sleeper shorts, a contrast to the man in front of her – even with his biker gear on, she’d recognise him anywhere.

“What the fuck-” Mal started, the man pushing past her to get inside her apartment. “Negan, why are you barging in here at 2am?” her voice was raw and croaky, red hair matted at the back. Somehow, though, he looked worse as he stepped into the light from her kitchen, pulling off his helmet – his eyes were sunk back into the sockets with at least a three-day beard growth on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Not fucking here to talk right now, Mallory,” he grumbled, his voice sounding worse than hers. “Just… need you.” Negan stripped off his leather jacket, depositing the helmet on her couch like he lived there. “Just – fuck – can you maybe throw me this one fucking bone and not ask?”

Rubbing her eyes wearily, thinking maybe this was a weird sex dream, Mallory just looked at him incredulously. “No, I’m not doing anything until you tell me what’s going on with you, you are freaking the shit out of me right now. Why are you here at 2 in the fucking morning?”

Through her confusion and sleepiness, Mal didn’t miss the grimace across his face as he took off his thick gloves, the knuckles on his right hand scraped red raw and peppered with something that looked suspiciously like wall paint. He peeled away the gloves and dumped them on her couch next to his helmet and jacket, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

“It’s just been a fucking shit-show of a day, Mallory…” Negan rumbled. “You want me to go, I’ll go, but-”

“What did you do to your hand?” she asked, taking a few steps closer to pull his knuckles into view. “Have you been punching a goddamn wall?”

He was a few inches from her face, her skin prickling up as he looked at her with those desperate, dark eyes. His injured hand broke free of her grip and almost tentatively cupped her face, pushing back her wild hair. “I’m sorry,” he lamented, looking like he was straining himself from something. “I don’t mean to freak you out or scare the shit out of you either. I just… I fucking need you tonight, Mallory, need…” Negan pled for her, pressing forward another inch until she could hear his heart beating between the air, smell the tinge of something malty on his breath. He sounded broken. “Please.”

Whatever made her nod her head was gone from her thoughts in an instant. He pressed her backwards onto a bare space of wall and kissed the breath from her body, his rough hands tearing at her vest and shorts until they were just tatters of soft fabric on the floor; she was almost bare in front of him in an instant. Her head spun out of control when his teeth and lips sealed possessively to her neck instead, sucking and biting her flesh until she had to smack his cheek for him to stop when it got too much, too painful and sensitive. Mallory groaned when he lifted her from the floor, her thighs clamping around his hips just for balance. Part of her was terrified and yet a thrill went through her core when he groaned her name as if it were his dying word. She would never forget that sound.

Her lithe fingers gripped a handful of his hair and wrenched him away from her neck, looking at the
wildness in his eyes as something she never got to see – raw need, lust, desire to bury himself into her body and own it. Mallory trusted him but a voice in her head was so close to saying the safe word, just from the way he was looking at her. It felt like a punishment, like a test of how far he could push her. Instead of giving up, she yanked him back in for another kiss, lips bruising, teeth scraping against the tender flesh. Blood rushed around her body as he groped at her breast with one hand, pushing his tongue down her throat abruptly.

“Negan,” she cried out when he pinched roughly at her nipple, frustrated and overwhelmed all at once. Mal groaned when his rough jeans pressed into her wet cunt, teasing and scratching through her cotton underwear. “Don’t be a fucking assho…”

He swallowed her cries of protest with another punishing kiss, grunting in desire as he ripped the cotton in two with one hand, her hip reddening and rubbing raw at the motion. Two thick fingers tested her and probed, rubbing at her clit menacingly, Mal bucking into his hand as he did so. Negan brought her to an edge quick and rough, building her like a wave, only to back away before she crashed. Mal swore.

“Fuck,” he groaned, rushing to get his jeans unzipped, even more ragged than he sounded before. She wanted him inside her, to make her come before she changed her mind. “Fucking fuck, Mallory.” Effortlessly, his palm reached down and hitched one of her legs up higher, already sinking his thick cock into her body, struggling to get all of himself inside her at the tight angle. His eyes never strayed from where they were connected. “Jesus Christ…” Negan bit his lip.

Mallory dug her nails into his forearm, biting her bruised lip until the edge of pain abated into simply feeling fuller than full, stretched and on the edge of bliss. “Negan, Negan, please, oh God…”

His eyes snapped back up to her face, the fire and anger and passion back in an instant. “You want me, don’t you?” he groaned, pulling out just barely enough to slam back into her cunt to the hilt. Her body rippled deliciously, clenching tight as he bottomed out. “Fuck, been needing you all fucking day. Sweetest pussy in the world…”

Head spinning, she couldn’t even form much of a thought before he started deep thrusts into her. She grabbed at him helplessly as he fucked her, her body shifting up and down the wall as he did. “What happen-”

Her voice was cut off as he clamped a sweaty palm over her mouth, whining softly as he just fucked her viciously hard, seeking her heat. “Shut up,” he snapped, almost daring her to talk out of turn again. “Just stop.”

The palm over her mouth drifted away, Mal keeping it shut herself and just concentrating on what was building up inside her. His hips rammed into her relentlessly, shaking her whole body from the core, body jerking, skin sweating and sticky. Mallory screamed and came hard around him as he rubbed indelicately at her clit again, her back arching as he fucked her roughly. Sweat beaded over his brow, coming inside her aching cunt with a groan, hips stuttering. They heaved for breath together, Negan backing away from her after a moment, looking dazed when he zipped his jeans back up like nothing had happened.

She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what to say. Mallory rubbed a hand over her face, struggling with the urge to cover herself back up again, almost ashamed at what she’d let him do to her, even though he’d done so much more before then. Her thigh was bruising already from his hold – she’d not even noticed the force of his grip.

Negan looked at her for a moment before going to the couch and grabbing his shit, his whole body changing. Panic rose in her body, an anger and gut-wrenching pain stabbing at her to twist the knife
“What are you doing now?” Mal questioned frantically, getting her brain back into forming coherent thought through her panic and fear. “Don’t you dare do this to me, Negan.”

“I gotta go,” he replied gruffly, picking up the helmet and avoiding her gaze like the plague.

Angry, she grabbed the fucking thing from his loose grip. “No. You’re half fucking drunk, aren’t you? I am not just some warm body for you to slide your dick into, okay?” she was still heaving for breath. “Look at me when I’m talking to you, you fucking asshole. I’m saying I’m worried about you and you want to run away? You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to, fine. But you better goddamn treat me with some respect or you never walk through my fucking door again.”

He licked his lips and something inside him changed again, coming from whatever haze he was in. Mallory could see the shift with her own eyes, the way his shoulders gave out, how his breathing mellowed and the tired but salacious smile was back on his weary face. She had missed it. “I love it when you boss me around. Honestly, Princess, it’s my favourite thing about you. That and your tits.”

Mallory had to stop herself from laughing in relief, tossing the helmet on the couch now that she was sure he was back to the Negan she knew and not some maniac in leather who just wanted to fuck her and leave. Mal strode more confidently across the room and grabbed a robe from the bottom of her bed, slipping it on – God bless studio apartments and the lack of steps needed to fetch things.

“Coffee?” she asked curtly.

“Read my mind,” he said with a softness, following her into the kitchen like a puppy.

A million aches and pains started to settle into her body from her legs, her arms and shoulders, her cunt – he’d been almost too rough, almost too uncaring for her but Mallory didn’t feel like an unwilling participant in the slightest. Still, she stretched out her aching back and ignored the stickiness between her thighs.

“So, you’re not gonna talk to me?” she asked as she set the coffee machine, realising it was going to be getting on for 3am soon. “Just a quick fuck, cup of joe and see you later Princess?”

Negan groaned himself, leaning back against her cabinets as she made the coffee. “I’m an asshole, I know. Maybe I shouldn’t have come here but it’s… fuck, I need to get another drink in me.”

“Last thing you need is more alcohol,” she replied, barely containing her grimace. “What the fuck were you thinking, riding that bike when you’re drunk.”

His laughter behind her was choking and she could feel his eyes burning a hole on her back. “Not drunk, that’s the fucking problem here. Don’t guess you can Irish up the coffee?”

Mal snorted and let the machine bubble, crossing her arms underneath her. “I’m not giving you more fucking whiskey and I’m not letting you ride away while you’re too drunk to not get yourself killed. Unless you wanna be roadkill.”

“Well you’re a barrel of laughs,” he muttered bitterly. Mallory turned to look at him and he swept his eyes over her front, his gaze softening when it landed on her neck. “Jesus, I really did a number on you.”
The coffee pot beeped at her and she poured him a cup – minus whiskey – before shoving it at him. “Get that down your neck so I can talk to sober Negan. He’s a lot less of an asshole.”

Negan downed half the cup, grimacing and shuddering as he did so. “I don’t set out to be an asshole. Most people think I’m always a mean son of a bitch even when I’m completely sober. I got no idea why you disagree with them but you’re a fucking saint for it.”

Mal filled a glass with water for herself, watching him carefully as she sipped. “Sober Negan I can handle. Drunk Negan’s a whole other ball game. He’s pretty wild. Too wild for me.”

He snorted in laughter, taking another sip. “You took it like a champ, Mallory, don’t sell yourself short. I feel like a fucking asshole for doing that just now, though. I’d beat a guy half to death if he touched you like I did.”

Drinking her water to shake that possessive streak from her mind, she turned off the coffee pot so it wouldn’t burn by morning. Talking to him wasn’t working but she could speak his language. “You can always come make it up to me. If you’re not gonna talk, we can put that mouth to better use.”

A raised eyebrow in her direction was all she needed as confirmation that it worked. Negan drank the last of the coffee in his mug and slung it on the side, following Mallory as she led him to her bed. “You’re gonna be the death of me, Mal.”

“Probably,” she muttered, pulling his rumpled white t-shirt over his head swiftly. “I promise it’ll be a nice death though.”

Negan beamed at her, his eyes sparkling as the coffee started to kick back in and took away the rough edge of alcohol. She leaned up and kissed him tenderly, smiling into it as he let her lead, let her dictate his hands and his hips. His fingers skirted around the suck-mark on her neck, thumb scraping the edge of it. Negan grimaced when she winced. “I’m sorry, Mallory.”

Pulling his hand back, she shook her head and pulled him in closer to her body. “Don’t be sorry. Make it better,” she commanded, letting him pull her robe half open.

He nodded softly, jaw set in determination when she laid back on her unmade bed, sinking into the mattress and losing herself. His breath skirted her collar when he leaned over to kiss her again, seeking a forgiveness that she didn’t need to give. Both knew that he’d crossed a line back there and had to make it up to her in the only way he could.

Mallory sighed softly as he kissed down the centre of her body, slipping the robe just enough to taste her dewy skin. His tenderness and hesitancy to go any lower without her explicit go-ahead surprised her but he peered up at her from her naval all the same with that questioning gaze. Mal set her bare foot on his shoulder and pushed his torso down, spreading her legs enough for him to see his own handiwork from before.

Flushed and sensitive, her body shied away from direct touch. Instead, Negan kissed the marks his hand had made on her inner thigh before, rubbing out the aches she felt with his lips. How he knew exactly where she hurt she had no idea, but the thought fell from her mind when he kissed her skin like that, her eyes set on his raptured face. The slight drag of his tongue across her felt like a thousand sparks hitting all at once. God, she loved him – Mallory wouldn’t say it but she could damn well let herself sink into that feeling, bathe in it and feel cleansed. He could show her what it was supposed to feel like to love a broken man even when he ripped her apart and kissed the remnants of her soul back together.

“So sweet,” he groaned, breathing harder across her skin. “Fuck, I never should have started this.”
Mallory was about to ask him what he meant when he sunk his tongue into her without warning, spreading her thighs apart as he dove into her. She cried out when he scraped the very tip of his teeth across her clit, her body loving and hating it at once.

Fingers slid into his hair and forced him to her cunt, Negan lapping up any trace of himself from her body he could get at. Mal’s eyes widened as he groaned with her in unison.

“Oh shit, shit, shit,” Mal said, gripping his messy hair with her iron vice of a fist, arching as he ate her out.

Panting, he pulled up from her and licked those wet, pink lips, his smile turning into a smirk when he gazed at her. “Sweet peaches still. Nothing changes…”

Mallory planted her foot back on his shoulder and pushed him down again wordlessly, a depth of need in her to come on the son of a bitch’s face like she owned him. Mal did own this part of him; he had sought her out and sunk into her for comfort and it was a fucking thrill, even when she was scared for him. He made her feel again.

“Make me come,” she gasped as he sucked on her clit, bucking into his mouth. “So close, please, please, make me come.”

Negan doubled down in response to her command and she was crashing over the edge harder than before, his lips and tongue lapping as she soaked his face in wetness. Mallory’s foot slipped back and he gripped her hips to keep her secured to his mouth.

“Holy shit,” he groaned, moving to lean back. She was blissed out and sunk back into her bed, waiting for him to climb on top of her. “You are fucking exquisite,” he said with mirth.

Blushing, she missed the tone of his chirping cell phone until he produced it from his back pocket, both of their faces falling in unison as he read whatever was on the screen. “What’s up?” she asked, once again lying naked, devoid of his full attention. “Negan?”

Everything hung in the air on a silk thread. His shoulders bristled again as he licked the taste of her from his lips guiltily. If Mal was a betting woman, that chirping was sure to be from Lucille. Nothing made him stop like his wife did.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he grouched but didn’t move this time, staring at his phone. “I’m a fucking asshole, ain’t I?”

Pulling her robe back around her body, she pushed herself up from her bed with an unbelievable urge to smack the phone from his hands. “You’ll only be a fucking asshole if you screw me like that and walk out again without a damn explanation,” she said calmly, her voice dry and croaky. “You wanna do that, fine. You wanna leave, fine, I can’t stop you. But I hope you don’t, all the same.”

His eyes burned into her again, shaking his head simply. “You don’t want to know, Mallory.”

“Try me, butt munch,” she said with an exasperated smile on her face. “Don’t wuss out on me now.”

Negan set the phone in his back pocket. “Fine. You can feel like an asshole same as I do then,” he took a breath and sat back on his haunches, half naked. “Lucille’s in the hospital. S’where I been for the past three days, sleeping by her bedside in some rotten as shit chair, hoping to fuck that our insurance is gonna cover this bullshit. She’s too sick this time, Princess, I don’t know what to fucking do, I’m useless as shit.”
Glass shattered around her – she had forgotten about how sick his wife was, what they were going through. He was right; she felt like an asshole now too. “Why’s Lucille in the hospital?”

“Infection, they think. Picked something up from someone, somewhere, and it just… she’s not herself anymore. It’s like they fucking ripped out my wife from her own body. Fuck cancer, pansy-ass fucker.” He looked like he wanted to break something, fists flexing until the raw skin of his knuckles bled in beads.

It made sense now. The mania, the beat-up hands, the strain and fear and anguish. “If you’ve been at the hospital for three days, why are you here now?” Mal asked tentatively, moving to kneel on the bed next to him, wrenched apart by guilt and shame and empathy and still giving a damn about how he was doing.

“Her folks kicked me out, Princess, they always hated my guts and she stood by me but she ain’t really there no more. I made a fucking mess of it now, though, they don’t want me near her when I’m like this. Can’t fucking blame them, can you? I’d kick my ass out too.”

Her brain ticked over and she wondered what to do. Was it even right to comfort him? She was quiet for the longest moment before she laid back down on the bed, patting the empty side next to her. He looked broken as he obeyed her command after a second’s hesitation, that tension in his shoulders never abating even when he scrubbed a hand over his face, kicking off his boots.

“You didn’t go home?” she muttered softly, letting Negan pull his arm around her torso almost unconsciously tightly, his head on her like a child’s.

“Too many photos,” he huffed into her shoulder. “Like staring at what you used to have. Not worth the fuckin paper they’re printed on.” Her fingers drifted up and down his bare arm tenderly as he relaxed. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

The sadness spiked in her heart too, seeing him like this in her bed. “You don’t have to pretend here, you know,” she tried, tempering her voice so it calmed him down. He looked exhausted and she realised he couldn’t have slept in days. “Sleep off the whiskey, shower in the morning and go back to swallow your pride. Lucille needs you to not be an asshole, just this once. Just sleep it off, Negan, s’all you got to do.”

His eyes locked with hers just one more time before he grumbled lowly in agreement. She kept stroking his arm until was out cold, regardless of the light still beating down from the bedside lamp. She envied that of him, how he was so exhausted that everything shut down while her mind raced. He breathed steadily and fell asleep so easily under her, looking older and younger all at once.

When he started snoring, Mal chuckled and used her toes to grab the comforter, draping them with it, Negan not even rustling as he slept. For hours, she watched him quietly, her own mind between awake and asleep with his. Hating seeing him in such pain, she hoped beyond hope that it was going to be over soon. Whatever happened after his wife died, whether he would want to be with her or not, she just wanted that peace to come over him too. Even when his phone chirped again from beneath the covers, Mallory made no move to tell Negan he had a message again. Mallory told herself in earnest that Negan needed sleep before he could get back and made it right with his in-laws, kissed his wife and prayed that it got better before it got worse again. She told herself that over and over.

For one night, just for two insane hours of her life, Negan had needed her more than she had needed him. Her fingers stroked his arm and she smiled.

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“No dessert?” Mallory asked as she slid her napkin over her empty plate, trying to avert attention from her own recent past and back onto their pseudo-date. “I was hoping for more of that berry crisp from the other day.”

Negan relented slightly and allowed her to move on the topic, standing up by the side of the table and holding a hand to her. “Not tonight, no, I wasn’t sure you’d turn up but now... I hope you and me can get along a little nicer after this, maybe even try for a second date?”

She stared at his hand, the wrist splint in place like he was a real baseball player. Mallory’s eyes switched to look up at him as she slid her hand into his, her body tense as he bent and kissed her knuckles tenderly.

“Thought you didn’t do anything on a first date?” she mumbled, her skin tingling into goose bumps when she felt his breath skate across her.

Chuckling, he yanked her to her feet and gripped her wrist in his hand loosely. Her heart hammered in her chest, thundering away when he stepped closer to her, bending and leaning forward until she could smell the wine on him. “I don’t. But if I had to make exceptions to that rule, Princess, you’d be the first girl on my dance card.”

Mallory couldn’t back away if she wanted to, her pale eyes sinking into his dark ones. The room felt claustrophobic and tight, too empty and dangerous. “Good thing this isn’t really a date, then.”

His eyes scanned her face in the dim light and seemed to be satisfied with whatever he was looking for. “I should walk you home though. These hallways and walkways aren’t always so safe, especially when you’re not armed.”

“Well whose fault is that?” she muttered, her lips curving into a genuine smile.

Negan barked in laughter, those eyes dancing again. “See, there you are, coming for my balls again,” he rambled, making no move to let her get away or have any space. “Goddamn it, I have fucking missed that mouth of yours.”

“Now you’re just being crass,” she said, sliding her hand so their fingers intertwined instead, her stomach whirling around at the heat emanating from his body.

“Crass is my middle name,” Negan smirked down at her again, seemingly not caring that she’d taken his hand like old times. “You are gonna come to dinner again, aren’t you Mallory?” he asked, though they both knew it wasn’t a question.

His spare hand reached up and slid into her hair, thumb scraping over the pulse point in her neck. She shivered on the spot, the alcohol turning her mind into mush, memories crashing and desire building. Mal had to have had three glasses with dinner, maybe more.

“If you’re nice to me, I can be nice to you,” she mumbled, trying to slide away from him and finding his hand on her skin almost too much to bare. “Quid pro quo.”

Negan smirked and nodded once before pulling the hand from her hair, that spike of alcohol-fuelled desire abating as he let go. “Good,” he said, his voice rougher. “Let’s get you home before you do something you’ll regret tomorrow.”

Mallory nodded in agreement, taking a steadier breath as she gathered herself back from her tipsy stupor. He led her by the hand back to her room, keeping a courteous distance between them before he dismissed the guard by her door and slipped the key to her room into her own tingling palm, an open invitation. Negan hadn’t said a word as he walked away, whistling to himself.
She stared at the damn key all night.

Chapter End Notes

Well there it is. I hope you liked reading this thing. If you did, please leave this poor writer some love in the comments down the bottom and thank you if you ever have. You're the best.

Come back soon for another installment and in the meantime, come and check me out on Tumblr where I am currently taking requests and asks for Negan fics.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

At the piano, she comes alive again. No man is going to tear her away from the music she's making and the naive bubble Mal's found herself in. When Negan's gone out of the picture though, Simon takes it upon himself to do a little digging around her head and breaks her down in a way nobody else has in the Sanctuary. When a different Negan comes back with an offering, she can't imagine it's anything she'll want.

Until it is.

Rated M for sex and mentions of violence.

Chapter Notes

Hello again and thanks for sticking with me. I hope this one's making up for the hiatus while I got my writing mojo back in line. It took me a few goes to get this chapter right but I'm happy and so here we are. A giant thank you goes to my Beta, Mayboo13 for providing me with the quickest beta service I've ever had in my life. If you need a Beta, there is nobody better.

Also this chapter is for the wonderful people who left a comment on any chapter here, and particularly NannaBanana in the last chapter when I was in a drought. All of it means everything to me so thanks for every single one of you. I hope this chapter brings you some happiness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the world first fell, Mallory made music out of pain. In those crashing storms, the thumps of her own heartbeat gained rapid ground, her footsteps thundered on dried earth, and bursting breaths pulsed in her chest to make song. The rhythms fuelled her, and she poured herself into composing symphonies. Each Biter she cut down with her Bowie knife was a crescendo to her masterpiece.

Real music found her again, though, nudged from the blood and guts and resurrected by the last person on earth she thought possible. At Negan’s piano, the real songs melted out of her fingers and into the keys like they’d never left her heart. She loved every damn note the more she played. The roaring crescendos weren’t made from thudding heartbeats and cracks of skulls but from real, godforsaken music. She could – and did – play whatever the fuck she wanted. Nobody stopped her; nobody wanted to or dared to try.

Music made her human again and she brought it out in everyone. More than one person dissolved into grief-stricken tears when she sat and played in The Sanctuary. She played out whole marriages, first dances, first kisses, last kisses; songs rooted in memories that didn’t belong to her. Playing on feelings she hadn’t felt. Mal got better at seeing them in people, she got better at smiling, better at tears. People broke before her just from the sound of music while she got stronger and stronger with every passing note. It was an odd sort of hold she had over the powerful and powerless alike. One
morning she had tried out Edelweiss and swore blind that Arat behind her had flinched visibly: Mallory counted that as the best victory she’d had there. Music seemed to move even the hardest and coldest of souls, if she found the right notes to play.

All too soon every day, her time would run out and she would blend into the crowd again, as powerless as anyone else. Mallory would walk back to her room under the watchful guard of some guy or another even as she pushed and pushed for more time to play, asking each guard she was given for just one more song. They never caved. From feeling panic and fear at her piano, Mal now counted the hours one by one until she got to play for the crowd, her fingers hitting keys made of thin air when they shook in the need for more.

After the third morning of playing, Mallory found that a stack of new books – trashy romance novels, an anthology of poetry and a book on astronomy – had been placed surreptitiously on her desk by the only person who could leave them there; no note in sight because she had no need of one. Two more mornings later, there was a white washcloth and fresh soaps and shampoos, all smelling of citrus and sweet peas. Negan was tossing roses at her after each performance, hoping she’d take the bait. Mal left them where they lie.

On the seventh morning, Simon had been watching over her from the edge of the room for a few minutes before he jogged over to interrupt her playing. Mallory hadn’t seen Negan in a day or two and even then, it was a sparse glimpse between his meetings: she considered Simon a poorer substitute for his boss, even though he’d picked up the swagger and the piercing stare alongside his own disconcerting weirdness.

“Hey, kid, scooch up. You’re gonna play me something,” he called out to her in the middle of an upbeat song, people glancing over towards them as the music stopped abruptly like she was in some strange game of musical statues. Simon didn’t seem to notice her annoyance, or care about it as he sat down on the bench beside her anyway, pushing her ass over as he did so. Her skin bristled at the invasion and she slid as far as she could.

“Like what?” she asked curtly, watching people around them turn away.

He rifled through the reams of sheet music balanced on the stand in front of her, most of them written by her own hand from her memory. “You got any Queen? Man, I was a fucking prog-rocker back in the day but I guess you’re too young to remember them in their prime, aren’t you? In diapers when Freddie was pounding out the hits in the 80’s.”

“Everyone knows Queen, you’d have to live under a rock not to,” she sassed back, trying not to laugh at the image of Simon singing Queen at the top of his lungs. He probably had a full head of hair back then too. “You wanna sing something? I don’t have a microphone, so you’ll have to project for the people in the back. Emote from the diaphragm so it’ll travel further.” Mal smiled outwardly this time, keeping her attention on her own hands as she started to play a bar or two of Under Pressure.

Simon smiled in return; the corners of his eyes creased up but there was a coldness lying underneath she didn’t want to see. “I like you better when you’re being sassy, Mallory,” he muttered, leaning sideways into her bubble. “I kinda get the attraction now.”

“I bet you do,” she muttered mostly to herself. Their toing-and-froing in the Hilltop wasn’t far from her mind – he had pressed a gun to her back and she had taunted him in return, her ego heightening around the man like it didn’t around Negan. There was no hiding with her ex-lover, but with Simon she could fake her ego and wear it pridefully, talking back to him like she thought she was immortal. Mal’s skin still prickled at Simon’s proximity to her, aware of the weapons he had on his person. She didn’t think he’d have the mind to kill her – especially not in front of witnesses who’d give him up in
a heartbeat – but the threat hung there nonetheless, like lightning waiting to crack the sky.

Simon was more unpredictable than anyone she was around since he had the strength to wrap a wiry hand around her throat and strangle the life out of her. Mal didn’t think anyone would actively stop him. Instead of thinking any further about a hand at her throat, Mallory kept her focus on remembering how to play the song, striking the notes that little bit harder than necessary.

“That’s the fucking sweet shit right there,” he groaned after a moment, tapping the top of the piano along with the rhythm. “Queen and Bowie. One giant blow job to entire fucking music industry.”

“Did Negan send you, then?” she asked almost rhetorically, ignoring his attempt to put her off-kilter. “Put his right-hand man on babysitting duty instead of by his side.”

“Oh no, no, no, no. Honey, Negan’s out of town on business, so to speak,” he grinned suddenly and gave a breathy laugh. “So, you’re all mine today,” Simon poked at her nose. “And mine tomorrow. And probably the next day, too. He’s not gonna be around until he’s done cleaning up other people’s shit. So really, I guess you’re my fucking pianist now. Look how that turned out.”

Her stomach faltered as she tried to keep the song going, the idea of Negan being gone suddenly looking like a bad thing. “And where’s he headed to now? Knock over some old folks’ home, steal a couple Zimmer frames for you and the other old bastards?”

Simon tutted and elbowed her in the side lightly, jostling her fingers. “Now, I may not be the brightest little lightbulb in the box, but I am still fairly goddamn sure it ain’t none of your business where he is. Don’t worry, I’ll treat you nice and sweet; comb your hair, sing you to sleep. You’re his favourite little doll, after all, he won’t want a hair out of place when he gets back and I don’t want a shit storm of angry Negan coming my way now, do I?”

“Which begs the question,” Mal snapped. “Why are you here with me? You must have better shit to do. Nobody’s attacking me out here and I doubt you’ve got the balls to.”

“I just couldn’t turn down a brilliant opportunity to get to know the new favourite better. All his girls just love a bit of company, long as they mind their fucking manners around them. Don’t want you getting lonely on me, Mallory. Just ain’t gentlemanly.” Simon beamed widely, and almost genuinely, at her again. She didn’t understand the sincerity. “Wanna play twenty questions?”

Mallory kept her rhythm going, trying to keep from going faster as her head turned in five different directions. “What could you possibly want to know about me that you haven’t already heard from your boyfriend?”

His hand flexed and twitched on the side of the glossed piano, his veins and callouses a stark contrast to the shiny surface. He was just as rough as she remembered from all their encounters – he was covered in scars and pock-marks, shoulders wider and meatier too; he’d obviously worked his ass off and then some judging by the muscle on his form. Negan was so different – lean and slim, more like a runner than a boxer. She knew Simon’s whack packed a hard punch.

Simon seemed genuinely interested as he leaned closer into her space, fixating his curious gaze on her forehead. “Does that still hurt you?” he asked, gesturing up to the pink scar on her head. “I got chewed out something awful for it, you know. Lost my temper when you ripped that chunk out of my leg.”


He looked pleased as punch. “Doesn’t it just wind you up that ain’t nobody wanna talk to you in the
morning times, except me? From what I hear, only the kids’ll go near you.”

There was a stabbing pain in her chest for a fleeting moment before it disappeared. “No. I don’t care about that.”

“Ooh baby, you’re a terrible liar!” Simon chuckled again and she fantasised about jabbing a pencil into his eye until it popped. “But hey, so am I.”

“My turn,” Mal shot back, wearing her ego like armour. “Do you hate me because I’m a woman? Because I caught you with a knife? Or is it because I’m in between you and Negan?”

Simon snapped and grabbed the back of her neck tightly though it wasn’t enough to leave a bruise or a mark. She froze. “That’s really rude to interrupt my game. Really, really, rude. But I’m gonna let it go because I am a nice guy. I’m reasonable, I’m amenable. Whatever stick you got lodged up your ass, honey, I suggest you pull it out quick.” He let go of her and she let out a breath. “And I don’t hate you. You have to care about a person to hate them…” his fingers threaded her hair back away from her face the same way Negan did, though it felt so much more different. “Hate and love aren’t opposite.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that one,” she said, heart hammering in her chest as she went back to start the song again. Mal felt better when she had something to distract her from Simon’s presence next to her, his volatility worsening. “Ooh I got another question,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. “How many times did he fuck you up against a piano? Did you cross it off your bucket list?”

Mal’s eyes roared into angry fire. “Zero. And no,” she lied. “It wasn’t on there.”

“Do you miss being free?” he asked. “Do you miss killing Biters, acting like a leader? From what I heard, you had a mightily shitty job out there but I know you’ve got some skills in your back pocket.”

“Yeah, I really miss the sweat and filth and grabbing for whatever scraps we could get. Jesus,” she shook her head, the anger making her say stupid things. “Just because I got you in the leg doesn’t mean I’m the best in the world,” Mal laughed curtly. “Men and their egos, I swear to God. Why don’t you all just walk around with your dicks out so you can measure them up against one another and do it that way?”

He didn’t say a word. He just stared, his eyes creasing as he broke into a wide, beaming smile. “You do miss it,” he said, clapping her over the shoulder. Her rhythm faltered again as he jarred her, pissing her off even further. “I fucking knew it; you miss being out there, it’s why you’re so uptight. Man, I really thought it was because you haven’t screwed anyone yet but dang… I was wrong as shit. You know, baby, I can put a good word in for you with the boss man, get you back out in the field. Who knows, maybe you’ll actually be fucking useful for once.”

“You’re just as batshit crazy as he is,” Mallory replied, at the end of her tether. People around them had gone back to their conversations, keeping their distance away from Simon and Mallory and their games. “I am never, ever going out there with you and your Scooby Squad,” she said, snatching her sheet music out of his hands and gathering the papers before jumping up from the piano bench. Her temper flared, hand itching to punch this asshole in the face.

“Come on! Negan seems to think that the sun shines out of your ass, Mallory,” Simon called after her, jogging to catch up as she stormed off. “Says that you’re better than any I got waiting in the wings to come up. Maybe he’s wrong,” he taunted. “Maybe you don’t have the guts to do it anymore. Look at you, sitting at that fucking toy he gave you, getting fat around the edges. Yeah I
see that tight ass wiggle a little bit, baby. I just love watching you walk away.”

Mallory clenched her fists as Simon stepped in front of her path, seeing that he wasn’t going to drop the damn bone from his jaws. “You’re not goading me into getting out into a line of friendly fire, Simon,” she muttered sweetly, walking around him. “I wasn’t born yesterday, no matter what you think.”

Simon followed her as she walked away from him, glaring at their spectators. “All I ever fucking hear is Mallory this and Mallory that; it’s a fucking broken record. I just want to see you put your money where your pretty little mouth is, sweetheart, see if you’re any better use as something other than a radio.”

When he slid in front of her to block the side door, Mal took a step back, an annoyed look on her face. “Look, I’ll put this in language you can understand,” she muttered softly, her confidence heightening again. “I not listening to your bullshit. You’re scared to death of me and I don’t know if that’s because of what Negan told you or because I one-upped you or Hell, if you feel that threatened by a skinny girl with a smart mouth, but I’m not buying what you’re selling. You want me dead? Come kill me, see how it works out for you. Don’t try make it look like an accident out in the field so you don’t have that shit storm of angry Negan coming at you with Lucille. Did I catch your real game?”

Simon folded wiry, steel arms in front of his chest and held her there, unrelenting in his fortitude. “I know that you miss the rush, Mallory. We both know that’s not bullshit and if half of what he’s told me is true, you really would be a God-sent fucking asset out there. I can get you suited and booted in no time, work off some of that anger you got bubbling under there.”

As she chewed on her bottom lip, Mal felt an itch under her neck she couldn’t reach to scratch. “You’d never trust me and I’d never trust you, let alone anyone else in your boy band. They all see me the way you do.” She caught his eye, her own gaze hardening as much as she could make it. “But, uh, just so you know, if it was a fair fight between you and me… I’d win.”

“Got no doubt there, kid,” Simon replied with something indiscernible in his voice. “But I don’t like fighting fair. It’s boring as shit and you’re better than that,” he trailed off and stepped aside only imperceptibly, a weird smile on his face.

“Guess it’ll have to be an unfair one then…” Mallory muttered before she deliberately pushed past him, feeling the heat of his eyes firmly trained on her back as she walked away.

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It started like all the other days.

Mallory would wake up, play her songs, keep her eye out for the guards and laugh with the kids, teach them a few notes and leave again. It was routine, it was normal, repeated over and over again. She found it easy to forget Simon, about Peter and it was even easier to forget about the threats over her head. She had even let Negan trail willingly from her mind in favour of a simple life.

Until she found the man himself three days later, sitting on her bed with his head hung low, blood and dirt smeared and spattered in a painting across his t-shirt. Her shoulders sagged and she opened her mouth to speak, pissed that her space had been invaded yet again. There hadn’t been sight of him in days and he came back to her now, covered in filth?

One of Negan’s hands shot up at Mallory as soon as she took a breath to speak. His eyes were still glued to the floor, unmoving and unbending. “Just don’t, for once. Shut the fucking door and don’t
say a word before you do.” Alarm bells rang in her head at the sound of his voice, cracked and hoarse, wavering under a weight. He didn’t look injured from where she could see and the blood was sticky on his skin, not fresh and weeping.

A silence passed between them as Mal shut the door behind her in reluctant compliance, rubbing the back of her neck as exhaustion set in. “I didn’t know you were back,” she murmured, standing near the door as if waiting for an invitation to come forwards. “Simon must not have-”

“Simon doesn’t know,” Negan grumbled low in his chest, interrupting her again. “I slipped in a couple hours ago. Nobody else knows and it’s gonna fucking stay that way.”

It was there. She could see it as she took a few steps towards him. His hand gripped the edge of the bed too tightly, knuckles almost white behind the purple tones. His eyes looked hollow when he finally decided to look up at her, as cold and as dead as a tree lying in a forest, deep and empty. “Negan…” she started, cataloguing everything she noticed as she came carefully closer. The alarm bells didn’t stop – Mal had only found him like this once before.

“Don’t, just… fucking don’t, Mallory.” His dead eyes finally snapped back into fire at her again, reminding her vividly of all the times he had felt hollow and angry at the world for Lucille’s cancer. This wasn’t the Negan they all knew downstairs; the one that they feared was constructed of mania and personality quirks with a barbed-wire bat. This was the Negan that Mal was scared shitless of – a raw, pulsating nerve that turned her into someone who needed to control it, to comfort him. Mal never could manage it.

She was quiet for the longest time, trying not to let her trepidation show in front of him, even though he was so obviously wrapped up in his own mind. God only knew what the fuck had happened out there to turn him back into this wreck of a man, the one she’d only glimpsed at the lowest of his ebbs.

“Why are you sitting in here?” she asked softly and slowly. No answer came and Mallory sighed, trying to find her voice again, standing resolutely away from him. “Is that your blood?”

Negan looked away again, a scowl on his face as he saw the pile of reading materials sitting on her desk. “I really should have fucking stipulated that Caroline get you books you’d actually like and not that trashy Kathleen Cookson shit,” he groused, gripping her sheets hard enough to rip the seams. “Fucking people, Mallory, fuck them. Fuck the whole fucking lot of them!” he raged, leaping up and stalking towards her suddenly, spitting fire until he stopped in the middle of the room. His shoulders swaggered like a caged animal, feet trekking across the width of the room. “I ought to burn this place, all of ‘em, burn them to the fucking ground. Go to war…”

“Why?” she asked, not trusting her own voice to remain steady. “What happened? Simon told me you were out on business.”

Chuckling dryly, he seemed to be trying to contain his anger away from her body; she could see how he was holding himself back like he used to, keeping all of it inside tight under pressure. The one slip had only ever been when he had come in and fucked her roughly up against a wall – neither of them knew how to funnel furious anger without sex or violence. Mal was terrified.

“Simon’s got a giant fucking mouth on him lately,” Negan said, though she thought it was mostly to himself. He groaned again and tore himself further away from her, his fists clenching and unclenching, a pulsating grip that struggled to contain his anger. “Alexandria’s a dead town,” he mumbled reluctantly, eyes darting to the floor and back to her. “What fucking more do I have to do before that asshole gets that I’m in fucking charge around here?!”
Mallory winced as he slammed his fist into a wall, broken bits of plaster and blood flaking off along with the skin of his knuckles. Negan’s shoulders hunched over and the anger seemed to dissipate slowly into stoicism as he shook out the pain from his hand. Her breath quickened.

“Look,” Mal said, trying to think of something to keep him calmer, keep him from yelling and breaking shit and raging around. “Just sit the fuck back down, you’re trailing blood all over my clean floor.”

“My floor, you mean,” he shot back but complied, slumping back down to sit on her bed. The floor was indeed sticky with bloody, muddy boot prints, creating maps of his steps.

“What…” Mallory snapped back, dashing into her wash room to wet a cloth. She gripped the edge of the porcelain and breathed deeply, feeling her hand shake and her nerves steel once more. Her blood thrummed in its veins and refused to stop the adrenaline flowing through her. Negan was terrifying when he was like this because he was terrified too; she had never known a man as brutal and raw as him. Mal had only seen it on a rare occasion but still something thumped in her chest, egging on the danger. She could feel the grip on her body, how he would drive himself inside her as she tried to make him better. Her own skin prickled in danger and desire.

Mallory wrung out her new washcloth quickly and peered into the bedroom, lingering at the doorway slightly. Negan looked up at her, catching the washcloth when she tossed it at him and holding it for a second. “Before you nag at me like you’re my long dead mother,” he muttered more calmly, wiping off the sticky blood flecks with a rough palm. “I didn’t kill anyone. I should have. Should have torn the whole place a-fucking-part. Rest assured, that will be the last fucking warning that prick’s gonna get.”

If that was a warning, she didn’t want to see a real threat. “I’m sure it will,” she murmured in reply, watching him clean himself. “You go alone?”

Negan caught her eyes and shook his head in denial. “About a week ago, I sent out a team of four or five, thinking they could handle it. Got word down from someone that Rick’s motherfucking moron party were holding back on us, not keeping up their end. Can’t fucking trust anyone with a job, Mallory, can’t trust a goddamn soul. I had to go do it all on my own, yet again.”

“And that Rick guy?” she asked, afraid of the answer given the state of Negan.

The washcloth glided down his arm and Negan grinned in sick victory. “I went down and I beat the living shit out of that ungrateful, motherfucking asswipe. Trust me, Mallory, he makes one more move to cheat me again and I’ll burn that whole fucking town to the ground and piss on the embers. He’s slaughtered my men, conned me out of my fucking property and now he’s trying to whisper shit in my ear about you… I can’t let that fucking crap slide, Princess, I am not an asshole that he’s free to fuck.”

“He threatened me?” Mal asked half in shock, taking steps towards him as her own ire spiked up. “He doesn’t even know me, why would he threaten me?”

Negan barked in laughter, staring up at her like she was an idiot. “I’m sorry, did you hit your head again? I watched you stand directly in front of his fucking line of sight back at the Hilltop. He knows what you did – Hell, they all know what you did. Your reputation’s starting to precede you. Rick don’t know shit about who you are to me but he saw what happened at Hilltop and he is mightily pissed off about it. He wants to come after us, after you, I’d better fucking me dead or he’ll wish I was. That wasn’t a fucking threat, it was a promise, and now he’s put his dick on the table, trying to measure up to me by threatening my sweet girl,” his voice cracked with his vehemence. “I’ll waste them all, every single fucking person there.”
“What did he say?” Mallory pressed, her own voice morphing into a growling menace.

Negan looked away, down at his knuckles as he cleaned them. “Back when I first laid eyes on that asshole, I killed his friends and I did what I had to do to get him in fucking line. Even then, the bastard looked me right in the eye as cold as fucking ice and said I was dead already. Now he’s coming and leaning into my ear again and saying, ‘she’s dead too,’” Negan growled. “And I fucking snapped.”

Her mind blanked. Everything burned, her hands shook and clenched like his had before in want of a weapon. The blood rushing to her ears heated her skin, heart pounding in her stomach. “You… reckless fucking moron,” Mallory stuttered, enraged and shocked. “You have no idea. You’re inciting this asshole to go to war, put all these people here at fucking risk because he said three goddamn words? That was your last straw? Are you insane?! You beat him half to death, it’s not gonna do shit to make him scared if he wasn’t already, it’s not gonna do anything except make people want to take you on. Big man with the giant balls, swinging that fucking bat around like you’re untouchable… I can’t believe you’d be such a fucking idiot. Rick conned you, Negan – he conned you good. Now he knows where to hit you: square in my chest.”

“I can’t show goddamn weakness, Mallory,” Negan argued back almost as vehemently. “You give this asshole a fucking inch and he takes a mile!” He looked up at her with clearer eyes, piercing and eerily calm. “And pardon my goddamn French but where do you get off telling me how to keep people safe?”

Mallory blanched in her anger, her eyes widening at his accusation as she stalked towards him, blazed and red-cheeked. “Excuse me?”

“You heard. You wouldn’t know how to make tough decisions if I gave you a fucking manual! You got everybody in your group killed because you couldn’t take a hard line. That was your fucking mistake, it’s not going to be mine! Rick won’t fucking hesitate, he’s not some gutless wonder like you are-”

Mal smacked him square in the cheek, her whole body shaking as she dealt the blow with all she had, Negan’s head snapping backwards. “You’re a son of a fucking bitch!” she cried out, her voice quaking and broken.

Negan shook his jaw out, the washcloth discarded on the sheets, soaking through the cotton. Mal turned to get away from him, arrested in her motions as his rough hand wrapped easily around her left forearm. She was suddenly wrenched towards him with his vice-like grip.

“Stop,” he growled, eyes darkening as she stood above him, struggling to pull away. It was taking all she had not to hit him again. “Just fucking stop it, Mallory.”

“Stop what?” she growled, staring him down with stabbing anger. “Stop caring that you’re going to get yourself in deep shit and that everyone here’s gonna suffer because of it? Stop being fucking angry that you think so little of me still, after everything?!”

Negan’s nostrils flared as he held her gaze with his, his face still a little dirty and flecked with blood around the edges he’d missed. She could see a shadow of a bruise around one of his eyes, something that she couldn’t have seen before he’d been clean. Rick had taken a swing at him, too; a mistake not many people made and yet he said he hadn’t killed anyone there.

Then he licked his bottom lip and Mallory’s anger stuttered, her heart pounding in her ears. This was too close, too raw, too real, too much. She could feel the heat from where she stood, drawing her in to those dark and stormy eyes as his grip on her changed.
“Stop pretending that you still hate me. I’m not buying it, Princess, not for a second,” Negan muttered slowly, his spare hand twitching. His eyes darted down the length of her body, her thighs rubbing together imperceptibly as she stumbled in her anger at him. Everything came flooding back and drowned her – all the sex, all the laughter, all the pain and happiness and love choking her hatred and fear back down until the man in front of her was just the Negan she had loved; brutal, honest, fierce and now he was willing to do anything to protect her.

“Negan…” Mal couldn’t move anywhere, her legs frozen in place as he splayed his palm across her hip, nudging the edge of her shirt up over her stomach an inch or so. His thumbnail caught the edge of one of her puckered scars, the skin pink and soft and almost tender under his whisper of a touch. Tentatively, he let go of her wrist, his body almost willing her to back away and stop it. “I would let cities of people fucking fall and die in agony before I let him hurt you, Mallory,” his voice rumbled below her. She could have so easily pushed back, got out of his grip. He’d never force her to move a direction she didn’t want to move.

“I know,” Mallory replied through gritted teeth, willing her skin not to break into goose bumps or her voice to not sound like it used to. She didn’t move.

His other palm mimicked its partner and held her other hip, nudging the edge of her shirt up and away from her jeans until a stripe of bare, vulnerable flesh was on view. Fingers threaded through his hair, Mal tugging at the strands between her fingers until it must have burned him. Breath ghosted across the bare skin of her stomach and he licked his lips, watching her closely through hooded lids. She slid further forwards to stand between his splayed thighs.

“I miss you,” he admitted, voice low. “Please.”

Thin lips kissed above her bellybutton, daring to taste her soft clean skin. Mallory melted and shifted her thighs, judging her options as he got closer to the limit.

“I can’t do this again,” she muttered, arresting his movements.

“Don’t tell me you don’t miss me too,” he chuckled darkly, getting cockier by the second. “I can smell it on you, you know. I can see it.”

He leant back in for another kiss at her stomach and Mallory backed away from his grip, shoving her shirt back down. Her heart thudded in her chest at what she’d nearly done, falling back under the spell of desire and memory.

“No, not yet,” she said after a moment to get herself back together. “If you ever knew or cared anything about me, Negan, you know why I can’t just go jumping back into your bed. It was a mistake the first time and I’m not going to repeat it again.”

Tension rifled through both of them but he nodded eventually, letting out a frustrated huff from his nose. “You really fucking know how to work a man up into a mess, Princess, I’ll give you that. I was a fucking idiot to let you get away.”

Mal laughed curtly at that and picked up the washcloth, sitting back down beside him on the bed. “You threw me away, Negan. I didn’t leave. I’m still picking myself back up again.”

“Ah fuck,” he muttered. “I have made a lot of fucking mistakes in my time, but that one might be right up there on top of the Christmas tree.”

“I can watch my own back,” she said softly, looking at him as he calmed himself back down. “Even your Gal Friday said he wants me on his team.”
Negan chuckled as he sat upright, staring down at the floor again. “Probably said it so you’d go out there, get yourself killed or something. He thinks you’re a distraction.”

“He’s probably got a point there, though,” Mal replied, wiping at the dirt and blood smeared across the back of his neck. “He can try and take me out if he wants, it’s not gonna work.”

“What, Simon or Rick?” Negan asked, turning his head as she cleaned him off.

“Both,” she murmured, tucking her hair back before he could reach out and make her weaken again. “Let ’em try. Maybe I won’t win but I’ll put up one Hell of a fight.”

“That little prick’s gonna get what’s coming to him,” Negan replied, his tone even as the anger dissipated. “Should’ve killed him today.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked, genuinely curious. There was a hesitancy when it came to Negan and his inaction against this great enemy she had yet to meet. “You could’ve done it a hundred ways, a hundred times. You would’ve killed anyone else who talked back to you like that, without threatening me too.”

Negan avoided her eyes and instead brushed off the dirt from his shirt. “Maybe you should think about Simon’s offer,” he said eventually. “Even if it was a ploy. We might need anyone we can get our hands on to defend the people here who can’t fucking defend themselves.” He turned and looked at her as if he wanted to say something but thought better of it, instead depositing the new – now bloodied and dirty – washcloth back into her hands before he stood up and strode towards the door.

“You should come visit me some time when you’re ready, Princess. I think it’d do us both some good.”

It wasn’t until he was gone that Mallory let out the breath she’d been holding, shuddering to think how close she’d come to jumping back full throttle without thinking. She laid back on the bed, still feeling the ghost of his smirk on her stomach and the tingle that lingered up her spine.

***

Contrary to everything he had promised her in the beginning, their relationship wasn’t easy. Or, at the very least, it wasn’t easy on her.

When she looked back on the games he had played, on the things he’d said and done, Mallory couldn’t – beyond reasonable doubt – claim that he had duped her into falling in love with him. She thought women who fucked around with older men only did it for either money or sex, not because they thought it’d end up in anything like love. She wasn’t much different in the beginning, she supposed.

Negan was the definition of charm and charisma, a magnet who drew everything and everyone into his insanity so that you were either everything to him or nothing to him. He would look at her and every doubt she had about herself would melt away into nothingness with that lascivious smile. God, he drove her crazy, like injecting fire into her soul. Being away from him in the beginning had been frustrating but now, months in, it was impossible.

It wasn’t fair on anyone, she supposed. Not Lucille, not Negan, not herself or the lives that were going to come screeching to a halt when Lucille would eventually die. It was wrong, so very fucking wrong, to want a dying woman to die even quicker. Mallory felt her jealousy fester in her stomach more in the two weeks Lucille was stuck in the hospital than she had in her whole life. He was gone before she was awake that first night; in the next fourteen days, she had come home every night to find him waiting on her couch. How he had managed to get a key to her apartment, she didn’t know.
But he would do what he did before and would always do; avoid her eyes, bury his face in her neck and make her come around him until he could sleep like the dead.

Maybe it was the only way he could sleep anymore. He hadn’t crashed at hers for three nights running and she figured that something had happened. Those three nights on her own were nothing short of painful, wondering and waiting for news. It wasn’t like she could go down and ask with the woman’s whole family there. Negan, of course, wouldn’t forgive her for it and would cut Mallory out of his life like she was the cancer rotting Lucille away. Her own mother had warned her about dating a man who was un-dateable. She should have listened, Mal thought.

She finished work one night, exhausted and dressed up to the nines after playing a private concert to find her front door barely open. Negan sat on her couch, his feet up on the coffee table and a beer in his hand, staring up at the ceiling like he’d never missed a day.

“She’s coming home tomorrow,” he said without missing a beat.

Mallory dumped her keys and purse on her little side table, kicking the door closed until it snapped properly. “Close the front door next time. If there’s a next time,” she muttered, kicking off her shoes. “Any old man could get in.”

“One did,” Negan said, tilting his head back down, still not looking at her. “You’re late tonight.”

“Had a thing,” she replied, padding wearily towards him on the couch. “Look, if you came here for a fuck and a bed to crash on again, you can just go find a fucking motel and a hooker or something. It’s late and I can’t do this now.”

Swigging his beer, Negan snapped his eyes towards her and stared, blank-faced as he clocked her clothes. “Fuck’re you wearing that for?” he demanded.

“I do when it’s for the goddamn Mayor,” she said. “I played a fundraiser tonight. Made a thousand dollars and got three propositions from potential sugar daddies. I was having a good night until you turned up and left your muddy boots on my carpet.”

Negan stared up at her blankly. “So, you got all dressed up to play a piano?” he asked after a moment, Mallory still standing over him. “Or were you already lining up the next sucker…”

Rolling her eyes, she picked his boots up off the floor and shoved them into his stomach. “Go home, Negan, shit, I don’t care. Go anywhere but here.”

He didn’t move and just stared at her, shoving the boots back down. “She’s coming home whether you want her to or not, Mallory. I can’t change it, I don’t want to. She’s…” he stopped when his voice creaked a little, and she could see the redness around his eyes. “You’d like her if you ever met her.”

Her resolve crumbling again, as it always did, Mal reached up and unclipped her hair from her head, letting the red locks fall over her shoulders. She had wanted to cut her hair before but he’d
asked her not to; she wasn’t used to the weight. “Does Lucille make you happy?” she asked, watching as his eyes traversed her body from top to toe. “Does she fuck you like I can fuck you?”

“She used to,” he mumbled, reaching his hand out to grab at her leg.

Mal smacked it back from her thigh and shot him a glare. “We’re going to have to call this the last time. I can’t go through this shit again.”

A smile piqued at his eyes as she pulled the skirt of her dress up and peeled off her white underwear, stepping out of them. “It’s not gonna be the last time, Mallory,” he said, leaning back as she climbed to straddle his lap. “Never will.”

“Stop talking,” she muttered, cupping his face in her hand and leaning it back slowly into the light. “Just let me have this one. I know I’m yours. You know I’m yours.” Mallory leant in and kissed him slowly, pressing her whole body to his.

Negan rubbed gently at her back, his fingers running over the lace and finding her curves, not intent to get her naked or to run the show but content in holding her and letting her go at the pace she wanted. Mallory gave a contented sigh as she leant back from his lips and knew he was right: whatever she would do in the future that didn’t involve him, it would always be in the back of her mind that she belonged to Negan. She could settle, find a husband and have a kid, buy a home. It didn’t matter – she was his.

“Mallory-” he started, sliding her skirt up her legs again.

“Shh,” she whispered, arresting his hand and instead taking over the job for herself. “It’s all mine tonight.”

He gave her a little growl of frustration in the back of his throat but nodded in acquiescence, lifting his hips as she wrenched open his dark jeans to palm his cock. “Fuck…”

Mallory kissed the moan from his lips and pulled him out of his jeans, already wet enough to take him. She could get used to being in charge if the way his eyes were blown and dark were any evidence to go by. They burned at the buttons on the front of her dress but he stuck to her rule and made no move to get them open.

“You want to get your mouth on me?” she asked huskily, feeling the slickness grow between her thighs. “Suck my tits as I ride you?”

“Fuck yes,” he groaned in bliss as she wrapped her hand back around his cock in reward. “Want to taste that sweet flesh, Princess. Take it off for me,” he begged. “Please.”

Smirking, Mallory popped each button slow enough to drive him insane, taking each button right down to her naval and spreading open the sides of her dress to show him the bare breasts waiting for him to taste. She threaded her fingers through his hair and brought his mouth to her, his lips and teeth automatically sucking and lathing on her skin while his hands wrapped around her hips.

She cried out in pleasure when he sucked on the underside of her breast enough to sting and messily shoved up her own skirts to get him inside her. Mal craved his touch, his lips, his breath because it gave her everything she wanted – power, excitement, that adrenaline running through her like fuel. Lifting her, she slid both of them back and sunk down on him slowly, eeking out the pleasure as he stretched her wet cunt.

“Fuck,” she gasped as Negan grunted into her chest, obviously restraining himself from driving up. “Fuck, fuck, yes…”
“Ride me,” he groaned and looked slightly up, craning to see her. “My gorgeous little redhead.”

Mallory gripped one hand on the back of the couch and rode him slowly, up and down until her thighs burned. Negan seemed happy to watch her impale herself on his cock again and again, his hands twitching and fingers digging into her thighs.

“Negan,” she gasped out when he gave up and thrust up into her, meeting her as she rode him. His twitching fingers inched to her cunt and rubbed delicately at her swollen clit, bursting her into life.

Skin and muscle burning, she rode him harder, driving his cock deep into her like it really was the last time. His thumb worked a rhythm quick on her clit and mouth lathed at any skin he could reach when she leant forward to make herself come. “Fucking beautiful, Princess,” Negan growled like an animal, thrusting up yet again. “Fucking soak me.”

Mal screamed and came all at once, a rush of blood soaring around her and setting herself alight with pleasure. Negan buried himself deep inside her and stuttered a few more times before he came inside her with a shout, clawing at her thigh.

Panting, she twisted back to look at him as her haze fell away, watching his brain click into place again. “Stay tonight,” she commanded quietly.

All he had to do was nod and he was hers again for a few more hours.

***

Her room was dark and empty, cold and warm at the same time. Mallory hadn’t been able to get Negan out of her mind all day, not with the way he had kissed her skin and gripped her hips. Still, she had backed away and was proud of that fact even if it didn’t fix her damaged walls or clean the dirt and blood from her carpet. The quiet was always too quiet at the end of the world. Some nights she used to hum songs or tried to remember poems she had learned in school, even a Bible verse or two from her youth and her father. They were patches on a gaping wound now she was here, her mind whirring around even in the middle of the night.

Peter used to snore a lot, she remembered that. Jackson and Brit would talk for an hour or two, maybe, before they would fool around and only then fall asleep. Hunter made light conversation when it was her watch, not wanting Mal to be alone, before he would grab his hip flask and say goodnight. She missed the sound of other people; she missed their clothes, their empty water bottles, their smiles.

It was useless to mourn anymore. She’d never do anything but. No, all Mallory had for company was the deep sound of her own breathing and her heartbeat in her ear. It didn’t make for good music.

The click and creak of her bedroom door startled her and she sat up slightly in bed, just tilting her head up even though she knew there would only be one person to look in on her in the middle of the night, her body curled half in and half out of her sheets. Negan stepped towards her wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung sweat pants and clean skin.

He clocked her eyes and chuckled softly, like he was expecting her to be awake. Neither said anything as she sighed and laid back down in her bed, too tired to fight another fight. She didn’t know what this was, what he wanted, but she was too tired to care. He must have called off any guard who was stationed outside her door, if he didn’t want them eavesdropping.

Mallory and Negan just watched one another as he pulled up a crumpled sheet from the bottom of the bed and laid it across her in an oddly gentle gesture. Her eyes watered at the sudden, random, act
of kindness when he just sat down next to her bed, back against the wall. And did nothing.

He didn’t move or speak. Her eyes grew heavy as Negan simply watched her, sometimes shifting his position. It could have been 30 minutes, it could have been three hours, she didn’t know. The last thing she remembered before falling deep asleep was Negan reaching up and brushing her hair from the side of her face, fingers lingering on the shell of her ear.

Her eyes sliding shut, she felt nothing but the press of thin lips on her forehead and the whisper of his smile on her skin.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and hopefully you'll leave me a comment down below with what you think. I'm getting closer to the 20 chapter end point and I honestly don't want to stop writing yet.

I've kind of fallen out of love with Tumblr lately but you can message me there if you've got an idea that you think I might like. If not, I'll see you next time.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Lives are falling apart and coming together again as Mallory's hands are forced in two directions. She has to navigate the egos of two dangerous men while trying to figure out where her own loyalties are lying. It's the beginning of an end she never saw coming when Peter tries to hand her an easy way out.

Sadly no smut in this chapter (sorry!) but the action's ramping up now. Slight warnings for injury detail and what I'm told is a gut-punch. I can't apologise for the length but only hope that you like having more to read from me.

Chapter Notes

I can't even begin to say enough thank yous to the people who have left amazing comments on the last chapter. I honestly didn't expect to receive the response I did but God, you made it worthwhile. I really do love you all for the feedback, from the bottom of my heart. Putting yourself out there as a writer (in any fandom) is the most nerve wracking thing but you have made writing this new chapter SO much easier.

Please keep commenting. All of them spur me on to write more Mallory and Negan (I've even got a spin-off / outtake one shot in the back of my head). All the thanks also go to Mayboo13 and Moomus for beta'ing. *GROUP HIGH FIVE*

So a giant dedication goes to: NannaBanana, Leslie, Ella (I cried reading yours in particular, my lovely), favabeans, alinova, AudreyChaz, AllyM, Stephizzle88 and Jess! If I've missed anyone, I'm sorry, I'll get you next time.

Enjoy chapter fourteen and the end of my rambling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a selfish thing she was doing, Mallory knew that. She wanted to ignore that poke in her head that told her to confess to Lucille, the voice that said the whole truth would clean her soul. After everything came out about how much time Negan really spent in her bed, how much he cared about her, how he looked out for her, Mal would be free of the gnawing pain she felt. Every night when trying to sleep, she had arguments with the mysterious version of Lucille that existed inside her head. Sometimes she pictured the same stunning young girl in the photos at his house, and sometimes she’d see a frail woman at the end of her life. No matter what the face or the argument was like, Mal would always be left with a burning guilt in her stomach and lose her nerve. The imaginary arguments never ended well.

Mallory and Negan hadn’t seen hide nor hair of each other in a week and she was lost, completely adrift between staying by his side until the rocky end when he crashed or walking away with her dignity somewhat intact. She had to make a choice soon.
Lucille knew there was another woman, another bed he slept in, another body he held. She couldn’t know how much time he was spending kissing guilt away and leaving nothing but happiness in its wake. And how much his Princess loved it. Just to see her one time, just to meet the woman Negan would die for, the woman who she’d always fail to measure up to would make it easier to walk away from them both.

Mal parked her shaky little junker of a car down the block from Negan’s house, the guilt fresh in her stomach as she tried to summon up the courage to walk up and knock on the door. Just to say hello, come up with some pretense for knocking. All Mallory needed was a moment to see if she was brave enough to rip this dying woman’s world apart. Mal could imagine how it would end; Negan would never forgive her for it, maybe even hate her for her selfishness. Her curiosity about Lucille was killing her slowly and carefully every day that Negan spent with his wife instead.

The sun beat down on the car and heated it until beads of sweat pricked on her forehead, Mal wiping them away with the back of her hand as she stared at their perfect white-picket fenced house. She could imagine the life they could have led together if it wasn’t for the cancer – happy, honest, open, maybe even with kids around. The world was what it was, she guessed; cancer happened, she happened and it was already a future in ruins. Negan could never love her, even more so now if she ripped his wife to pieces on her deathbed. Lucille might have fought off the infection but she was still terminal and Mallory hurting her now just to make herself feel better was just the worst idea in the world. It was wrong on every level.

Mal bit her lip as a tear welled up into her eye at the futility of it all. How many times did she have to swallow her own love for him and bury it down deep? Negan was devoted to his wife and that was the end of it. Confessing to an affair Lucille already half-knew about wasn’t going to break them up - it would just be the worst thing she’d ever done to another person.

Still though. Just to rip off that band-aid, clear her conscience and confess would give Mallory enough courage to walk away from Negan. It was all she had to do: just tell the truth and she’d be free from it all – guilt, pain, love, pleasure, meaning.

“Fuck it,” she muttered to herself.

***

Mallory’s life hadn’t been much of anything.

After enjoying nearly ten years of being pretty much a total-fuck up in her father’s eyes, she had turned a sharp corner, tried to do better and make him proud of her like he’d been when she was six years old with ribbons in her hair. Her teens had been spent in bars with bad friends, smoking shit nobody else would dare smoke, getting arrested for petty theft to make a buck. Every rebellion she’d made against her parents was a textbook example. Only now she was a little older, a little lonelier, did she want to make her life better than she’d made it.

Mal had got herself a steady job, a crappy little apartment and a clunker of a car but they belonged to her and she had tried her fucking hardest to do it right, to be his little girl again. That was until Negan came along and threw her life back off the rails, turning everything back around again. Her father died still disappointed in her. There was an ache in her gut, fuelled by regrets, that was never completely gone.

Even as she finished getting dressed, it was there – that little seed of something she had buried deep inside her long ago. Mallory sat on the end of her bed, her calloused hands rubbing along her thighs idly, mind wandering to their last conversation and the hurried words before it all came to the worst possible end. Her Dad had taught her how to handle a gun, how to punch so she didn’t hurt herself,
how to tie lures and hunt deer. Mal chuckled to herself at the notion that her Dad had saved her life in unknowingly preparing her for what was to come: she’d survived at the start because of what he taught her. Even if he was disappointed in her for her shit choices, he’d be proud that she’d survived this long.

Her pale blue eyes – same shade as her own father’s – flickered up towards the door before she reached almost automatically for the sonogram photo buried inside her mattress. Mal kept it away as much as she could for fear of being caught even if she was sure that there weren’t any cameras on her. Negan would have exploded in a white-hot fit of rage if he had found out about her secret.

It was the one thing that was still hers, that picture. The black and white waves, the crease down the middle and ruffled edges – it was hers and hers alone to keep. Her car, her apartment, her job… all of them were long gone. Mallory simply stared at the splotchy picture, a thing barely weeks into forming, only just alive and yet it had been hers. She never even knew whether it had been a boy or a girl. Mallory was more than the sum of the things that had happened to her – miscarriage included – but it still helped to think that she’d gotten close to doing some good in her life.

It didn’t matter, in the end.

Whatever she’d done in the past, she could now be grateful that their kid had never been born because it hadn’t stood a hope in Hell’s chance of surviving. People weren’t people now; they were colossal wrecks, decaying before they died in the dirt trying to crawl to freedom. Whoever thought having a baby at the end of the world was a good idea had to be insane – she was grateful there wasn’t that burden of a death on her shoulders.

“Knock, knock sunshine!” a booming voice suddenly announced from outside her room, accompanied by knuckles rapping on the door before it started to creak open creepily.

“Shit…” Mal hissed and panicked, stuffing the picture under the mattress in haste to hide it as her peace was disturbed.

Simon poked his head around the corner, grinning coldly. “Hey, I said knock, knock, you could at least pretend to invite me in.”

“What do you want, Simon?” she demanded, jumping to her feet and praying that he’d not seen the sonogram. “I got a half hour still before I have to get downstairs.”

He waltzed in like he owned the place, thumbs tucked through the belt loops of his jeans. “Oh, I really don’t give a crap about that. I’m here with some happy news from the big man.”

Mal’s mind went blank for a fleeting second before she could process what he’d said, her body stiffening as she realised what it meant. “Negan wants me out?”

“Bet your ass he does. So, I’ll get you a box, get you packing whatever shit you’re taking down. It’s like Christmas, kid, Santa’s bringing you a present!” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together joyously, looking like the cat who got the cream. “And you’re gonna have to do an actual fucking job instead of sitting on your fat ass all day doing nothing! Don’t you just love the holidays?”
Mallory’s stomach churned; she had gotten used to being up in the rafters, in her own space. She’d gotten closer to Negan, pushing her way back into his good books and now it was gonna be in fucking tatters if he tossed her down the stairs like a bag full of trash. Fucking fuck.

“This is bullshit, I haven’t seen Negan in days. No fucking way he told you that and you waited this long,” she reasoned, panicking and picking at straws, desperate to find a reason to stay close. “Make him come tell me in fucking person, then I’ll believe it.”

Simon snorted derisively. “Make him? He’s his own man, with his own mind. And I’m doing jack shit favours for you. I thought you’d be happy, all that crying about being up here alone.” She glanced away for a moment in shame and he just smiled again. “Yeah, I heard about that, baby. Aren’t you the littlest bit happy to be hidden away downstairs again, huh? You turned down all the offers he gave you for an easy life. Time to pay your goddamn way around here.”

Losing proximity to Negan just wasn’t a fucking option. She had a chance that she wasn’t about to just give up without a fight. She didn’t believe for a fucking second that Negan would make a decision like this and have Simon of all people deliver the news. Negan wasn’t a coward, not then and not now.

“I’m not going anywhere until he grows some balls and tells me himself,” she demanded, holding her head a little higher. “Me and Peter aren’t going to—”

“Peter?” Simon interrupted, looking confused at her. “That pussy’s been out of medical and back downstairs for a week. Hasn’t stopped bitching about working in the kitchen either. Not said one word to anyone about you, though. Can’t blame the asshole. I mean, you are the reason I call him Stumpy now, it’s pretty understandable that he doesn’t give a shit anymore...”

As he talked and talked, her fingers curled into a fist. Her Dad had taught her to keep her thumb on the outside so it didn’t get broken, keep the wrist straight to get the most power, use the shoulder for the hardest force. Smashing Simon’s nose in could be a fucking cathartic release but it’d get her nowhere fast. Instead, Mal forced herself to calm down, just wanting to get him the Hell away from her as quick as possible.

“I’ll work. I’ll do whatever job he wants. But I’m not moving until he comes and tells me himself,” she said, waltzing past Simon to yank the door wide open. “Now get the fuck out of my room.”

***

The next few days themselves dragged out; every noise outside her window made her jump to her feet, checking for signs of Negan’s return. She kept looking through every door, asked the gossips about rumours and inadvertently started a few herself, but nobody knew anything. If they did, they weren’t telling her. The prospect of being left with Simon made her chances of surviving the Sanctuary less and less as each day passed – the idea of Negan never coming back slowly filling her with sinking dread instead of the confidence she usually portrayed. It wasn’t until she was starting to consider the worst that Negan decided to make a grand re-entrance into his own kingdom.

Whatever had happened out on the road, Negan didn’t look the same after he came back as he had that night in her room. It was like someone had turned a switch on him and the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. His first act was to bound into the commissary in great striding steps with no sign of Lucille in his hands, rushing towards Mallory with the warmest grin on his face just so he could grab her arm and tear her away in the middle of a song. Even his boots skidded on the linoleum in his hurry to get to her. Mal tried to hide her relief; his eyes lit up at seeing her again. Whether that relief and happiness was reflected her own eyes, she didn’t know.
The notes squealed out of sequence as Negan grabbed her, hauling her up to her feet while she protested. “Hey, I was playing that!” Mal griped, Negan dragging her from the piano, slipping his grip from his arm to her hand like it had never let go.

“You’re always fucking playing, come the fuck on!” he laughed almost manically, tugging her out of the building by her hand. “It took a goddamn week but we got it all, every last fucking scrap out there! You gotta see this shit, Princess.”

Her loose hair whipped around her face and she brushed it back, trying to ignore the people watching them with bemused, judgemental faces. “You got what?” she asked as they made it outside into the bright daylight, right near the front gates…. and then she saw his haul. “Holy shit,” she muttered in stilted awe.

“I know,” Negan smirked, not letting go of her hand as she stood there in a stupor, her neck craned up a little. “Fucking beautiful, right? Making my dick hard just looking at all this stuff.”

Stuff was an understatement. Parked in front of them were three huge trucks, backs all opened out to show their insides crammed full of everything. Every kind of thing she could think they’d ever need. Mallory could see at least six crates of apples, bundles of scrap metal, stacks of both new and broken furniture, piles of clothes, a few mattresses and some just sealed boxes and coloured tubs. Piles upon piles of supplies, more than she could even technically see.

“Where the ever-loving fuck did you get all this?” Mal asked, dumbfounded. It had been fucking forever since she’d seen anywhere near as much stuff as he’d collected, somehow – each truck was already being carefully unloaded by a couple Saviours and a few normal people, the grunts working quickly to get everything safely inside before any rain could fall from the clouds tumbling around overhead. “How did you do this…” she trailed off, walking towards the middle truck to take a closer look.

Negan beamed proudly behind her, his eyes flicking to watch his men carefully, lest someone drop something precious. “The old-fashioned way; scavenging, looting, hitting up some places a little further out of the way… scouts had been out for months trying to find good targets. This haul’s been a long time coming, but it’s enough now, it’ll keep all of us here through the Fall and Winter, maybe even beyond. We scouted out a factory, cleared it out and got a mother-lode of canned food, freeze dried stuff, pristine condition cos it was so overrun with Biters nobody else had the balls to go through it. Even found the old boss’s secret booze stash in his desk,” he winked at her gleefully. “It was a goldmine, Princess, a 24-carat fucking goldmine,” he walked slowly up beside her as she took it all in. “And it’s all ours now.”

The wind whipped up between them as she took a step back, impressed and overawed. “I don’t understand. You must have gone across state to get all this, hit everything. There’s not enough fuel left in the world to do that.”

“Oh, I have magic in my fingertips, remember?” Negan muttered, switching his gaze to her as the procession of loot went by. “I got you a little something-something too…”

She turned and raised her brow at him with suspicion, glancing at the people who were unloading. “I don’t want a present, I’ve had enough fan mail lately. All those books and soap and stuff… they’re more than I want.”

Those dark eyes flickered into what she could distinguish as a pissed-off kind of hurt that only he was capable of. “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you, Mallory, it’s hardly a fucking engagement ring.” A moment and a hand inside his jacket pocket later and there was a thin gold chain dangling from his fingers; he had found her a necklace with a musical note on the end, something very familiar to both
of them.

Mal bit her lip. “Where did you find that?” she muttered sharply, reaching out to grab his elbow and turning them both away from where people would see. “I’m not wearing that again.”

“Why not?” he chuckled, pulling it from around his fingers nonchalantly. “You loved it when I gave you one just like it before. You wore it all the fucking time indoors as I seem to remember.”

“And look where that one ended up,” she shot back as he unclasped the two ends of the chain. Sighing, Mallory swept her hair up with a roll of her eyes and turned around on the spot for him. Maybe she could allow him this gesture since it was only a necklace: it meant nothing to her anymore. He wouldn’t rattle her cage.

Negan’s fingers looped the chain around her neck, his body pressing in a little close for comfort as he did so. Mal could feel the warmth of his breath on the nape of her neck, skin tingling at the familiarity. “Yeah, you threw it in the trash, I remember. Still, you wore it. I saw your eyes light up when I gave it to you the first time,” his fingers slipped around the chain, making it settle around her neck delicately. Her heart thudded and she knew he could feel it through his fingertips, that soft little gasp slipping out of her mouth before she could stop it.

A beat later and Negan was gathering the chain at the nape of her neck, pulling it tight across her throat, tugging it backwards enough until the metal bit into her skin. It felt like a collar slicing into her skin. She stiffened.

“Negan…” Mallory said, flashing back to when he would do that with the first necklace. The act had always turned her legs to mush underneath her. There was something about his possession of her body, sometimes enough to leave marks on her skin, that made her skin prickle with heat.

Mal felt his chuckle rather than heard it, the necklace cutting into her neck deeper as he tugged again. “Just a little fun, Mallory. I wanted to hear that raspy little gasp again,” he muttered into her ear.

“Stop it,” she snapped quietly and felt the instant release from her neck as he let go. She turned and met his eyes, the unspoken memory floating between them. It had been a secret gesture then and it still felt wrong now, to be flaunting it in the open for people to see. Negan was taunting her, making her beg and reminding her how he made her feel still. “Don’t,” Mal warned, her tone clipped to a sharp point. “Don’t do that ever again.”

He held both hands up in mocking surrender, gaze flickering to the necklace at her collarbone. “Can’t blame a guy for trying. I’d like to know what’s got your panties in the bad kind of wad, Mallory.”

Skinny fingers lifted to her throat to rub away the memory of a sting more than any actual pain. “Can you blame me?” she replied quickly and quietly. “You come into my room, kiss my forehead and fuck off to nowhere for a whole week? Then Simon’s telling me you want me out of the room, down with the rest of them. You wanna talk about mixed signals, Negan, I think you’re writing the fucking dictionary definition.”

Barking laughter left his lips suddenly and he clapped a hand on Mal’s shoulder, manoeuvring her whole body to walk forwards. “Fuck, and you believed him? I bet him a bottle of scotch you wouldn’t fall for it. Fuckity fuck, Mallory, you just cost me a good night in!”

God. She was an idiot. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. Of course I didn’t believe that bullshit he was spouting,” Mal shoved his hand away from her shoulder. “I didn’t move jack shit out.”
He was still laughing but slipped his whole arm over her shoulders instead, tugging her close. “I am so honored you chose to stay up there with me, Princess. Maybe we should make it permanent? I’m sure I can get some plaster, fix the walls up, paint ‘em, whole nine yards just for you. I had half a mind thinking you’d be out of there before Simon could finish up his spiel.”

Mal chewed on the inside of her cheek, “Don’t think I didn’t consider it. It’s just that people here don’t like me because they don’t know what I am. I’m not a wife, I don’t really work, yet I have a room to myself.”

“You want a job? Take one! I got a hundred jobs going free, Mallory, take any goddamn one you want,” the fingers of the arm around her shoulder fleetingly trailed over her arm. “Hell, with all this gorgeous new shit I got in stock, take a position in the inventory. Jane’s a good old gal, she’ll get you set up in the system, making sure my shit doesn’t get stolen! I’m on fucking fire today!” he laughed again and squeezed her shoulder. “It’s settled. Tomorrow, you can start your brand-new job. I’ll get someone to come grab you after your little concert and you can earn some fucking respect back from all your new friends.”

“Inventory?” she replied, looking over at the people unloading from the trucks still.

Swiftly, Negan leant in close to her ear, whispering quietly. “And you can spend all day pining after me.” He suddenly dropped his arm from around her and accosted a passing man carrying a crate of apples. Negan plucked a single ruby red fruit from the case before waving the guy onwards without much notice. “You’re just about the only person in the inventory I trust not to just take shit without asking. Don’t fuck up now, Mallory. I am not a nice man if I find out you’re hiding something from me.”

Without wasting a breath, Negan bit into the apple nonchalantly, licking the sweet juice from his thumb.

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Eyes itching, Mallory’s stomach rumbled as she unlocked the front door to her apartment. It was the only sound in the empty hallway – a click of a lock and the echo of her hunger. She’d skipped breakfast again and had only picked aimlessly at her leftover pizza the night before, so she was voraciously hungry next lunchtime. She was exhausted already, the stress of Negan and his baggage crashing down on her and turning a spigot to drain what she had in the tank.

He still hadn’t contacted her, hadn’t called or texted in a couple of long, long weeks. It wasn’t unusual behaviour from Negan and not by any means out of his ordinary but it felt so much different to her this time. It felt final in a way that it hadn’t before. Instead of spending her nights with him, Mallory had called her friends, had gone out with her mother to sew patches back on their relationship and slowly she began to remember what it had been like before Negan – an easy routine, the normalised life she had strived towards. She felt like any other girl trying to make sense of the world again. Mal wanted to throw herself back into it, the routine of a life made right. Maybe even think about going on a real date just to push past the roadblock in front of her that had forced her to back up. It would never be simple but she thought it might just work – a clean break.

She tugged off her jacket and rubbed the back of her neck to pull out the ache she felt rising. Something clattered. Metal on metal, around the corner in her kitchen. Acid panic started to rise from her gut to her chest and she turned to check the door; it hadn’t been jimmyed open and the windows looked fine to her. Oh God. She didn’t have the energy for this.

“Negan?” Mallory asked tentatively, chucking her keys in a bowl by the door. Her eyes widened as she saw the state of her kitchen. “Oh, fucking Hell, man, what the fuck is your problem?!”
She didn’t have to guess who the person inside the cabinet beneath her kitchen sink was. He was chest-deep so all she could see were his paint-flecked jeans and the flesh where his shirt was riding up; still, he was completely unmistakable.

“I’m fixing that fucking leak, Princess, what the fuck does it look like I’m doing?” he called back from inside the cabinet, the sound of his voice a little hollow and sharp. “You been bitching about it for weeks without getting off your ass and doing something.”

“So, you thought you’d just come here in the middle of the day and make a fucking mess everywhere?” she questioned, kicking off her shoes.

Negan swore as there was another scraping sound and a thump. “Got nothing else to do since I’m on sabbatical. I fixed everything in my own fucking house so I thought ‘hey, Mallory’s just a kid, bet she ain’t got that faucet fixed up yet’ and here I am. And I was right. Fucking door’s rotting from the inside.”

Incensed at the balls on him, she walked around the counter to stand over his body. Negan was lying flat on the kitchen floor, head obscured and a mess of parts and paint and tools tossed all around him like he was working on a construction site.

Mal poked at his thigh with her foot insistently. “The fact that you’re bored out your mind doesn’t give you a right to just waltz in here and start fixing shit without asking!”

“Well fucking excuse me, I am just so fucking sorry, what an asshole I am,” he muttered sarcastically, curling himself out from the cabinet. His dark hair was messy and flecked with the same paint from his jeans, cheeks flushed enough to notice. “I’m just doing something fucking nice for you, figured you’d be wanting that security deposit back for when you move to fucking Baltimore.” Mallory saw the coldness of hurt flicker and die in his eyes as he looked up at her.

Her fiery anger doused, she curled her arms around her chest. “How’d you know about Baltimore?” she asked a little more quietly. “I only got the call a few days ago – you tap my phone too?”

Negan groaned and clambered up from the floor, throwing some kind of wrench into an old toolbox on the counter. “Tap your phone? Jesus, Mallory, no, I didn’t tap your phone. Bob called me yesterday, asked when I was getting back to work since the classroom next to mine was gonna be empty soon.” He had his back to her as he started packing up his stuff, angrily throwing in all the clutter from her chipped counters. “Guess I should have seen it coming.”

“You know what, I really don’t want to talk about this bullshit with your selfish ass, so get your crap and get out of my apartment,” she snapped, walking away from him. Her head thumped painfully, the apartment feeling too tight around them, trapping her inside.

“No, no, nope, you don’t do that to me!” he demanded, furiously stomping after her. “I gotta find out through our fucking boss that you quit?!”

Mal stopped dead in the middle of her apartment, standing stiffly in the middle of the room. The walls weren’t scuffed up anymore – instead the marks had been covered over, all freshly painted and clean like she hadn’t lived in there at all.

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, Mallory turned and looked at him as he came up to her. “I can’t keep doing this, you and me. I need a break away from—”

“No!” he seethed in an instant, rounding on her. “You want a break from me.”
“From everything!” Mallory clipped in trembling tones. “I want my goddamn life back, Negan. Spend your time with Lucille instead, she’s the one who needs you.”

There was a slight tick in his jaw that she saw, forcing her to turn away. “And you don’t anymore, that’s what you’re saying?”

The dust covers crinkled as she ripped them off her couch, stuffing them into a crumpled ball in her fists. “Let’s face some nice cold facts here; we are not a thing. We were barely casual and now it’s in a coma, I’m pulling the plug…” her voice caught at the back of her throat.

His hand wrapped around her wrist, trying to get her to look at him. “Mallory-”

“You don’t have a right to tell me what I can wear, where I can work, what I can do, who I can speak to!” she spat, turning and shoving the cover into his chest. “You’re not my father, you’re not my boss or my husband, Negan. I can make my own fucking rules too and this is one of them – you get out when I tell you to.”

Negan didn’t take the sheet. He simply stood there with his hand around her arm as if he was clinging onto her for dear life, his fingers gripping like they always did. Their eyes met and she wanted so desperately to have him back to herself, those demands from his lips giving her life but Mal had to take a step in a different direction, make her own life for herself before it all blew up in her face. If there was one thing she could be sure of, it was that she’d never be a part of his life.

Both knew what he needed from her – control, comfort, a way to ignore the chaos going on around him. Negan had used her just like she’d used him to get a cheap thrill back into her bloodstream. But now he was just staring at her, jaw clenched and hand clasping onto her arm, not letting go.

“I’m not leaving, not until you realise that this has never been your fault, Mallory,” Negan eventually muttered, piercing her with a knowing look. “You’re not the one cheating, I am. I know you’re scared and you’re hating yourself because of Lucille,” she winced at his overly knowing tone. “But trust me here, I’m the only asshole to blame in this thing. You can do what you want, I’m the one with responsibility.”

Mallory couldn’t believe his gall and twisted the sheet in her hands. “I’m your mistress, your dirty secret, that’s all I am now. I’m not free any more than you are!” She laughed and sobbed at the same time, the tears suddenly pouring over her cheeks like rivers cutting down forests. She wiped them away and chucked the cover into a mound on the couch, turning away from his cutting gaze and his calloused hands. “I can’t stop going over and over it in my head, how much of a shitty person I am for cheating with a dying woman’s husband,” she grimaced visibly. “How can any decent person do that? I nearly confessed everything to her, all of it. Even camped outside your house in my crappy car the other day like I was waiting on a Catholic priest. But then I thought she’d just hate me, it’d hurt her. I got no guts, Negan, and neither do you.”

Mal slumped down and sat on the back of her couch, not daring to look at him. She could feel his irritation like it was her own, a tension between them at her confession. Her conscience had invaded his world in the same way he always had invaded hers – everywhere she went, he was in the back of her head.

“Lucille would’ve laughed, Mallory,” he said plainly, sounding as exhausted as she felt. “She would have hurt you more than you could have hurt her, she’d laugh and ask for the details and you’d wonder what mind games she was playing on you.” He snorted in laughter and Mal saw him run his fingers over his paint-spattered hair. “I get that you feel guilty. You don’t think I don’t fucking have it eating away at me too? Why’d you think I force myself away from this? It’s not fucking easy but I do it for my wife. I love her like you can’t even fucking begin to understand, I can’t love you
Biting her lip hard, Mal fought the uncontrollable anger and urge to rage and hate him, to throw him out of her life for good with his knife in her chest. “I never asked you to love me,” she seethed through gritted teeth. “There’s only so much of your controlling, manipulative bullshit I can take.”

He suddenly clamped both of his palms around her head, forcing her to look him in the eyes. “Nothing can control how you feel,” the smallest smile barely graced his lips. “I can’t stop coming here either – you’re stubborn and naïve, you put up with my crap and call me out on it. You drive me fucking insane and taste like Heaven,” he gripped the hair at the sides of her face harder with his fingers, almost rough. “I can’t stop wanting you and I’m not going to, no matter how far away you run from it.”

“You are ripping me apart,” she barely whispered, gripping the edge of the couch with white fingertips. “I have to leave this behind.”

A hefty, angry sigh left his lips as he simply looked at her face, like he was memorising her pain. “If you want to go to Baltimore, I’m not going to stop you. You’ve got more of a future than I ever had, Mallory, don’t want you wasting it.” The smile gracing his lips turning sweeter and sadder, he let his hands drift back down to his sides. “Play for rich assholes, marry some lawyer to make your Daddy proud. I’ll always be in your blood, Princess. You’re mine now.”

Suddenly the whole place around her felt alien. Her apartment had been built as their secret, a world where the outside didn’t matter and they could lose themselves in each other, forgetting about what they had to be. He could forget about Lucille, she could forget about her failures and disappointing her family with her past. Negan had painted over her – trying to fix the leaks, papering over cracks – but it only made her feel more wrong. Her walls were cracking and crumbling as the end came.

“I need time to think,” she muttered, looking around the place with a more measured view. “No more letting yourself in.”

“Not gonna take as much time,” he smiled distantly, the mirth not reaching his eyes. “I’ll send you a bill for the repairs, Mal.”

He strode out without another word, leaving her to clean up the mess he’d left behind.

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“Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Mallory stuttered to herself, flipping page after page of inventory lists, sheets of paper flying everywhere. “Shitting fuck!” Her head throbbed and heart pounded in her chest, sick realisation setting in.

She threw the clipboard onto the table, the clattering turning a few heads of her co-workers. Three fucking days. That’s all it had taken her to see that something was wrong, some giant fucking anomaly from the books that had gotten overlooked by the people now looking at her like she was crazy. Mal didn’t know what to do. She had checked list after list, gone through piles of equipment, looked over everything she could think of. She had even asked around the others about whether it could have been an oversight but, in her gut, she knew what was going on. A knife had been checked back in but the store was one short – and it was a chef’s knife.

People’s lips moved but Mal couldn’t hear what they were saying around her. The clipboard stared at her accusingly, mocking her. It was all her fault. There was only one person in the entire Sanctuary working in the kitchens who had the balls to steal a knife so openly. Peter had to have taken it –
nobody who had tangled with Negan would be as reckless, as stupid as to take something like that from under his nose, something everyone should know was missing. Had the purposefully ignored it until she came along?

“Honey, you doing okay?” Jane – a slim woman with bluntly cut, dark hair – asked her in passing, her arms wrapped around a box of freeze dried meals. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” Mal replied curtly, shaking herself out of her panic. “I’m just getting dizzy. Skipped a couple meals, you know?” The lies flowed off her tongue like fresh water, the act becoming second nature when nobody was to be trusted.

“You go and get something to eat then,” Jane replied almost kindly, turning her wrist over to peer at the watch on it. “It’s getting late any way; five minutes won’t hurt none.”

“Sure, thanks,” Mallory said, quickly grabbing her clipboard and taking it with her. She ignored Jane calling after her as she dashed from the storeroom, striding across the mess hall and towards the kitchens, hoping that there was another explanation she’d missed. Mal stormed through the empty buildings with determined, angry footsteps echoing off the dark walls. Mal set her eyes determinedly on the prep kitchen, the only one she knew that was way at the back of the building, the only place someone could have slipped a knife from the chefs without them noticing.

Possibilities ran through her mind as she passed the few cleaners still going at the main kitchen. Had Negan known about the missing knife? Was this some big fucking set up to test her loyalty? He knew everything. He had to have done this to her.

The kitchen was lit only by a few lights from overhead, the neon blazing down on the silvery counters as she found Peter, far behind the other cleaners, struggling with a mop in his right – and only remaining – hand. He glanced up at her in shock and opened his mouth to say something but she grabbed his arm and wrenched him aside instead. She thanked her luck that he was here.

“What, what the fuck – what’s going on? What are you doing here?” he hissed at her, his voice turning quickly into a hushed whisper. Peter peered over her shoulder, his face going white as a sheet.

“Negan’s not with me, you dipshit,” Mallory replied in a whisper. “I need to talk to you and I gotta do it now before I get a search party of Saviours coming after me. Think fast – where’s quiet?”

In a flash, he had crammed them into a tiny closet, clamping the door shut behind them. It was almost pitch black until Peter reached up and turned on the only light bulb overhead, the light swinging above them. “Look, I-”

“Where’s the knife, Peter?” she snapped in a hushed whisper still, scared stiff of getting caught. “I have zero time for excuses, I just want to know where it is.”

To his credit, he looked as if he was going to deny it but decided against it, the fake shock and confusing fading from his face. “I’m not fucking giving it back and how did you even find out?” he snapped. “I didn’t tell anyone, nobody even cares.”

“I got assigned to inventory, and you’re the only idiot who’d steal a knife from the kitchens!” she smacked his arm. “What in the fucking fuck are you thinking?!”

Peter grunted at the smack and stepped back as much as he could away from her. “I was thinking that you’d need a goddamn helping hand since it’s been for-fucking-ever and he’s still scaring the shit out of us. You need to back the shit off, Mallory.”
She smacked him again, going quiet as she thought she heard footsteps. Her head still throbbed, the clock running out quickly on her time. “Is that it?” she whispered even lower. “God, what is it with you Peter? You want to go out in a blaze of glory? Sneaking a knife is not gonna work, it’ll just get you killed! You are jeopardising everything I’ve been working towards. Fuck, for all I know, he put me on inventory cos he knew I’d catch you.”

“Negan put you on inventory?” he parroted, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “No, no. He can’t know, nobody knows. It’s just some weird coincidence. Don’t worry, I got this.”

“Got this?” Mal replied, reaching the end of her short tether. “What exactly do you think you have? It’s a knife, you’re not gonna take down an entire army of Saviours with it.” She gripped the door jamb as her head swam in anger. “Put it back tomorrow or so help me I’ll have to tell Negan, he’s bound to fucking suspect me otherwise.”

Even in the low light, she could tell the blood had drained from Peter’s face. He looked tired as she felt, the bags under his eyes making him look hollow. “It’s true, right? It’s all fucking true. I heard all the gossip, all the rumours flying around about what you and him get up to upstairs but I never thought you’d… Jesus, Mallory... how could you do that with that asshole?”

“What rumours?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest defensively.

Peter clucked his tongue on his teeth mockingly. “You’re the Piano Girl. The *favourite*. Some people even thought you were his new wife except all the others are so obviously pissed off about you being there, getting freedoms they don’t get, doing whatever you want.” He looked down at her, gaze cold and emotionless. “Makes sense now, you falling back in love with him, just like I said you would. Always weak, weren’t you, Allie?” he said her fake name scornfully. “It’s all you are now, just another pretty object to add to the collection.”

Mal shook her head softly, jaw clenched in defiance. “It’s nothing like that. I’m playing a game with him, Peter. I don’t want to just kill him, I want to wreck him like he wrecks everything he’s ever touched.”

Her friend just stared at her, passing her eyes and going into her soul. He slowly brought his hand to the back of his jeans and produced the knife, angling the blade towards her as the light glinted from its shaft. Her breath stuck in her throat at the sight of it, almost threateningly close to her stomach in the confined space. One trip over her own feet and she’d be impaled on the thing, dead in a closet. She didn’t want to die like that.

“So, take it then,” Peter mocked. Mallory stood rock still, her eyes flickering from the knife to Peter’s taut face. She didn’t flinch. “Take the fucking knife.”

“No,” she muttered defiantly, stepping back again until her back hit a wall. “I’m not doing it like this, it’s suicide for both of us.”

A derisive snort left Pete’s thin lips and he dropped the knife back down to his side, limp in his hand. “See? Weakness. Every time we get boxed in a corner, you never fight your way out until it’s already gone to shit. Just look where your plan’s gotten us so far.” His left arm sprang up and she could see what she’d ignored: his stump of a wrist, angry red in colour, the skin stitched together crudely but still healing, still raw and painful. His flesh eaten away by Lucille. “Look at what you’ve done to me. Take the motherfucking knife.”

Mal forced herself to look at what she’d done to him. At what Negan had done. “No, no, I can’t take it, Peter. It’s stupid, it’s messy. I’d be dead before I got anywhere near him. I can’t and I won’t!”
He sprang forward a step and rounded on her, hand flexing fingers around the knife by his leg. “He killed people who were on their knees in front of him, Mallory. People who were begging for mercy. They were surrendering and he killed them. Bashed their heads in with that bat until whatever they were was gone just like my hand. I have listened to every single gory story that people tell each other in the dead of night. I hear kids crying for their fathers,” his voice waivered. “I see wives as widows, empty bunks and pain all around us. People are scared to death of him. Whatever lies that megalomaniac is spinning you, don’t buy into them. Negan has destroyed far more than you can imagine.”

“I have too,” she whispered, trying not to let the fear show. Peter’s eyes were wild, swirling and dangerous, intent on her face. “I just can’t do it like this, okay? I can’t.”

“Then I will,” he announced as if it were easy, slipping the knife into the back of his tattered jeans. “I can’t keep waiting and trusting you when all I hear is rumours. You don’t come talk to me, you’ve never even tried to keep me in the loop – what the fuck am I meant to think? It’s been weeks and I get jack shit back from you. No, I have listened to your crappy plans before and look where we’ve ended up, whispering in a closet because you’re scared of the child catcher.” He glared. “You owe me, we both know that. My sister’s dead because of you.”

Her head nodded of its own volition. A tiny little acquiescence. “I know I owe you, after Aimee, after all of it, but I can’t just sneak away to tell you what’s happening,” she reasoned. “People are watching me, reporting everything back to him, playing games every time. We aren’t in a position of power yet but we will be, I promise.”

Peter sighed and leant into the door, turning his head to listen for signs of life. “Don’t be goddamn naïve. He’s spinning you stories that you’re buying. You know what an asshole you’re dealing with, and there’s only one way he’s gonna get what’s coming to him.”

Mal panicked, that determined look in Peter’s face giving her chills. He wouldn’t stand a chance on his own against Negan and his arm – she had to placate him, play along, find another way. “Fine, just give me time to think about how to do it right,” she pleaded, her voice colder. “Another night or two, I can slip away again now I’m working. Just don’t do anything without talking to me, I’ve lost too much of us already. I can’t lose anymore.”

She couldn’t decipher the look he gave her. Peter didn’t say another word, just pursed his lips and strode out of the closet without a second glance back.

Mal let out a breath she didn’t know she had held, scraping her hair from around her face and trying to stop her hands shaking. Her lie might have worked but Peter had torn her into pieces at the idea of killing Negan so quickly. Everything was falling apart again – her life, her family, her heart and soul. The necklace still hung close around her throat.

All she had left was a final choice to make.

Chapter End Notes

Please, please, please, please leave this poor fanfic writer a quick comment, a kudos or anything you fancy just to show Negan some love! Requests are welcome and encouraged :D see you in a couple of weeks.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Mallory's running out of time. Negan has the world around her in his grip, except for one reckless, naive man who wants to make a difference. She wants to talk Peter out of doing something stupid but his unwavering loyalty to her is making her rethink her reignited empathy for Negan. There's no right choice; only choice and consequence left.

After all, Mal learned a long time ago that she can't rely on anyone else's judgement than her own.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I'm posting this only two weeks after the last chapter. I made a promise to a wonderful reader and Ella, I made it by the skin of my teeth. I've been working overtime at my actual job and will be for a while so this might be the last time it's a two week wait, I'm sorry.

Thank you so much for commenting. I know there's people out there reading this now and I can't stop being so amazed that you would. Shout outs and dedications go to my Betas Mayboo13 and Moomus and to commenters Jeralynn, Scream_dream99, Negansgirl, Malline, Ella, NannaBanana, AllyM, AudreyChaz, Tfs20011, Jess and an extra thank you to Jamie who helped inspire a few lines of this chapter with their choice of song (Young Gods by Halsey. Go check it out!)

I'm sorry if I forgot your name but thank you all! *hugs!*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scent of lavender was overpowering everything in the room. In her last-ditch attempt to get back her exorbitant security deposit, Mallory had cleaned every inch of her apartment and sprayed everything in sight with some cheap air freshener that reeked of dried lavender. The repainted walls helped make it look as if she’d never lived there, but still there was mould she couldn’t reach and cracks she couldn’t fix. It looked empty when it was like that – clean, un-lived, unloved.

All her life amounted to two full suitcases and six boxes that comprised nearly everything she owned. It wasn’t as much as she thought it had been, even when she considered taking her couch, the bed and the television with her to Maryland. All her clothes fit into the suitcases, so it boiled down to six boxes; her whole life story stuffed into cardboard and sealed.

Mallory sat herself on the living room floor and set about taping up and labelling the last box in the pile. She had rechecked the removal van time twenty times, and had even spoken to her new landlord in Baltimore about picking up keys. How had five weeks gone by so quickly? Every day had been a blur of planning, of meetings and packing and figuring out her finances, trying to keep herself busy. She should have been excited, she should be itching to leave and here she was, still stretching one moment to the next, hoping for a reason to stay.
Baltimore felt like a cop-out, no matter how excited she was to leave Virginia behind her, leave her life behind her. The truth was, and would always invariably be, that she didn’t really want to leave. Her apartment, her job, her whole life in the South was wonderful. The friends she’d made were good people, there was enough money to live on, she had nice job and her family was close by enough to count. It hadn’t felt like she was rebuilding anything, it was just her home – until she’d wrecked it to rubble.

Taping up the last box, Mallory slumped backwards until she hit the back of the couch, wondering for the umpteenth time if she was doing the right thing. It all boiled down to her making a step forward that scared her, her taking a path into something unknown to sink or swim. Negan had given her the excitement of feeling needed and wanted, craved and desired, but he wasn’t her future. Nothing about them was healthy and she knew that they’d never be normal. It still didn’t stop her loving him, it didn’t stop her wanting him.

Three more days to make it through; she’d be gone forever and she’d be free. Her mind still wandered to Negan, even five whole weeks after forcing him to walk away. It was better to have that clean break, she thought – lingering goodbyes were worse.

He didn’t want to let her go, and wouldn’t without a fight. He had left his shirt here, his tools and a razor or two. She’d shoved all of his shit inside a box, away and out of her mind. She had even made sure her phone wasn’t a temptation – his calls and texts were deleted weeks ago along with his phone number. She had felt like burning the damn thing too, just to make sure that she’d never be tempted to call him from Baltimore. No: he wasn’t going to make her change her mind, even after she’d left.

It was a sick sense of inevitability that haunted her as he came knocking on her door at midnight as she finished taping boxes. The scent of lavender overpowered everything still. Mal closed her eyes for a moment to brace herself before getting up, still dressed like a slob in a sweatshirt and leggings. Another knock, more insistent, more demanding came and she hesitated. Mal sighed softly and prepared herself, slipping off the new security chain and unlocking the door. It swung open slowly and there was silence. Negan didn’t stride in. He didn’t do anything. Instead, the man just stood in front of her, waiting for an invitation, lingering and loitering as if he didn’t know where to stand. The hall behind him was deadly quiet.

“You look like shit,” Mal murmured, resting her temple on the edge of the door.

“Feel fucking worse,” Negan grumbled, the spark missing from his once soulful, mischievous eyes. She missed them shining. “You didn’t honestly think I’d let you leave like that, did you?” he asked, striding confidently into her apartment as she stepped aside, granting him entrance to let the steam off his back.

“I had honestly hoped you would,” Mallory replied truthfully, closing the door behind him with a click. “I don’t think there’s anything left to say between us, do you? I think we both know what’s for the best in this situation.”

Negan ran his fingers through his own damp hair, smoothing it away from his face. Laughter lines looked deeper set around his eyes, skin pale. It was as if he hadn’t left Lucille’s side in weeks – Mallory wouldn’t have doubted if he had. She kept her distance, crossing her arms over her chest defensively away from him, feeling uneasy with the goose bumps on her arms. Every part of her was trying to keep her head in check with her heart, to stop from crumbling completely at his feet.

He nodded sharply towards the boxes on the floor. “Went with Baltimore, then?”

“Yeah,” Mal replied, not looking away from him, standing her ground. “Another three days and
then I’m gone. Actually, I have a box of your stuff I was going to mail to you. You might as well take it now.”

His face fell suddenly, eyes thunderous. “Mail to me?” he chuckled without any mirth, the last of his ease fading fast. “Fucking sums all this shit up, don’t it? Thanks for the memories, pal, I put everything you ever touched in a fucking box for the mailman to deal with.”

“I’m not arguing with you, Negan,” she laughed wearily. “Fucking Hell, haven’t we done enough of that already? I’m just tired of it. Aren’t you tired of it too?”

“You were just gonna leave without saying a word to me?” he demanded, ignoring her. His guard slipped back over him like armour.

“I didn’t want to go knocking on your door. I spent too much time waiting for good stuff to happen, Negan,” Mallory said calmly. “I know you don’t give a shit about that and, I don’t know, maybe I’m a selfish bitch, maybe it won’t even work out in Baltimore but I want this.”

“Well I’m glad you’re fucking happy, Princess,” he replied. “One of us has to be.”

“I have to go,” she said, her voice hardening with resolve. There was a bitterness in her tone that she couldn’t make go away. “You’ll find another girl. From what you told me, you always do anyway.”

Negan’s hands flexed at his sides, like he didn’t know where to put them. “Never thought I’d lose you both,” he grunted, teeth almost grinding. “First time I saw you, Jesus wept, I fucking wanted you, wanted you to want me too. I’m a Godless, narcissistic cunt, Mallory. I knew from the start it was gonna end up with you running away. You’re shit-scared of going against the grain, of just being happy with what we are.”

“But I’m not happy,” Mal argued back. She hugged herself tighter, fisting her fingers into her palm until the nails bit into her skin. “I am sick of waiting for my real life to begin, sick of waiting for something that wasn’t ever gonna happen. Of course I’m scared. I’m scared that this is a giant mistake… but I stopped caring about being that when I realised that you can’t love me like I want.”

A smile that didn’t reach her eyes tainted her lips. “You can’t love anyone but her. Maybe it’s not a bad thing. You’ll get on with your life and I can get on with mine, knowing that I made the right choice, for both of us.”

Negan was quiet for the longest time. Her frustration dissipating as she watched his anger fading away. “I made a mistake,” he said eventually. “I should’ve kept a ten-fucking-mile long pole between me and you from the beginning. All this should never have happened. This is the biggest load of bullshit.”

With a crack, Mallory felt her heart break, his voice stabbing again in the centre of her chest. He stood in front of her with one hand rubbing at the scruff on his chin. He looked thinner, too. “Really good way to leave things, huh?” she said, shaking her head. “You hating me, regretting—”

“When did I fucking say I hated you?” he snapped again, looking her up and down. “It shouldn’t have happened because I’m an asshole. I’m always the asshole, fucking girls ten ways to Sunday and leaving them before the sheets are cold. You think I ever slept over at any other girl’s before I fucking saw you?” He took two steps towards her before stopping himself. “Like fuck I did. I only ever wanted you. You ever gonna believe me, or you just gonna treat me like a bullshitter forever? Because I’m getting fucking sick of it, Mal.”

Mallory didn’t back away, instead she just kept her arms crossed in front of her, narrowing her eyes.
“Then what was it? Why me? Didn’t you see the blonde English teacher down the hall? She was so fucking hot that even I would have screwed her!”

“Oh, God, you’re killing me…” Negan groaned, planting his hands on his hips.

Mal’s eyes rolled back. “Stop that. Why did you have to go after me so goddamn hard?” she shook her head just enough that it caught his eye. “Why me?”

He licked his lips again, looking Mallory dead in the eye like he always did, pinning her gaze. “You reminded me of her,” Negan muttered as if he was loathed to admit it, the words tumbling out. “At first you did, at least. Fucking naïve little co-ed thing,” he gestured up and down. “But there was that spark in those feisty eyes of yours and I was gone. Like I was looking at something I was already losing. Fucking world, God, fate, whatever it was, it was laughing at me.”

Everything inside her shattered. It made sense, didn’t it? Of course he would chase after his past when the present was fading away, leaving him shattered. “I’m not your wife, Negan.” Mallory replied vehemently. “I’m me. I’m not a substitute you can use.”

A warming chuckle left his mouth and he strode forwards the few steps towards her, cupping her face with his tender hands. Two calloused thumbs skimmed gently along her cheekbones, memorising the curve and the feel. “Oh, I know. You are a hundred-fucking-percent Mallory. Ain’t no doubt about that.”

She shrugged herself out of his grip and backed away from him, waving his hands off her like they were burning. “I’m going to Baltimore, Negan. I can’t be your Lucille anymore.”

“You know how I met her?” he said, walking over to sit his ass down on the arm of the couch. Mal rolled her eyes again and stood in front of him. “Luce was a punk rocker, wore her hair red like yours, but dyed. Had big baby blues, handfuls of curves, and this look about her that wanted to get in trouble. I was her bad asshole biker phase. That thing lasted for twenty-three fucking years, so far Mal. Twenty-three years and she’s gonna be gone in a couple weeks, a couple months at most? I don’t know what to do. What can I do?”

Mallory’s guilt flared as she tried to imagine the beautiful woman in the photos as a punk rock version of herself. “You’re being a cruel fucking bastard to her right now. And to me too…” she said, wrapping her arms around her stomach this time. “If you love her so goddamn much, then why fuck around with other women all the time?”

Negan shrugged as if he didn’t know the answer. “Because I am who I am and Lucille is Lucille. We work better that way. She’s had other men, I had other women. It didn’t mean that I stopped loving her, or that I wanted to leave her. Mallory, when I was with her, I felt normal. I wasn’t an asshole to her, I was just me and she loved me for it. That’s some fucking voodoo witchcraft right there – takes a fucking strong woman to really love me, crap and all, and be happy. We’re a team, best friends, soulmates. And soon she’s gonna be dead shell of herself.”

“Why are you hiding me away then?” Mal argued, her frustration and anger building back up in her core like lava. “If she’s so goddamn wonderful, why keep me a secret?”

“She’s got family she fucking loves! Family who have hated my guts for as long as you’ve been alive. Before the cancer happened, she didn’t give a shit what they thought. But now her mind’s going and it’s just me and I… fuck, Mal, I can’t keep her family away from her. But if they found out about you… Jesus. I’d miss a last goodbye that you can’t even begin to fucking comprehend.”

A light shone on him then, the connections clicking in place in her mind: he was just as alone as she
felt, both without anchors, drifting away and bumping into each other in the dark. He needed her and she had needed him.

“You shouldn’t be here with me, then,” Mallory echoed more gently, sure of herself. “You should be with her.”

“I just had to come see you,” Negan murmured as Mal came towards him, taking little steps to say the long goodbye that was now inevitable. “Just to try one more fucking time to get you to stay. I had to try and fucking make you understand why I need you.”

“You don’t need me, Negan,” she said softly. “You need to let this whole thing go, be with Lucille. Love her.”

He reached forwards and threaded his fingers through her wild hair, tugging softly at the messy waves. A grumbling sigh escaped his lips as she looked through her. “Tell me you love me again, Mal,” he muttered, eyes darting across her face. “Maybe I’ll believe that you could.”

“I loved you,” she replied vehemently, pushing the last remnants of her broken heart away. “You really are an asshole, but I fucking love you.”

Without another word, he stood from the couch and pulled her in flush to his body, bending down and kissing the life from her lungs. “Stay here,” he muttered, staring straight into her eyes. “Who the fuck actually wants to go live in Baltimore anyway? Full of fucking Ravens fans.”

Mallory laughed as he kissed down her neck, a hot path going slowly down her skin. “I need to find something for me, all my own,” she muttered quietly, shoving the leather jacket off his body for the last time. “I don’t know what it is, but I can find it, can’t I? You found it.”

“You deserve more than that,” he protested, shucking the leather from his arms alongside her. His voice was low in his chest, body backing her towards her bed. “I let you break all my bullshit rules, Mallory. I’m just the asshole cheating on his dying wife. You deserve so much more than I could give you.”

One last time, she told herself as he pressed his palm down over her clothed crotch. Pleasure sang through her skin. One last goodbye, one last touch and kiss and taste of what was never hers – that was her bargain. “I hope I do,” she moaned softly, working his white t-shirt up over his stomach. He pressed again and she keened. “Negan…”

He ate up her sins, kissing back to her mouth, rough and demanding, never relenting. “Please?” his growling voice begged, the back of her knees hitting the mattress.

“One last time,” Mal whispered in reply, pulling back to tear his shirt from his body. She bit her lip at the sight of him in front of her, imperfect. “I’m going to Hell, aren’t I?”

Negan kicked off his boots, staring at the mark he’d made on her neck. “If it helps, I’ll meet you there. We’ll burn together.”

It spoke to her greed and lust that she looked forward to that moment, burning in Hell with the devil by her side. She glanced over at the boxes on the floor, eyes full of doubt and worry. If it was going to be the last time she kissed him, the last time he was inside her pulling her soul apart, then she had to make it count, draw every memory together.

Mallory pulled off her sweatshirt as she kneeled on the bed behind her, face to face with him. Negan hadn’t shaved for a week or so, she thought, his beard rough against her lips as she kissed the underside of his chin. He sighed sweetly. She knew every place to kiss on his body as much as he
knew the same of her, both using the knowledge to full advantage; the tension in his shoulders melted away at her kiss.

She felt his hands skim up her bare back until they hit her old bra. They pulled it from her chest together, Negan bending down to suck on her breasts as soon as she was bare. Mallory cried out and dug her nails into his arms as he quickly made a mess of her. Her heart raced his, fingers feeling his muscles move as he lathed his tongue and teeth on her flesh.

“Fuck!” she cried out loud as he bit the side of her breast, groping the other in his hand. His marks would be gone by morning, she knew, but they were a brand nonetheless. “Negan!”

He growled and it was as if a switch had gone off, his demeanour sliding back into the man she knew. Mal could feel the cocky grin between her breasts, his hands shoving down the back of her sweatpants. “Love that sound,” he murmured and squeezed her bare ass roughly. “Bet you’re wetter than a fucking waterfall, huh?”

“Yes,” Mallory whined, her hands darting to his zipped-up jeans. “Always. I need you.”

Negan stuttered at her last few words, looking up at her with paler eyes than she would ever remember. “Do you?” he asked, pushing her backwards so she laid flat on the bed. “Do you need me as much as I need you?”

Her chest heaved as he kneeled over her, him searching her eyes and looking for a truth she couldn’t say anymore. “You know I do,” she said plainly, reaching and pressing his whole body into hers. “Probably always will.”

That cocky smile flickered back, his eyes burning dark once again with danger and lust. “Whose are you, Mallory?”

“Yours,” Mal replied, the word barely spilling from her mouth before he was kissing her again, both tearing at the others’ clothes until they were completely bare. She wanted all of him to herself and in bed she could pretend that it was just them left in the world. One last time she could fuck him and feel free.

Naked flesh pressed into her chest, her now bare leg sliding over his hip in ritual. She could feel his cock as hard as a rock against her stomach, hot and pulsing with the need to bury inside her and fuck her blind. Instead, rough fingers slipped between them and found her soaked thighs, her cunt in aching need for his touch. His eyes were wild with desire, watching her face as he flicked teasingly at her clit.

“You want it?” he growled, clearly holding himself back from fucking her wide open. “I need to hear you say it, Mallory.”

“Yes!” she cried as he pinched her swollen flesh. “God, I want your cock.”

Negan slipped his arms around her so they were on their sides, sheets rumpling, him manhandling her to get the most contact before he sunk his entire length deep into her hot cunt without warning. He felt so much bigger than she remembered – whether it was because of the angle or how long it had been since they’d had sex, she didn’t care. He was shaking as much as she was, frantic with need as he pushed deep inside her.

Her breath burned in her throat as she hitched her leg up higher and let him thrust into back her slowly. Mallory moaned deliciously against his mouth, opening her eyes to find him staring at her face. “Need you,” Negan groaned deeply and thrust in and out of her supple body, his hands
reaching down and grabbing her ass once more. “Feel so fucking right.”

Mallory slipped her free arm around him, her breasts rubbing up against him as he fucked her. She felt tears pool around her eyes and squeezed them closed, her fingertips tearing at the muscle on his back. She listened to his heart and his breath and the wet sounds of him fucking her and the creaking of her bed. Mal sunk herself into the moment, sweat trickling down her back as he smacked her ass.

Her cunt clenched suddenly and he groaned, doubling his efforts. His hips crashed again and again into hers, bursting pleasure in her body every time his flesh hit her clit. “Negan!”

“I know,” he growled, smacking her ass softly again, like he was punishing her for leaving. “No man’s ever gonna fuck you like I can fuck you, Mallory. That cunt is mine, those tits are mine. You fucking leave me and expect me to just take it?” He thrust into her harder, barely pulling back before hitting her in the exact right place again. “You think about that, think about how bad you want to come right now.”

“Yes…” she whimpered, gasping as his hand slid to her throat, fixing her with a glare. “Yes Negan.”

“I’m gonna fill you up, make you mine,” he growled. “You wanna come, Princess?”

“Please, please, please,” she begged as he deliberately changed his angle, her eyes bursting open. “Need it.”

“Come with me,” Negan pounded up into her, taking his hand off her throat and rubbing furiously at her tender clit, eyes wild. “Fucking soak me.”

She came with a rough shout and reckless abandon, body thrashing through wave after wave of familiar searing heat, her spine curling up. Her cunt clenched around his dick and soaked him like he wanted, Negan roaring into her shoulder as he came too.

She couldn’t catch her breath, naked and sweaty and sticky, his cock still inside her. She swallowed to push down the lump in her throat and looked down at the top of his head, his face buried between her breasts. Mal knew that when she fell asleep, she’d wake up to an empty bed again, hollow and cold. She wanted to make this moment last longer, stretching one second into the next before they had to let go.

“Negan, I -” she muttered.

“You can go anywhere,” he murmured. Negan breathed heavily and kissed back up to her throat, still holding her tight. “Anywhere in the world, Mallory. It’s not gonna take the ache away. Years from now, when you’ve got yourself a man and a kid and the life you want, you’re still gonna want me buried inside you. You and me will always need each other. Go to Baltimore, and you’ll see. I’ll always wait for you.” He finally let go of her and she laid back on the bed, trying to shake off what he said. “I really should’ve fucked the blonde teacher instead. Way fucking easier than this shit rollercoaster.”

Mallory laughed and felt the tension seep out. It was inevitable, she supposed. He would always be a part of her; acceptance was the only way to let go. “I bet she tastes like Heaven,” Mal smirked and laughed at the exaggerated groan of desire he gave her.

There was just a smile on his lips in return, a sad chuckle that cut her. “I’d rather taste you in Hell, Princess.”

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Mal made a piss-poor job of hiding the damage, having cut herself on his edges. Even as she refused to be sad it was over, she was bleeding. Moving forwards was the only way to get over the man who made her feel alive and unbreakable when he devoted himself to her for two hours a night. The morning after the night before came as starkly cold as she expected and yet the outside world turned its hands as it always did: people mowed lawns, they went to work, picked up the morning papers. The world went forwards and so would she have to, going along; bleeding but unbent.

After showering in the morning like always, Mal packed up the last of her stuff, labelling the outsides of the boxes stoically. It wasn’t until the last of it was done, her whole life now ready for shipment, that she noticed the box of Negan’s stuff had disappeared – he probably had taken it back when he left the night before. Mallory didn’t know why it made her pause like it did, seeing the empty space; why would it matter that he took his things? She shook the feeling from her shoulders as she made her way to work, needing an errand to distract her.

Her thoughts consumed, Mallory one again only noticed the flashing lights of cop cars outside the main entrance as she got out of her car to go pick up the last of her things. Her eyes darted around, a crowd gathered outside the taped-off line though there were no ambulances or even any damage that she could see. The crowd whispered as she locked her car up and jogged to join a small band made up of the few teachers she knew.

“What’s going on?” Mal asked, a little breathless and concerned. “Someone been hurt or something?”

One of the secretaries, a woman roughly in her early forties with a motherly vibe, looked like she couldn’t wait to gossip. “No, no, the safe got raided. Bob thinks they must have taken like fifteen, twenty thousand, including all the money from that charity night, just gone.” She snapped her fingers in Mal’s face. “God, those poor kids are gonna be heartbroken.”

“Jesus...” Mallory muttered in reply, relieved that nobody was hurt but angry nonetheless that someone could steal from a charity. “Have they got anything on who did it?”

“Not a word,” the wood-shop teacher answered, crossing his scarred arms over his chest. “Bob’s talking to a cop now. The cameras got cut out, probably some pro who knew how much was in there.”

Another man she didn’t know grumbled. “Hardly Fort fucking Knox, is it? Wouldn’t have taken much to get in if you knew where to look.”

Silence fell again as Mallory and the rest of the crowd watched Bob, the Principal, speak hurriedly to the cop, looking stressed, eyes flickering in the direction of the people around her. Mal’s stomach turned in familiar dread as the cop came towards them, striding over eagerly. “Excuse me, ma’am?” he called across, hopping under the tape and gesturing towards Mal. “I’m Officer Lewis,” he said, flashing her a badge that was clipped to his front. “I’m gonna need you to come down to the precinct with me, Miss Keenan. There’s been a theft and we believe you...”
might have some information that would help clear some circumstances up. Are you willing to come down with me now?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bob staring intently and Mallory fiddled with the gold necklace around her throat. "I have a lot to do, I’m moving state in a couple days, everything I own is sitting in boxes on my living room floor. Is this really necessary right now?" she asked, frowning deeply.

The cop chewed on his cheek, tilting his head down. "I really do not want to have to cuff you, ma’am. There’s been an accusation and some evidence has been found that relates to you. Is there any way you can account for your whereabouts last night, roughly between 10pm and 5am this morning?"

Her stomach sank to her feet, the wind whipping up around her. She felt like a dumb kid in trouble all over again. "I was at home all night with... with a friend,” Mallory said in a barely audible voice, her mind racing. "He works here as well but he’s on sabbatical at the moment.” The earth turned beneath her feet and Baltimore faded away.

The look the cop gave her was sad and kind at the same time, like he could tell exactly where this was going to end already. "I’m sorry ma’am but... Mallory Keenan, I am arresting you on suspicion of grand larceny. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?" he rattled off.

“Yes,” Mal said, her voice cracking at the edges as he led her to his car. "I didn’t do anything, just talk to Negan, he’ll back me up. We were together all night.”

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She waited hours at the precinct, it felt like.

They had booked her in and shoved her alone inside a room, making her sweat before they sent in their big guns – a detective in a small town was a big deal and they always acted the same way. "This is such bullshit,” Mal muttered to herself for the hundredth time, twisting her fingers around nervously as she sat in an interrogation room, the walls echoing every sound she made. "You haven’t even called him yet, have you?"

"Again, Miss Keenan,” the detective, sitting across from her, sighed in exasperation. "We are attempting to get into contact with your alibi to get a statement but while we do, please answer our questions. It’ll go quicker if you just talk to us and get this mess cleared up.”

Mallory clamped her mouth shut, wondering if her mother had heard about this, or – even worse – if her father had. She couldn’t be certain of anything, and had no idea how she came to be a fucking suspect within a few hours. Something was wrong, very, very wrong.

"Fine,” she relented eventually, leaning back in her hard chair. “I have nothing to hide.”

The detective, a guy called Mahoney, sucked air through his teeth as he opened a paper file, flipping through some pages with his thick fingers. "Actually, it kind of seems like you do. Juvenile arrests for theft, assault, disorderly conduct and, well, public intoxication. You even did some time in a youth detention centre for the theft, didn’t you?"

Her past – it seemed – would haunt her through all her life, no matter how far she tried to run from it. "I was a kid. I did stupid things, but that was years ago, it’s irrelevant.”
“You stole cash from women’s purses while you were working as a waitress, before you were eighteen; you even lied about your age to score the job. They let you off easy on that one, didn’t they? All because you were having an affair with your boss...” Mahoney stated, closing the file up. “You have history in the system, Miss Keenan, that raises alarm bells in cases like this. Fifteen thousand dollars isn’t petty cash, it’s serious money. People have stolen far less.”

Mallory’s eyes burned in anger. “So, you think I did it just because I stole a couple bucks? I haven’t put a single foot wrong in goddamn years, have I? How is this proof that I robbed a school or that I should even be sitting here right now?”

Detective Mahoney was a monster of a man, she could tell even as he sat in front of her, behind the desk. He was broad shouldered and wide at the waist but lean, as if he’d just come from a wrestling ring just to interrogate her. Mal wouldn’t want to run into this guy after hours, that was certain; she missed the young cop who treated her with some modicum of respect. Mahoney simply looked at her with nothing but contempt, judging her silently.

“You’re right, it’s not proof of anything, but more so of your history. What made you want to work nights teaching piano lessons in the first place? You could have worked full time in private education, made a lot more money,” he said, glancing down at her file. “Why that job?”

Mallory thought for a moment, looking at her lap briefly. “Because I didn’t want to work in those places, they only learn because they’re forced to, their parents make them. At least I was teaching people who wanted to be taught, who gave a damn.”

He grumbled again and made a note on the page in front of him. “But you still handed in a resignation letter six weeks ago. What made you change your mind?”

“It’s...” she swallowed thickly again, realising how her behaviour appeared. “I couldn’t stay. I got an offer from an orchestra in Baltimore, and I know it was spur of the moment but I-”

“So, you quit without a lot of thought?” he accused. “You say that you’re moving state, away from where you grew up, to... play piano?” Mahoney raised a brow at her and fixed her with a glare. “It wasn’t motivated, let’s say, by a pay cut the Principal made to your salary at the school?”

“How do you know about that?” Mallory asked, frowning as well.

Mahoney didn’t smile, only let her dangle for a moment. “We’ve been talking to the Principal as a matter of course. He told us about your resignation, how he wasn’t surprised given that he had to cut your pay grade down quite a bit. A few weeks later, you handed in your notice.”

She chuckled derisively. “Bob tell you all that, did he?” she said, folding her arms. “I had to take a pay cut, there was some trouble with the funding.”

“It’s interesting though,” the detective said, closing the file and putting it down. “You had your pay cut, worked fewer hours, equipment was going to be taken away next. I think that’d piss off a lot of people in your position. Did you find out that yours was the only salary that was cut?”

“What?” Mallory glared, starting to piece things together. “Bob never told me that.”

“Officer Lewis and the rest of the unit spent a lot of the early morning talking to people. Your students loved your classes, Miss Keenan, they were very shocked when you quit so suddenly on them, without talking to them, without even mentioning it. I wonder why you only told your boss...” Mahoney nearly spat, getting a victorious glint in his eyes.

“I’m not saying anything else,” she said. “Talk to Negan and you can drop this whole fucking witch
hunt against me.”

He ripped open the file, grabbing a bit of photocopied paper from the back to slam in front of her. “You failed to disclose your criminal history on your application form when you went for this job. You wanted to hide your past, didn’t you? Thought you could run away from it.”

“Wait, no, that’s -”

“We found a hair on the inside of the safe, Miss Keenan. There was no forced entry into the room but the safe was wrenched open with a crowbar. The only thing left inside was a single hair. The only person in the entire building with access to that room with natural red hair is you.”

“No, that’s not mine, I didn’t do anything wrong!” she pleaded, crumpling up the photocopy of her application form. “This is all circumstantial, it’s a fucking set up and your dumb ass is falling for it.”

She made to get up but Mahoney snapped. “Sit down!” he glanced at her then, his eyes flickering over her in a cold stare. “Unfortunately, this is a small town and even circumstantial evidence is still evidence. You have means, you have motive and there was opportunity. We’re getting character statements from people as we speak. Make it easy on yourself; just be honest.”

Fear clenched in her chest. “I want an attorney. And my phone call.”

Mahoney crossed his arms over himself, still staring at her. “You have strikes on your record, you know that. If you’re proven guilty in a court of law, you could go away for the maximum penalty. I’d think very carefully.”

“You’re not locking me up because you want an easy collar and a page in the local paper! Talk to Negan,” Mallory demanded, her voice taut. “He’ll set this straight. I’m not that fucking girl anymore. I’m not! I only wanted to play music again.” Angry tears streaked dirtily down her sunken cheeks and she wiped them away with her fingertips. “It wasn’t me.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to wait for your boyfriend to come corroborate your story,” Mahoney said absently, peering down at his watch. “He might be a while, though, since his wife’s in the hospital again. Won’t leave her side, apparently. You might be here a while, Miss Keenan.”

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In the cold light of day, Mallory knew what she had to do.

Peter wanted her to sink a knife straight into Negan’s chest, watch his eyes as the life faded away, body surrounded by a lake of his blood. How many times had Mallory done what was necessary to save her people from the scum still alive on this world? She’d jammed a knife into her own mother, had killed allies, and without batting an eye, had slaughtered people who threatened them. And yet she was hesitating on killing a man she knew truly deserved to suffer for what he had done. He’d wrecked the lives of innocent people, had taken out anyone he could just to prove his ruthlessness. Nobody living under his roof still was safe – the families he’d broken, the heads he’d caved in with that fucking baseball bat, they haunted her all night and all day. Lucille. How he could take his wife’s name and pervert it into something so hideous made her queasy right down to her toes. He intimidated, he killed mercilessly, he survived, he laughed.

Still, Mallory had hesitated to take the knife Peter had offered her. Neither of them would get away with his murder, not before they were tortured to death by Simon. Taking out Negan would just mean another version of him would rise, a version whom she had no hold over, a man who only cared that people looked at him the same way they looked at Negan – in fear and respect. That was
more terrifying than the thought of trying to lie so blatantly to a man who could read her emotions better than she could.

But Peter would never let go of his grip on the knife if she told him she wouldn’t do it. Mal knew that. There was a lust for war in his naïve face, a boy among men wanting to prove himself a man too. Her friend had watched everyone around him get picked off one-by-one, sacrificing themselves needlessly to save his skin. Mallory saw it building for weeks, that itch in his skin to claim that the sacrifices they made were worth his life. She wouldn’t let him die for pride.

After spending all day in the inventory, keeping her nose down, Mal slipped away early from Jane again to meet Peter in the kitchens. He had wide, pale eyes and an eager, anxious look on him as she jogged to meet him, his face lighting up. He was alone now, as late at night as it was, one low-lit gas lamp illuminating a back corner of the kitchen. She could see that he was pretending to have trouble mopping floors with only one hand, his eyes flickering around the whole empty kitchen to check that they weren’t being watched.

“Well?” Peter said hurriedly, dropping the mop to the floor so he could grab her as she got close to him. His grip was hard and unyielding. “Tell me you’ve come to your senses, Mallory. I can’t hide this thing from them one more day, someone else will find out I took it and it’ll be my head on the fucking sidewalk this time.”

Mal swallowed nervously, every sound they made echoing off the stainless-steel tables around them. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll do it,” she whispered almost hesitantly, trying to make the lie sound good. “I’ll take the knife back, hide it inside the mattress. I don’t know when or… or how, but I’ll do it. I can’t keep sucking up to him, it’s making me feel sick.”

Peter seemed to hesitate as well, looking her up and down, before releasing his grip from her. He reached around his back and pulled the knife from his belt, presenting it to her. “You sure you’re willing to do this? Cos I need you, Mallory. You have to be fucking sure that you’re going through with this. He deserves it, you have no idea what he’s done to these people here. He’s a maniac.”

Her face hardened a little as she looked at the knife, her eyes turning slowly back up to Peter’s excited face. “He was always a monster, I saw it then, even when I was in love with him,” she spoke honestly, hoping it’d be enough for her to sell her story and get the knife away from him. “He used me, made me cold and heartless just like him. He tore my family apart back before any of this apocalypse bullshit even began, he left me to rot in my worst nightmares. Whatever stories you’ve heard about him, there’ll be ten times worse than that still, floating around. Negan deserves a worse death than this but since I have no other option, it’s the one I’ll goddamn take.”

But her hand still couldn’t reach around the handle of that knife. Peter watched her carefully. “You know what killing him means, don’t you?” he asked softly. “What will happen afterwards?”

Almost snorting in laughter, she settled on a simple, knowing nod. “I get it. There’s no escape routes. Nobody else would ever be even a suspect, there’s only me. Killing Negan’s going to mean that I die too. Guess everyone has to go sometime, why not in a blaze of fucking glory, huh? I’ll burn in Hell alongside him.”

Peter dropped the knife on the table to her side, the clinking sound reverberating. “I don’t want you to die,” he said tenderly, taking a small step towards her. “I wish I knew of another way but you’re the only person who has a real shot at it. Everyone I talk to is so scared, they’re just breathing, not living. This place is more like a prison than a sanctuary, I just… I fucking can’t anymore. He ripped you and me apart just like he did everyone else. He wants to own you, you can’t fucking let him do it to you again. He deserves to die in agony, betrayed by someone who he thought loved him.”
The man standing in front of her with a hand missing had never betrayed her. He had never wavered from her side, not even after Aimee’s death. His own sister had died at Mallory’s hand and still Peter battled alongside her. Her guilt over Aimee had only grown but he’d never hated her for the actions she made, only held her hand tighter and made her look forwards. It was heart-breaking to betray him like this, to lie to his face, to protect Negan.

“I won’t let him get away with it,” she took a deep breath and pressed forward, hugging him tightly. Peter had never done a thing to her and she’d cost him so much. “Let me save you this time, huh? All those raids where you kept my ass getting bit, I still have to pay you back for them all.”

Peter hugged her even tighter in return, his lone hand rubbing soft circles over her shoulder blades. He felt so much thinner than she remembered, full of anger and vain naivety. He’d never survive if Simon took over. “I love you,” he murmured into her shoulder, the feel of his voice spreading down her collar bone. “I loved you so much. I don’t care that you can’t, I just… everything we went through, we did it together.”

Mallory pressed her face into his chest, her cheeks burning at the shame of her deceit. Peter was telling her words she had never wanted to hear ever again, the word love dangling in the air between them. She couldn’t love him, or anyone, again. “We are doing it together. It’s going -”

Both of them froze at the sounds of shouting coming from the distance, tall shadows crawling up the walls around the kitchen. Mallory panicked, her heart leaping into her throat as she found herself cornered. There was no escape as the noises got closer and that familiar voice that called out nondescript orders, barking and laughing at the same time.

“Here, piggy, pig, pig!” Negan yelled, the sound just faint enough to give her a few seconds spare. She didn’t have much time left and nowhere to run to.

“Shit... closet,” Peter spat out, shoving her inside the cleaning closet as the shadows came ever closer. “Be quiet!”

“But-” Mal protested as she stumbled backwards.

Peter hissed at her, grabbing at the door. “Just do it!” he said before she was in darkness, the door clicking into place.

Mal caught her breath and tried to peer into the crack of light between the door and the doorframe, her hand splayed on the wall for balance. If Negan caught them both now, with his Saviours in tow, he wouldn’t hesitate to take another body part – or worse – from Peter. She had to stay quiet, had to trust Peter not get caught, not to show his whole hand to Negan.

It was a few seconds maybe between him closing the door in her face and Negan’s voice coming through loud and clear this time. “Well fuck me in the ass with a candlestick, if it ain’t Cool Hand Pete!” she heard him say. “You down here all alone, little boy? You haven’t, by any chance, seen a sexy little red head running around the place? About 5’ 8”, answers to Mallory?”

“No sir,” she heard Peter say, the sound of his voice tense and almost strangled. She couldn’t see anything but blurs of skin and shadows.

“Good. Because I really, really, really want to talk to you, Petey.” Mallory could practically hear Negan’s smirk in the sound of his voice. There was a flash of black leather in view. “You have some fucking explaining to do.”

Her body froze as bile rose in her throat, the glint of something shiny catching her eye as she shifted
her feet achingly slowly. They’d left the knife on the table in plain sight, a knife that wasn’t meant to be there.

Chapter End Notes

Gah. Don’t hate me. Let the speculation roll over you in waves. See you in three weeks.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Negan’s the most raw, intense man she’d ever met and he’d been easy to love and easy
to hate in almost equal measure. Mallory learned a lot from him; how to lie, how to hide,
how to cheat. She’d also learned that opening up was harder than she’d thought it would
be, putting a trust in a man who'd never shown any commitment and barely any
friendship.

Mallory loved Negan, that much she knew. But warming the bed of a cold man is about
to catch up to her, in the past and the present.

Chapter Notes

Boy, I was gone a while, huh? Unfortunately, real life came and bit my ass and I took
an extra weekend to get this chapter right since it's so.... pivotal. I'll call it pivotal for
now. I hope I didn't make you suffer too much and promise that the next chapter won't
be so far away from now.

I'd love to say a big thank you as ever to Mayboo13 and Moomus for
beta'ing/cheerleading this chapter and being awesome people in general. Also I want to
say thank you and give giant hugs to Jess, Bravesgirl99, Ella, Stephizzle88, Jamie, Ally
M, Wakingdream58, Screamm_dream99, Negansgirl and AudreyChaz and basically
anyone who’s ever liked reading what I'm writing here.

I hope this makes up for what I'm about to do...

Trigger warnings for unplanned pregnancy feelings! And a lot more feelings in general

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dreadful sound of a key scraping in a lock kept her on edge. Grey doors slammed shut around
her, walls enclosing as she was left alone and the air was sucked from the empty room. Mallory was
choking, she was suffocating, dying for breath as her lungs burned. Nobody came to help her. They
laughed, sneered, turned their backs, beat her until she begged them to stop. His head was above all
of them, that cold smile cracking his face in a grotesque victory. Her shackled hands plummeted
suddenly to the ground with the weight dragging her down, the floor giving way as her body
slammed into it – she was falling, screaming, crying, pleading. There was nothing but laughter and
a cold, dead smile.

Mal gasped as she woke up suddenly from her nightmare, burning blue eyes snapping open.

Everywhere from the top of her head to the tips of her toes ached, neck stiff and wrists sore, heart
thumping in her chest. She shivered in the coldness of morning, the light barely poking through the
skinny windows at the top of the back wall. It was like light had no place there, in her tiny holding cell; it was dark and quiet and calm, a mausoleum for the living. As she sat up, Mal ran a hand over her face, hoping that soon the light would come and she'd be home. One damn night in a cell and she wanted to rip her own eyes out. Not that it mattered, she thought; if this arrest showed up in her criminal background check, her new job would remain forever a dream – no Baltimore, no fresh start, no new home. She'd be lucky to get work anywhere, even if she was exonerated. All her plans were in ruins in front of her and her past was fuelling it, burning her dreams to ashes.

Mallory sat there for what felt like hours, time dragging by at a dead snail’s pace, the light fading as clouds rolled past her windows. She forced herself to tread around the squared-off floor like an animal to keep herself sane, reassuring herself over and over that Negan would come through for her. The world would have to end for her to believe he wouldn’t be a man and own up to his actions, even with Lucille back in the hospital. She perched on the end of her bunk, trying not to think about what she was going to do if he didn’t give her an alibi.

Suddenly, her aching body froze at the familiar sound of the scraping of a lock, her nightmare haunting her still. Some young-looking cop in uniform stepped inside, his eyes sharp and judgemental just like all the others. “Ma’am, the Chief’s approved the extra phone call you asked for,” he said, gesturing for her to get up. “I got to escort you down now.”

“About fucking time…” Mallory said under her breath, launching herself up and towards the guy without a thought, desperate to taste air that wasn’t stale.

As the kid led her down towards the bullring, she felt the stares of every person they passed. Their thoughts were projecting on her, words she hadn’t cared about since she was a shoplifting teenage tearaway – only now she was an adult, held accountable for something she didn’t do, they felt like knives slicing at her flesh. Mal kept her head high and her arms firmly at her side, having learned to toe the line of the law when she was in their hands, to never get mad, never get violent – get an apology instead.

“You get ten minutes, Ma’am. I’ll be right outside the door,” the kid said as he stopped in front of a room that was empty except for a table and a corded phone.

“Yeah, thanks,” Mal replied, trying not to roll her eyes; they were small town coppers trying to look like they had big city balls, probably recording her illegally or listening in to her conversations in the least. She figured there had to be something going on, for all that fucking crap evidence that was planted against her, all her actions somehow manipulated to make her look guilty. Nevertheless, she was determined not to let them strong arm her into tripping herself up or to get led by any bullshit questioning. She was better than that, better than the manipulation of police looking for an easy collar and their names on brass plaques. Mallory picked up the phone and dialled the only number she wanted to call, the only person who mattered. She’d barricade herself in and dial all day if she had to before she’d call her father for help.


She took a deep breath, the swell of anger and frustration bubbling up inside her as she got shrugged off time after time, Mallory telling herself that he was with Lucille, back in a hospital, looking at the end. Biting her cheek, she dialled again, glancing up at the cop still loitering outside the room. Another night in a cell and she’d go insane completely but it wouldn’t happen if she had any say, there was just the option for bail she didn’t want to take.

Negan hung up without answering once more. Dial again. She pressed the numbers and the phone rang. And rang.
“Fucking Hell, what?!” Negan’s gruff voice snapped, tone demanding and sharp. “Who the fuck is this fucking calling me?”

Relief spread through her at the sound of his voice, familiar and friendly even if he sounded pissed. “At least you goddamned answered me this time,” Mal muttered softly, lest anyone was actually listening. “Where are you?”

“Hospital,” he replied curtly, his tone switching to wariness. “And who the fuck is this?”

The relief turned to pain in a flash. Negan knew her voice. He knew everything about her, even things she didn’t want him to know. “Should’ve seen that coming, huh?” Mal answered softly. “They can’t hear this, you asshole, they’re not allowed to. I know the cops have tried to talk to you, but they keep messing me around with some bullshit about you not wanting to get involved. Why the fuck aren’t you getting involved, Negan?” Mal demanded, sounding angrier than she meant to. “I’m in goddamn jail!”

“It’s not death row, Princess,” Negan said, letting out a huff of air with his reply. “You’re wearing big girl panties, you can take a couple nights in a cell by yourself.”

“I shouldn’t have to stay one single fucking night!” she argued back, slumping to sit on the desk. “We both know where I was when that school was getting robbed. Why the fuck haven’t you said anything?”

He laughed curtly down the phone at her in reply. “Thought you wanted fuck all to do with me? You don’t need me ruining your life for you, wasn’t that what you said?” Negan spat viciously. “I’m on the phone with you when I should be holding my dying wife’s hand like you told me to. Get yourself out of fucking jail, Mallory. You burned all the fucking bridge up, rope and all, there ain’t no walking over it now.”

Mal felt tears sting her tired eyes as her world and last hope crashed around her, the aches feeling worse than before. “You’re punishing me because I wanted a clean chance?” she retorted. “I wanted a life, Negan, this is the opposite!”

Monitors beeped faintly in the background alongside his breath. “Excuse me, but the last time I looked, I wasn’t responsible for your shitty life choices. I’m not giving you an alibi because I got fuck all to say, to you or the cops.”

“So, it was all total crap, then?” she said after a moment to gather herself, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. “I was nothing. We meant nothing.”

Mal could hear his sneer in his voice, that coldness and desolation prickling her skin. “Bingo. Hole in one. Gold star. She finally fucking gets it.”

Fingers furiously swiped away the tears. “And here was me thinking that you crying like a pussy into my shoulder about your wife meant you trusted me,” she spat back callously. “Turns out you’re just the manipulative, selfish son of a bitch everyone said you were. I can’t believe I ever loved you, I can’t fucking believe I ever let you talk me into this shit!”

“I didn’t make you do anything,” Negan barked in return. “I told you that this was just sex, never love, never anything other than a quick fuck and some fun. It is not my fucking fault or my responsibility that you felt anything for me. We had fun, and sure, I didn’t want it to end but you did so we’re done here.”

“You begged me not to leave!” she snapped angrily before he could hang up on her. “Soon as I
made the choice, you were in my apartment, on your fucking knees trying to get me to stay.”

Malice ran down her spine at the sound of his voice. “I didn’t beg you for anything. We were nothing, we are nothing. I’m not risking my wife’s last weeks for an airheaded, naïve little girl. Can’t you even fucking comprehend what would happen if I gave you any kind of alibi? I admit to an affair and her family are gonna freeze me out of her last weeks, no matter what she says. I’ve given up enough of her already. You’re the one who left me, Mallory, so just fucking leave.”

The walls closed in on her again, the air sucked right out of her lungs. “Why are you doing this to me?” she whispered, terrified of getting thrown back in that cell. “So I won’t go to Baltimore? Did you plan this whole fucking thing so you can keep me where you want?”

“Believe it or not, I got better things to worry about right now, Mal,” Negan replied. “You just got stuck up shit’s creek without a paddle.”

“No, no, no… I had a paddle. You just stole it,” she shot back. “I got framed for something I didn’t even do, and I’ll get five years for it, Negan. It’ll ruin my whole fucking life.”

Another snort and cold chuckle came over the line. “And in about six weeks, mine’s over completely. I don’t give a rat’s ass about your problems right now. You didn’t do it, there’ll be evidence of who did and they’ll be the ones doing a five stretch. You don’t need me, you just gotta wait it out like a good girl. Grow the fuck up, Mal; we weren’t anything then and we’re even less now. I’m not doing dick for you, Princess.”

Her heart grew cold, the stone cracking as it hardened around her. Negan was punishing her for leaving, he’d ruin her life for no damn reason, other than because he could.

“When I get out of this place and I will get out of here,” she muttered softly, almost calmly. “There’ll be no excuse for you to hide behind anymore.” Mal felt a sadistic smile tug at her lips. “You’re a joke of a man, ruining whatever shot at a future I had left, everything I worked for, all the blood and sweat and tears... for what? My whole fucking life is getting torn apart... and when I’m out, I’ll do the same to you.” It surged inside of her, the hatred and bitterness replacing her love piece by fettered piece. “I’ll rip your world to shreds in front of you and laugh.”

Negan was quiet for the longest time, only the sound of his breath and the beeping of monitors in the background. “I look forward to you trying, Princess,” he replied almost sweetly. The line went dead again as he hung up, the screeching tone piercing her ear like a mocking laugh.

Mallory’s hands shook with untold rage at his betrayal; she wanted to rip off all the skin he’d touched, scrub away all the memories he’d seared into her brain. She screamed and cried, smashing the phone against the wall with as much fury as she could. Angry screams bounced off grey walls.

The cuffs were back around her wrists before she could blink.

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Inside the tiny closet, Mal could barely see flashes of what was going on in the kitchen outside; black leather and tan boots, the glint of stainless steel. And then there was barbed wire, rusting around the edges and wearing down but still sharp as Hell. Her chest felt tight, adrenaline coursing through her veins and fear flooding her. Hiding was her only option; if any of them found her, she’d get them both into something worse than she could imagine. Mallory held her breath until it burned.

“What do you want me to explain… sir?” she heard Peter say without a waiver of fear in his voice. “I’m just doing my job, mopping floors, whistling a tune.”
Negan grumbled, the sound further away now. “I know you’re a little bit of a dumb fuck,” he chuckled softly, tapping something on the ground. “But I don’t think I am. Am I a dumb fuck, Simon? You’d tell me if I were, right?”

“Yes sir, ain’t no dumb fuckers here except for this one,” Simon replied. Negan’s second in command was in her line of sight and she could see his hands on his hips and a glint of glee in his eyes that put a rock in her gut. “Got to be a dumb fuck, since he’s taking all day to mop a kitchen floor.”

“I agree entirely,” Negan replied curtly. The barbed wire disappeared and she heard a swooshing noise like he was batting the air. “Peter, Peter, Peter… I been hearing a lot of rumours going on about you and our mutual friend. You think I don’t know what’s been going on in my own fucking building?”

Her breath caught and she planted her back against the solid wall, catching a broom handle she’d dislodged before it fell. *Fuck.*

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Peter said without hesitation. “I haven’t talked to Mallory since I was still in the hospital, can’t imagine she’d come see me again. Maybe you shouldn’t believe everything you hear, y’know? Chinese whispers and all that.”

Mal’s fingers gripped the broom handle tight as she tried not to make a sound.

“Funny, you’re a funny guy. I get that,” Negan replied, Mal hearing a rustle and heavier bootsteps. “But, uh, I know that she was here last night,” she caught sight of him leaning in to a figure she assumed was Peter. “She snuck out, met you in a dark corner for all of, what, ten minutes? What did you two have to say to each other, Petey?”

“Not a lot of talking involved with me and Mallory, not these days,” Peter retorted, the sound strangled but defiant. “Used to. Back before you come along, she told me everything back then.”

Her eyes bugged, her stomach leaping as she panicked for her friend’s safety. He hadn’t got a weapon but – God – he was gonna use whatever he had to get a jab in at Negan’s expense, even if it meant a lie. She tried moving again, desperate to see what was happening.

Negan’s voice changed again, his tone more clipped, irritated. “Oh, I’m sure she did, cos Mallory’s the open book type,” he laughed outright. “Very trusting gal.”

“She told me enough,” Peter mocked. “Told me all about how you two met. She’s a nice girl, a little naïve back then, but sweet…” Mallory could hear a smirk in his voice as he spoke, still with no trace of fear or wariness. “Took me a while to break through to her, I gotta give you that, but she got over you pretty fucking quickly once I did.”

Negan laughed outright, the sound bouncing off the walls. “Look at the motherfucking cajones on this asshole!” Simon and whoever else was there seemed to laugh alongside him. “Kid, you are either dumber than I thought or you’re fucking suicidal. Please, please do enlighten me. I’m sure you know everything about my Mallory.”

“I know all about you, about your wife, what you did…” her breath caught, mind racing as to what she told him about her and Negan, if he was bluffing or if he’d guess. “I know all about your Mallory,” he said, disgust in his emphasis. “Actually, I should thank you. You must’ve taught her a trick or two; she is one Hell of a good fuck, damn good cock sucker too…”

Mal clapped a hand over her mouth as she heard the unmistakable fleshy whack of a punch being
thrown. A body crumpled to the floor at the force of it, landing close to the closet door. Peter’s bruising eye peered up at her through the crack before he was hauled back to his feet, coughing and groaning as he did.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to talk about a woman like that?” Negan demanded, sounding wild, angrier than she could remember. “Mallory’s got more fucking class in her little toe than you ever could dream. She can fuck whoever she wants to fuck, that’s her damn body and her damn business…” Mal heard another loud punch and another groan of pain. “But you talk about her like that and I will sew your nose and mouth shut and happily watch you choke to death.”

“She’s never gonna crawl back to you, Negan,” Peter spluttered. “You sold her out,” she could hear ragged breaths. “I’m not scared of you, that’s what this is. You’re angry because I’m not fucking scared. You kill me, you lose whatever dregs of love there are inside her for you.”

Suddenly, it was all silent. She couldn’t hear anything but Peter’s ragged breaths, a wheeze of pain as he righted himself as she watched through the crack of the door. Mallory’s stomach was in her throat, heart pounding in anger and fear.

Negan dragged Lucille across the floor in between them, scratching what looked like a jagged line in the linoleum. “You see this shit right here, Peter? This is my line. I fucking drew it, not you, not Simon, not Mal. I fucking draw the line. You wanna talk about Mallory? You wanna talk about my dead wife like she’s some big secret?” She heard a thud and a pained groan that went straight through her. “Crossing my motherfucking line, you pansy-ass son of a bitch…”

Her eyes screwed shut tight, as if closing them would black out what was happening outside. She couldn’t watch Peter lash out uncontrollably at a man who wouldn’t hesitate to do what he had to do. Peter couldn’t suffer for what she’d done. She heard Negan land another punch to his jaw and she cringed, wanting to put as much distance as possible between herself and the scene outside.

“You don’t scare me!” Peter cried out angrily. “I know your girl better than you ever fucking will, we share more than you ever did! I know-”

“You know nothing!” Negan snapped. There were thuds of heavy footsteps. “Get on your fucking knees.”

There were more pained groans, she tilted her head away from the door, hoping for something, anything, to keep Peter away from the blunt end of Lucille.

“I know she was fucking pregnant when you left her to rot,” Peter spluttered hastily. “I know everything about that baby.”

Mal’s eyes sprang open as shock sank through her. No, no, no. He didn’t. He wouldn’t. Peter couldn’t have known, she’d never told him a word, not a single fucking word about the father. Her hands fisted, Mal restraining herself from storming out there in anger.

“The fuck are you trying to do, kid?” Negan thundered, the bat thrown to the floor in a clatter, forgotten. Mallory pressed herself as close to the door as she could get, watching as Negan shoved Peter to the floor and stood over his half-beaten body. “Who the fuck do you think I am?”

“I think you’re a coward,” Peter seethed. “You think she’s really going back to you now?” he barked in laughter. “It’s a game, man, she’s out for your blood and good fucking luck to her.”

Negan laughed again before hunching over, raining blows down on Peter. “You had one shitty mother, kid. Running your mouth off about a girl, spreading lies to save your own neck, trying to get
me to go after her instead? I am gonna have so much fun watching you beg me for mercy when Lucille has her way with your pretty little head. Careful, she bites…”

“I’m not a liar, it’s the fucking truth. She carried that sonogram thing with her damn near everywhere we went, no matter what. Bet your ass she’s hidden it somewhere close to her,” he panted and Negan landed another blow to his face, an audible cracking sound reverberating through her tiny closet. “Do it, come on,” Peter taunted weakly, not giving up. “You know I’m right. She’s never been yours, not since that baby died and you were nowhere. Mallory, Allie, whatever her name is… she’s broken inside because of you.”

Negan’s shoulders snapped and he rained heavy punches back down on Peter, kicking him in the ribs as he stood back up. Her friend was just about visible as a bloodied mess on the floor, his body curled and jerking in pain. Mallory’s last hope died inside her, the last person she thought would betray her was lying broken and bleeding on the floor, all her trust shattered around him.

“Tell you what,” Negan sneered coldly, standing back up and waltzing over to pick up Lucille, his knuckles dropping blood on the floor. “I’ll give you some benefit of the doubt here, Peter. Don’t know why, maybe I’m just a nice guy after all. If I find that sonogram, maybe I won’t let Lucille get too friendly with your skull. But if I find out you’re lying to me… well, I’m not gonna be responsible for her reactions. She’s not gonna start with your head, but she’ll end it there.” He kicked Peter in the gut again for good measure, turning to Simon. “Toss her room. Find her and get her ass to me. I’m putting an end to this.”

It was only after the room was empty again that she felt like she could breathe. Mal waited until she was sure that the only person there was her former friend, still squirming in pain on the scratched floor. She couldn’t bring herself to feel remorse or care about the blood spilling from his mouth as he spluttered, reaching for her.

“Allie…” Peter grunted, pushing himself up. “Fuck, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I had to, I had to tell him, he was gonna kill me.” He clutched at his ribs as he leant back against a kitchen cabinet, wheezing in pain. “Please, please… help me up.”

“Don’t touch me,” Mal hissed, shoving his hand away from her, disgusted at herself for trusting him with her life story, with anything at all. He’d gotten them a death penalty. “You have no idea what you’ve done, no idea. It’s all gone, everything…”

“I know,” Peter muttered, his face a mangled mess of bruises and split skin. “But it worked,” he panted. “He didn’t notice the knife, you have to take it, get him now.”

Her eyes darted back to the stainless-steel counter and the knife still there, untouched from its last position. It was so tempting, it was calling her name and asking her to drive it into both Peter and Negan in revenge for all the pain she’d endured because of them, and all the pain she had yet to come.

“I’m not touching that thing,” Mallory snarled. “I’m done. With you, with this… let them come find me. He’ll do what he’ll do. Either way, in or out, I’m dead and so are you.”

Mallory straightened up and walked away, leaving Peter to choke on his own betrayal. She hoped he was smart enough to slit his own wrists before Negan found him staining the floor.

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The monitor on Mallory’s ankle beeped and reset itself like it did every day on the dot of midnight, tracking her location and making sure she didn’t stray outside the zone the courts had set. Every day
felt longer than the one that had come before it, each minute she was under house arrest dragging out into the next. Perhaps she should have been more grateful that they’d granted her bail in the first place, let alone that her Mom had paid for it. Instead, the guilt about the money just ate her up inside; the last of her own money, her parents’ savings and her grandmother’s engagement ring had to get cashed in just to foot the high price for the bounty on her head.

It was still too quiet. The lights in her childhood bedroom were down low and the noise non-existent, her life fading into silent darkness as her parents slept across the hall. Peeling posters on the wall stared down at her like they were monitoring her too, watching for the next round of bullshit to wreck her life. Mallory was a kid again, grounded for no reason, her skin itching as she longed to be outside, unable to sleep because of the storm inside her head.

The way it happened was nothing like she wanted; Mal had thought that maybe they’d go easy on her since their evidence was circumstantial, their cases too weak to stand on their own feet. But the public outcry had forced a rougher hand; her story was in every local paper, her face and name branded for people to judge her guilty without fair trial. Even getting bail had been a struggle her shitty family lawyer had to fight tooth and nail for. But for what? It had all fallen apart to sand between her fingers anyway, her family ruined, her career in tatters with no hope and no money to fall back on.

And that was how she found herself every night, at midnight, in her old bedroom at her parents’ house, unable to feel anything but numb and cold and wait for the beep. Mal had thought about what was going to happen to her and her family but it didn’t seem like there was much hope left. Their lawyer was pressuring her to admit to it, saying that if she did, there’d be a lighter sentence. It didn’t change much else though, did it? Her father would still look at her like she’d shattered him, her career down to the shit jobs people got outside of prison, and her name still branded as a thief’s.

Mallory couldn’t escape from it. She’d never get to escape from it.

Suddenly, her cell phone buzzed on her bedside table and Mal span quickly around in her desk chair, looking at it with curiosity. She went over and picked it up, frowning at the unknown number on the screen; she’d gotten a scant few calls from friends but those offers of support had long since dried up. In the few days since she’d been arrested, Mal could count on one hand how many people had talked to her as a friend. A week later and the number was zero.

It didn’t stop buzzing in her hand and her stomach curled again as she decided to answer it in a hushed, deep voice. “Whoever this is, stop fucking calling. I get it, I’m scum, I-”

“Princess?” grumbled Negan’s confused voice from the other end of the line. “That you?”

The phone almost slipped from her hand in shock. He was the one person in the world she didn’t want near her, the one who’d ripped her heart out, crushed it on the pavement and betrayed the trust she had left. Even the sound of his voice made her mad. “Eat shit, asshole.”

Mallory couldn’t say why she didn’t hang up right away. Maybe it was because she’d never gotten to yell her tirade at him, maybe she just missed the sound of his voice in her ear. Whatever the reason, she was waiting with baited breath to hear what he had to say.

“Lost none of your charm then,” he said after a moment, sounding softer than before. “You made bail, at least.”

“You read that in the papers? Or saw it on channel six? My face is fucking everywhere, it’s hard to avoid it,” she nearly hissed, clenching the phone in her hand.
He sighed in exasperation down the phone. “I didn’t call to argue with you, Mallory.”

“Then what did you call me for Negan?” she paced a little in her bedroom, wrapping her arm under her chest. “To gloat, to tell me I deserve all this because I was halfway out the door from walking out on you? Got your wish, didn’t you? Now I’m not gonna get to leave Virginia for the next ten goddamn years…”

Mallory waited for his retort. She waited for him to argue back, to tell her it was her own fault or to wait it out and get proved innocent. Everything she’d thought he’d say to her had a retort attached to it, as if she was reading from a script. All Negan had were excuses for everything.

“Come to the window, Princess…” he replied softly, almost sadly.

Her body steeled and her gaze panned across to her bedroom window, the light from the street lamps casting shadows on her. Mal sighed heavily and took the few steps towards it, looking down and seeing exactly what she expected: Negan, standing in the back yard, staring up at her.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she said, her face blank as she stared down at him from a gap between the curtains.

Negan had one fist clenched in the pocket of his jeans from what she could see from one floor up, his face covered by a baseball cap and a beard until she could barely see his eyes. “You look sick,” he said into the phone at his ear. “You not eating?”

Mal resisted temptation to roll her eyes and instead counted to three in her head, like her court-appointed counsellor had told her to. “I’m fine. If you’re came here to—”

“M’not here to gloat at you, Mallory,” he replied, his back straightening as he stared up at her from the garden. “I wanted to… fuck, man, why’s this so hard?” he grunted. “What happened, it’s not because of Baltimore. And it’s not because of what I wanted. I did it for Lucille.”

“Get your foot off my Mom’s flower beds,” Mal muttered, trying simultaneously not to cry or hurl abuse. “She alive?” she added, as an afterthought.

She watched as he took a short step back to get his feet out of the mud. “Hanging in there. They discharged her home, her parents are living at mine now. I put a couple of her old Percocet in their drinks, just for some fucking peace.”

Mal chuckled bitterly. “Real nice job, drugging your family with painkillers. I’ll add it to the list I have for reasons to hate you…”

“They’re not my family,” he stated. “Lucille’s my only family.”

“Then what am I?” she asked, biting her cheek for a moment. “I should say ‘was’ really. What was I? A sweet bit of ass, a way to waste your time while she was getting chemo?”

His voice was gruff and demanding. “You were the best mistake I ever made and I’d make the same one a million times over. I don’t feel anything anymore, Mallory, it’s been a long time since I did. Before, the closest I got was in those moments when I had her back from cancer for a little while, where she cracked crude jokes and watched college football with me, made dumbass bets about the scores. But I got close to those moments when I was with you. I wanted you to know that.”

Mal wiped away an errant tear. She felt numb now, too, as if the colour had drained slowly from the world. Only, Negan was her cancer, rotting her away from the inside. “Thanks. That’s sweet, such a nice thing to come say. Now you can go fuck yourself and your bullshit excuses and never come to
“Mallory—”

“No!” she hissed down the phone. “I’m not doing this anymore, I’m seeing straight through you now. It’s never your fault, is it? It’s cancer’s fault that you cheat on your wife, it’s somehow my fault that you couldn’t stop. It’s a default fucking position for you, Negan. Blame whatever shit you say, whatever shit you do on the fact that your wife’s dying, on anything other than your shitty life choices,” she parroted his own excuses back at him. “Unless you suddenly, miraculously, grow a damn conscience and apologise at my feet and give me the damn alibi, I don’t want to hear it.”

“I wish I could,” he grumbled in some form of apology that made her eyes roll again. “But I can’t.”

“It’s bullshit,” Mal replied, shaking her head visibly down at him. “A week or two ago, I might have believed you, but not anymore. You’re a coward, Negan, always hiding who you really are. You’re wearing a fucking Yankees hat to keep your face hidden, talking to me on a disposable cell phone so I can’t prove you called. You didn’t suddenly feel guilty and come to give me an excuse again. You wanted to make sure I had nothing left that could cause any doubt. So, let me save you the pathetic bullshit – I got nothing. No pictures, nothing you owned, no texts – nothing. Any calls I had from you, they’re circumstantial at best because we work together, we even shared office supplies.”

“Mallory…”

“You won, Negan. I have nothing now, the same as you. Even the students of mine, the ones you scared away, the ones you paid off? They won’t talk. Too scared of the big bad wolf coming after them to call out your shit.”

He dropped his head slowly to the ground and she watched his shoulders slump. “I didn’t want this, Princess. You deserve better than getting mixed up in what happened.”

“What happened?” Mal repeated, glaring down at him. “Scratch that, I know what happened. Didn’t take me long to figure out, though I didn’t want to believe it. The Principal’s the one who hired me. I told him all about the past convictions I had on my juvenile record, all the shit I did as a teenager. He knew everything. He set me up as an easy patsy. What I want to know is if you helped him? Is that why you started this thing with me? To make it easier for Bob to make me look guilt, divert my attention?”

“What?” he asked sharply, meeting her gaze as Mal glared back defiantly at him. “Fuck no. I never lied to you, Mallory. I had no idea what the fuck was going on when I was there, let alone when I wasn’t. Shit, I haven’t even been to work in weeks.”

She didn’t know whether she believed him. It could all have been lies and manipulation, getting her to feel sorry for him and sleep with him and he’d get a pay-off from his boss for the trouble. But the way he sounded so wounded, like there was a knife in his back, made her pause.

“Guess I’ll never really know,” she said more softly. “Pointless now, though, right? Damage is done, my father hates me, my mother hates my father for hating me…”

“He can’t hate you,” Negan replied. “It’s not your fault.”

Mallory smiled bitterly. “I know that and you know that but he doesn’t. He thinks I’m guilty; my mother had to strong arm him into posting my bail. They fight every day now, all their savings have gone, my grandma’s jewellery’s gone. My Dad looks at me and he doesn’t see me as his daughter anymore, he’s…” she sniffled and hated herself for doing so. “He looks at me like they all do. I’m
never gonna get that back, that’s what fucking sucks. You didn’t just destroy my life, you destroyed my family’s too, just like I said you would.”

“Mallory, I-”

“Shut up,” she hissed again. “Nothing you can say will ever get me back what I’ve lost. So just... just fucking go screw yourself. You’re never going to help me, so just stop trying to make yourself feel better. Own up to your shit, Negan; be a goddamn man.”

Mallory hung up her phone, turning away from the window, shattered and exhausted. Another few seconds later and the cell buzzed again in her hand, her rage swelling. It buzzed and buzzed and buzzed. Mal grunted and bent the phone backwards on itself, snapping it into two where it flipped open, cracking the thing into jagged pieces. She dumped both in her waste basket and felt soothed by the silence.

Negan was nothing but a coward, nothing but a bully and a cheat. Everything he had ever said to her, all the kisses and touches, the late-night conversations and the tears; they were as tainted as she was. Mallory knew he’d never come through for her, not even if Lucille died the next night. Negan didn’t love her. He never had and never would. It didn’t stop her from loving him, even as she curled up on the bed and let the malice grow inside her.

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It wasn’t much of anything yet, Mallory kept telling herself; it was just a cluster of cells with no brain activity scheduled for months yet, and barely even a beating heart. None of it seemed real, not when the last of the five tests she’d ordered online gave her the same positive result and not now, staring at all of them. The universe was laughing at her, obviously, one giant joke to give her the best send off before her hearing was due before a court, jury, whatever it was.

Mal only had to be about eight weeks pregnant, she thought; any further along and she’d have seen it sooner, she would have noticed more signs. All that nausea, all the symptoms she’d put down to stress or heartbreak or anger – or all three at once. But there the truth was, in plain blue lines right in front of her; she was pregnant with Negan’s baby. Mallory hunched over the sink and felt more nausea wave up from her stomach to her throat, her skin going pale in the mirror. It was a joke. It was all just a massive joke and a middle finger up at her future. What future did she have now, and what choice?

Mallory collapsed back onto the edge of the bathtub, her heavy head cradled by her hands as her mind raced over the possibilities. Even if she did all the right things, made the right choices, taught the right lessons, there was still going to be one screwed up kid whose mother hated his father. Did it matter? Mal couldn’t raise a child on her own, not even if she was free, let alone from prison if she got sent down. Having a baby was meant to be something special, something two people shared intimately between them but having Negan’s baby felt wrong, as if she was betraying herself. The world had made a joke of her life and given her a choice she didn’t want to make.

Negan was the unknown, she realised, putting her palm flat on her stomach to see if she could feel anything. Lucille and Negan didn’t have kids but whether that was by choice, Mal didn’t really know. Maybe they’d planned to, before Lucille had gotten sick. Maybe he’d plead with Mallory to keep the baby she was carrying, raise him together like some fucked-up family in a 90s sitcom. Their baby. Her baby. Negan’s baby.

God, it made her want to throw up again. Her mind was a jumbled mess of fear and pain but beneath it all was a tiny speck of something she hadn’t felt since the job interview for Baltimore.
Mallory hadn’t planned on getting pregnant but the cluster of cells could still be hers more than anything else in the world; it was beautiful and tragic but it belonged to her. Negan didn’t ever have to know – he’d never come near her, never visit her, never ask. Mal could keep it to herself, and raise her child away from that selfish asshole.

She didn’t want to admit that it felt wrong. She’d be keeping the child of a man who’d betrayed her in the worst way possible, a man she didn’t trust, but a man she still loved despite it all. Her anger and her rage, her hate and spite, they all together couldn’t diminish the love she had felt for Negan. Maybe nothing ever would entirely.

“Mallory?” her mother called suddenly from the hallway. “Are you in there? Lunch is on the table.”

“I’m not hungry!” Mal replied through the door, sighing softly to herself. She’d need to tell someone, at least. It wasn’t like she could talk to Negan to figure out what to do.

“You feeling sick again, honey? You’ve not eaten anything in days…”

That feeling creeped up on her again as she looked over the five positive tests sitting around the sink, laughing at her. Be brave, Mal told herself. It was her mother, the only person in the world who’d never given up on her.

“Just… can you come in a sec, Mom?” Mal called, going over and unlocking the bathroom door. “I think I need some help.”

Angela, her mother, was a stocky woman but held more grace and elegance in her little finger than in all the other women Mal knew combined. Her hair these days was a soft honey blonde in waves around her face, her clothes always in pastels and her pearls always shiny. Her father had called her mother ‘cherub’, a woman so loving and caring that she didn’t seem real. Mallory wished she’d taken after her more; Mallory wished a lot of things.

Her mother stepped into the bathroom, eyes widening at the messy state of her depressed daughter. “You look awful,” she said, cringing at her own words. “What is it? Your stomach again?”

As she stepped into the bathroom, Mal clicked the door closed behind her, not wanting her father to hear. “You could put it like that…” she said, tilting her head towards the five positive pregnancy tests sitting on the counter.

It took a moment but she could see the shock register slowly on her mother’s face as she realised what was going on. Mal had a similar look on her own face when the first test had come out positive.

“You’re pregnant…” her mother whispered, as if it was a giant secret. “Is it Negan’s?”

Mal only nodded and sat back down on the edge of the tub, feeling ashamed and guilty as her own mother looked at her like she was still a tearaway teenager. “Yeah. It’s his. I think I’m eight weeks, maybe a little more. I can’t…” she swallowed at the lump in her throat. “What am I gonna do, Mom? I can’t have his kid.”

Her mother sighed softly and folded her arms across her chest, looking down at Mallory with a stern smile. “Well first, you’re going to take a breath and you’re going to calm down. Every single woman in history has panicked to some extent when realising she’s pregnant. I know that your situation right now is complicated…”

“To put it mildly,” Mal muttered in reply, taking the deep breaths as instructed.
“Hush. I know that this is messy and, Mallory, you’ve always had bad timing but there’s still never a right time to have a baby,” she said as she sat next to her daughter on the edge of the bathtub, putting a hand on her back like she did when Mal was a child herself. “Nobody has to know if you don’t want them to. I can deal with your father, I can call in a favour or two from Dr Robinson. She’s known you since you were five, we can trust her. But, I have to ask, do you know whether you’re going to tell the father?”

Mallory scoffed slightly, starting to feel a little better with her Mom by her side. “I’m not sure I should be allowed near him. He doesn’t deserve to have a child, Mom, he’s the most selfish asshole I’ve ever met. I guess I’m not that much better either.”

There was a palpable silence as her mother rubbed her shoulders lightly. “You loved him, though,” she said after a moment, letting Mal get her head back under control. “I know you loved him, otherwise you wouldn’t be so upset, you wouldn’t have done five pregnancy tests. If that baby gets born, whatever what he did, it doesn’t deserve to be punished for what its father did. Despite how you feel about him, you loved him once.”

“It doesn’t matter. He never loved me back. I can’t stand the sight of him and he doesn’t give a damn about me now; what kind of world is that to bring a baby into?” Mal whispered as tears fell cleanly and silently down her cheeks, cutting valleys down them.

Her mother didn’t say anything but instead just wrapped her arms around her daughter when the silent tears turned into heaving sobs, her hand reaching up and stroking Mallory’s wild red hair back down. Mal sank into her mother’s embrace. “I’m sorry, honey, I’m sorry. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, but…” she hesitated, lowering her voice again. “If this baby is born, and it’s Negan’s, you might not go to jail. If there’s reasonable doubt…”

Mallory bit her lip and screwed her eyes shut as her mother whispered her own darkest thoughts at her: to have a baby just to help prove her own innocence. It was evil, wasn’t it? It was selfish and cold-hearted, to have a kid just for her own gain. “I can’t do that. It’s… I can’t. I’d never be able to live with myself, Mom.”

If there was one person Mallory could always count on to be by her side, through anything, it’d be her mother. There had never been an ounce of doubt in her eyes at the police station, not when she saw her daughter in cuffs, not when she’d pawned jewellery to get her out of that Hell hole surrounded by corrupt cops. Mal wouldn’t have been able to survive without her Mom.

“Mallory, whatever reasons there are for all of this,” her mother said, leaning back again. “You’re a good person and good people will always bring out the best in everyone around them. Even the most selfish of us are just scared of being on our own; all people want is someone. Whether you choose to keep this baby or not, for whatever reason, that doesn’t change who you are.”

She lost track of how long she cried into her mother’s shoulder, pouring all her pain, heartache, fear and anger into the wracking tears. All her mother did was hold her and let her scream.

“I’m so sorry, Mommy,” Mallory said, her voice small and scared. “I don’t want to go to jail.”

Her mother’s kind hand wiped the last hot tears from her face with a small smile. “Mallory Keenan, you are nothing if not a fighter. You’re gonna get through this and whatever else there is to come afterwards. I know your father acts like he doesn’t trust you but I know deep down that he’ll come around to seeing the truth. You just need to have faith in him, Mallory. Keep fighting for him.”

Mal would never be able to pay her mother back for all she’d done for her, but perhaps she didn’t need to. All she had to do was to keep fighting and her mother would be proud. Just breathe. Just
fight. Just survive.

Hearing it was like nothing Mal had expected. That rapid, deep boom of a heartbeat filled up her childhood bedroom and brought everything to life. What was a painful reality for a moment was a wonderful dream, a tiny baby in her arms and a true second chance at becoming the good person she wanted to be. It was there, fighting alongside her.

“Well look at that, you were right, Mallory,” Dr Robinson muttered as she peered into the portable ultrasound screen. “This equipment’s not as accurate as the hospital issued ones but the foetal size corresponds to your dates, I’d say about eight or nine weeks. A little small maybe but the heart rate’s perfect for this gestation. Nice and strong.”

Mal’s gaze travelled from her bare stomach to the ceiling. She felt different. She had hope.

“So, there’s nothing wrong?” her mother asked from beside her. “She felt sick for an awfully long time, Susanne, and there’s been a lot of stress.”

“But I said,” the doctor smiled softly as she moved the scope. “It’s a little small, and you’re not out of the woods, but you have a good chance at a viable pregnancy. Mallory’s in good health, in general, nothing would indicate an increased risk of miscarriage.”

Mal sighed as the heartbeat faded away, her eyes flicking to the screen being held up by the doctor. “That’s it?” she asked, sitting up a little as she stared at the wavy white lines and the blob in the middle. “That’s the baby?”

“That’s the baby,” Dr Robinson chuckled, pressing some buttons. “I know that there’s a lot of stress about the court case but there’s no reason why you can’t continue this pregnancy if that’s what you wanted.”

“What if I don’t?” Mal whispered softly, avoiding her mother’s gaze. “How long do I have before I have to make a decision?”

The doctor busied herself with the machine, pressing more buttons until a copy of the sonogram was being printed out. “There’s a few more weeks but if you want to have a termination, it’d be better for your health and wellbeing to do it sooner rather than later. I’d like to avoid a surgical termination, if possible,” she said tenderly. “This is your body, Mallory, not anyone else’s. You need to be sure about what you want before anything happens. Just take your time, and call me if you need me.”

Dr Robinson held out the picture. It was identical to what they’d just seen; those wavy white lines and the shape in the middle that formed her potential child. A tiny speck of hope in black and white staring back at her. She just had no idea how she was going to tell Negan that she was pregnant or what he’d do when she did.

Just for a fraction of a moment, though, Mal stared at that sonogram and the world fell away. It was only her and her baby together, and hope swelled in her chest.

Chapter End Notes

How was that for you?
Please please please leave any thoughts or ideas or comments on this chapter down below. I'm coming to the end of this fic in roughly four or five more chapters and I don't want it to end so quickly! But thank you again so much for reading this thing, you have no idea how much it means when hard work and a weekend spent indoors pays off in good karma.

See you next time xxx
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Negan isn't the same man, that much she knows. He's ruthless, psychopathic, sadistic, devoted, and dead set on making life Hell for Mallory, stretching her to the breaking point she didn't know existed. How many times can he wreck her life and how many times will she crawl back to him, hopelessly in love and determined to push him back? After all, he's not the only person who's changed; maybe they aren't so dissimilar.

WARNING: mentions of miscarriage - not the actual experience but the emotional impact afterwards. Please read with caution if this will effect you, I don't want anyone feeling bad. I just hope I've done it some justice.

Chapter Notes

Hola! I want to say a giant thank you to everybody for the incredible response to the last chapter. I was honestly in happy tears reading through them all to get up the courage to post this chapter; I can't believe it's already chapter 17. I've never finished a multi-chap in my life but I can't stop with this one and I think the difference is you guys! Your responses mean the entire fucking earth to me, they are amazing.

As always, this was Beta'd by the amazing woman that is Mayboo13. She is my constant source of confidence, and she nit picks (in the good sense) until she's blue in the face just to reassure me. I adore her. And this is dedicated to my friend Amy who has put up with me bugging her about TWD canon for about nine months.

This is dedicated to the crazy people who commented on the last chapter: Jess, Ella, Stephizzle88, AudreyChaz, jberry11, TheCradleofNin, Nicoline10, Scream_dream99, jdmfanfiction (I FUCKING LOVE YOUR WORK), Ticktok_bb (and thanks for the other comments too, darling), Laura, Londonbridgefall4me, YorkieNYXX and Bravesgirl99.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were so many of his Saviours out looking for her, mad people running on Negan’s command and braying for her blood – Mallory had to run, she had to hide or escape, not let them win in dragging her back to him. Rain lashed her skin as she found a door around the back of the building, the dark night sky playing to her advantage. Her heart pounded as she heard their thunderous footsteps, guns and knives threatening.

Fifteen. Twenty. Thirty Saviours. She’d lost count. Every corner she rounded, there was even more of them, shouting orders through the heavy rumble of the rain on the ground. It was pointless – escape just wasn’t possible. It was inevitable that one of them would find Mal and march her up to face Negan. Maybe it was just a point of pride, to not go gently into that good night but instead to fight tooth and nail until Lucille took her head. The Saviours moved quicker and worked better
together than she’d have imagined; they flashed torches as little as possible so they didn’t attract the Biters, some stomping around to try and flush her out.

Soaked to the core from the rain, Mal edged her way along the exposed brick walls, keeping as flat to the surface as she could, trying not to breathe to show the vapour in the frigid air. It was what she used to do to get past the Biters and the living alike; keep her back secure and check both her sides, keep her weapon drawn just in case. Except she had no weapon. She had no hope. She had no chance.

Her fingers flattened across the coarse brick as she turned a corner just in time to see another jack-booted thug walk right past her, not even turning to check his flank like an amateur. Still her heart pounded in her chest, her options between a dead end, walking out into the open, or going back on her own path. Quick – she had to make a choice. There was people hunting her for sport everywhere, they’d boxed her into a corner, wanting to flush her out and attack with her bare hands against their weapons. She had to make her choice – but it was a trap, it was always a trap.

Mal turned back around the corner she’d just come from, feet crunching on the gravel. There was a click and a scrape of metal on metal, the barrel of a gun between her eyes and a slim figure in the shadows behind it. The gun lowered and she breathed.

Pain pierced her head, the handle of that fucking gun cracked against the side of her head near her temple, splitting the skin and knocking her for six. Mallory grunted in anger and pain, stumbling back, her knee was kicked from under her with a sickening crunch before she could even think to run, to panic, to fight back. Pain speared through her joint and she cried out as she crashed to the gravelled ground, sinking into the mud underneath. Another blunt kick landed solidly into her side and forced the air from her lungs. She coughed and spluttered, head swimming and body burning from adrenaline. Mal pushed herself up and turned, catching a look up at her attacker in the bare light from a single torch.

Fuck.

It had to be Arat. The woman smirked and kicked her in the back once more just for her own sadistic pleasure, Mallory’s ribs almost vibrating with the force of that steel-capped boot. Her eyes were fire and her gaze tore through Mal’s limp body as more of his men hauled her up to her feet, both of her arms wrenched back and straight enough that she couldn’t wrestle them off without tearing her limb out of the socket. She grunted and struggled, blood dripping down the side of her face. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fucking fair.

“There she is,” Arat said, sounding out of breath. She crouched down right in Mal’s face, the rain still pounding down onto them both. “I caught the little piggy trying to run away. Let’s see what your big, bad wolf has to say about that.”

“You hit like a girl,” Mal spat as they marched her back into the viper’s nest. She summoned whatever fight she had left in her to struggle against their grip on her the whole way there, not willing to show an ounce of weakness. “You should have shot me when you had the chance!”

“And miss the show?” Arat smiled mirthlessly. “You can keep pretending as much as you want, if it’ll make you feel better. Round two goes to me.” She grinned a little wider now, and Mallory could just about see the remnants of the damage she’d done to Arat in their first fight. It gave her a cheap victory.

“I’ve done nothing wrong!” she protested, crying out in pain as someone wrenched her shoulder back. “It’s all lies!”
“Innocent people don’t run away from a safe zone,” Arat seethed, gripping Mal’s hair and yanking up. “I heard about your little secret – after all the trust he’s put in you, all the gifts and the fucking piano. You should see him now, he’s angrier than I’ve ever seen. Shooting your brains out would have been too much mercy; we’re not really about that here.”

Arat yanked her hair again and stalked forwards with a cocksure strut, leaving Mallory’s head throbbing and pulsing. The woman wiped the mud from her boots before she went inside the building, holding the door open to her subordinate Saviours. The thugs behind Mallory pulled her arms painfully back again until her shoulders burned, the muscles resisting every inch as they dragged her back inside, down to the Hell she’d clawed her way out of.

The hallways of the Sanctuary were empty and deathly quiet though the normal people weren’t far away. They had to have heard it all, the struggle and the painful groaning echoing off solid walls, the whispered rumours between the Saviours they hauled her past each and every one. Mallory was dragged up the wrought iron staircase, her ankles catching on each step just to spite the assholes and make it harder on them, her body going limp as a dead weight in their hands. She was a petulant child but she’d be damned if she was going to make it easy on the executioners leading her up the green mile. They gloated and hauled her up without care, letting her hurt herself on the iron steps. The grip of the men holding her tightened as they got closer and she struggled to break free.

Finally, as the landing came into sight, the men gave up and practically threw her into her room, dumping Mal’s aching body on the floor in the middle of the chaos. Five more of them were tearing her things to pieces, turning over and breaking into her furniture to try and find what she had hidden. In the middle of them all was Negan.

The pain from her shoulders lessened as she tried to catch her breath, not even daring to move with his men surrounding her. Mallory felt weak, as tiny and meaningless as the crumpled pieces of paper torn from the books on her shelves. Her legs were flecked in mud from ankle to thigh, and the fabric of her jeans soaked through to the core from that pounding rain. Everywhere across her torso was stiff and agonising but still Mallory pushed herself up a little from the floor, not willing to look weak even as she felt it.

Negan hadn’t even glanced at her. He was there in the middle of them all with his back to her like a monolith, watching the carnage unfold as everything he had ever given her was torn to shreds in front of him. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t move at all and her stomach rolled in fear – Arat was right, he was beyond angry.

“Get the fuck up,” Negan ordered quietly a moment later, still refusing to turn around and face her. Mal still refused to show any pain as she stood up on her weak knee, keeping her head high. The ache in her body was nothing compared to the fear she felt. Everything she owned was a torn mess of cloth and paper on the floor. It didn’t look like they’d found what they were looking for, not if the tension in him was anything to go by.

“Negan-” she croaked out, hoping there might be a chance she’d leave with all her body parts intact.

“Everybody get your fucking asses out of here right the fuck now!” he thundered suddenly, turning sharply on his heels as they all froze. “This shit’s gonna get messy.” His voice was different like this, the kind of angry where he sounded dangerous to every man, woman and child around him; even Simon guarding the door glanced at her as if he was glad he wasn’t in her shoes. Negan refused to look at her still, his icy cold eyes on the Saviours shoving past her to follow his order – none of them dared to step a toe out of line, none of them hesitated, none lingered or gloated or jeered at her now.

He strode forward and held out Lucille, using her and her barbed spikes to slam the door shut behind
the last of his Saviours. It was just them on their own; Mallory and Negan in the middle of that wreck. It was devoid of any ownership he’d given her now, all the freedoms she’d earned were in tatters at her feet, all his kindesses and adoration torn apart because of Peter. Negan dropped Lucille to his side again as he stood there, a foot or two away from her – it might as well have been an inch for all the space he seemed to take up. The heave of her chest and pounding of her heart belied any strength she might have shown to his face as he finally looked right at her instead of pretending she didn’t exist. His eyes were still glassy and arctic-cold.

“You shouldn’t have brought me here,” Mal muttered eventually, unable to take the stare and the painful, accusatory silence any longer. She was glad that the raindrops sliding from her hair onto her face covered up her watering eyes and washed away the last of the blood from her temple. “I never wanted any of this to happen.”

“Where is it?” Negan asked her almost calmly, picking a towel off the floor and throwing it at her. “Where’s the sonogram, Mallory? I’m done with the games, I’m done with the scheming and the lies. I just want to know where you hid it.”

She didn’t even try and fake a look of shock. He was keeping himself back, she could tell, stopping himself from exploding in a white-hot rage and beating his anger out on her, his fingers flexing dangerously around Lucille’s handle. The man wanted answers and was going to make sure she damn well gave them to him before he doled out whatever punishment.

“Inside the mattress – there’s a hole under the label,” Mal replied quietly after a moment, watching as Negan stalked over to the bed in an instant. It only took a second before he found the gap she’d hidden the sonogram in, his fingers pulling it out.

As he stared at the folded-up photo, it hit her that he would be seeing it worn and folded, boxed around the edges and stained on the back from all the dirt she’d ever had on her hands. It was all new to him, those wavy lines and the shape in the middle – did he even know what he was really looking at? Mallory had been given time to memorise that sonogram from the moment she saw it but Negan was only seeing it now, creased and torn.

Mallory knew that he didn’t know what had happened to that baby, or what she had hidden for so long from him. All Negan knew for sure now was that she’d been pregnant and that she didn’t have a child with her when he found her again in that fucking farmhouse. Out of all the painful scenarios that must have been running rampant through his head, she wondered whether any of him felt the joy she felt when she first laid eyes on that baby. She still thought it was beautiful.

He straightened up, his back still facing her, finally unfolding the sonogram to look at the wavy lines she’d hoarded for however long it had been. Years, probably. “You shouldn’t have trusted that dickhead friend of yours,” he muttered quickly, his face unreadable. “It didn’t take much for him to give you up. Pansy-ass motherfucker. I wish I’d killed him. I should have. He saw my kid before I did.”

“Peter only guessed it was yours,” Mal replied carefully, wiping herself down with the towel, glad that her head wasn’t bleeding anymore. She ached but the sharpness of the pain had faded now. “He didn’t know for sure because I never told him anything about it. But you’re right, I shouldn’t have trusted him. Can’t trust anyone.”

The chuckle he gave her was dry and humourless, Negan shaking his head as he leant back on the edge of her tipped over desk, eyes glued on the picture. “I thought he was just digging shit out of his own ass to rub in my face, trying to make me look like a fool,” he said quietly. “But Petey took a big swing and hit it out of the park, huh? The date on here… it lines up, doesn’t it? It’s all true.”
“It was a long, long time ago, Negan. Not exactly something you bring up in an apocalypse,” Mallory lied, squeezing the last of the rain water from her hair before she tossed the sullied towel away again. “I just… couldn’t tell you. Not yet.”

“My bullshit meter’s working overtime tonight, Mallory,” he replied angrily, snapping his gaze up to her pale face. “I fucking knew something was different about you this time around. There was so much hate in your eyes, shooting in my direction at the beginning… you weren’t expecting it, were you? For all this to come back and bite you in the ass? I couldn’t fucking figure out what was eating at you that badly but this makes some perfect fucking sense. You weren’t just hiding this from me, you were hiding it from yourself too. I deserve to know the motherfucking truth about our baby-”

“My baby. Not yours. Mine.” Mallory wanted to rip that picture from his hand and hide it again, burn it from his memory and keep it for herself. He’d sullied it already. “I was the one who was pregnant, I went through all of it on my own and I’m not letting you pretend to care about it now. You threw me away, Negan! I was on my own and I was fucking terrified. I had nightmares about giving birth in a jail cell, that kid ripped from my fucking arms before the blood got wiped off, all because of you!” Her voice broke and Mallory crossed the room to stand in front of him, her hands shaking. “You don’t get to call it your baby because it was never yours. It was mine and only ever mine! You want to call that bullshit? You want to take my head off for keeping this from you? Go ahead. I’d make the same call a million times over, and a million times again because you’re not fit to be a father, you’re barely fit to be a man.”

Negan didn’t say a word. He simply looked down at the sonogram in his hand and let her spit out the hate, his expression still blank. The tension in his shoulders was still there, though, the anger in his eyes burning cold but she saw something else too: pain. It had been a long damn time since she’d seen real pain from that man, not since before the end of the world, back in her apartment. He looked too human, too real and raw. Mallory wanted him to rage, to be the Negan they all feared, to hit her, to give her something to hate again, tear the damn sonogram into ribbons if that was what it took. But he did nothing. He said nothing. Every injury she had felt new and raw in his silence.

“What do I even do now?” he asked eventually, muttering low in his throat and turning to look blankly up at her. She didn’t think those words would ever come from his lips. “Half of them think I’m too soft on you already, and now Peter’s stuck a can of gas on the flames. If I look weak, if I look like a fool for you, they’ll kill you first. It’ll start a tidal wave I won’t be able to stop, Mallory. You got me boxed into a fucking corner.” Negan sighed, looking at the door with an arched eyebrow, the shadows at the base dancing slightly; they were being watched. “I should have killed that little prick Peter a long time ago.”

Her brow arched in confusion as she listened to his careful words. “It sounds like you don’t want me dead…” she said in hushed tones, realising why there was so much anger and tension still in him; he’d built his own grave and she might have to lie in it. He hadn’t wanted this either, his army looking at him like he was an untouchable general when he had a giant weak spot: her. “You could kill me and Peter now, though, couldn’t you?” Mal suggested. “It’d solve all your fucking problems.”

“I’d rather not do that if it’s all the same to you,” Negan grunted sardonically in reply, his thumb tracing over the shape of the baby in the sonogram. “I might be a fucking monster, Mallory, but I ain’t about to kill the mother of my kid, no matter what she says I want.” He sucked air through his teeth and roared suddenly in anger, turning and throwing Lucille straight at the closed door with all the rage and pain he had in his body. Mallory flinched as he hit the jamb, the wood and plaster splintering with Lucille’s blow. The shadows disappeared in an instant.

Mal’s chest heaved and her skin prickled in fear at this ticking bomb trapped in a room with her, torn
between two sides of himself. “What are you going to do then?” she asked, simply standing in front of him with nothing left to give except herself. “You know I’m not gonna let you kill me without a fight. You decide that this is more important than me, then you better make damn sure you know what you’re doing. I’m not giving up now, not after everything that’s happened to me.”

“Just tell me something, Princess,” he said, still tense and terse. “How in the fuck did you end up with that cretin staining my floor downstairs? He doesn’t give a fuck about you anymore.”

A cold look glazed her eyes as she replayed that kitchen scene through her mind, her view through a keyhole having blown her to pieces. “I know he doesn’t. I guess I just trust hot-headed idiots who betray me in the end.”

“He is not fucking good enough for you,” Negan seethed angrily, standing up with the picture still in his hand. “How in the shit could you ever go around with that kid? You’re meant to be smarter than that, Mallory, he’s a fucking weasel!”

She wasn’t about to let him intimidate her, to make her cower, to take her back to the naïve girl she’d been in the beginning. “Like you know what’s good for me? Why does it matter to you what Peter said? I don’t give a tiny rat’s ass about him so why does it matter to you? I never loved him, you idiot, I can’t love him, I can’t love anyone anymore!”

Mal’s hands shook, heart pounded, chest heaved. She blinked as she peered down at her feet, unable to look Negan in the eye, everything coming back to the surface she’d forced it under.

“What in the fucking fuck does that mean? You can’t love anyone?” he questioned intently, rounding on her.

“It means I can’t love anyone,” she hissed, snatching the sonogram easily from his hand. “It’s all a fucking joke, isn’t it? It’s so damn easy to fall in love but it’s impossible to stop completely and I just… can’t love anyone. I don’t love Peter because I can’t and I never did. I used to look at him, thinking that I’d feel something like love, like friendship or even just fucking care more, but I didn’t. I’m numb. I owed his sister a debt and I repaid it, thinking that maybe there’d be a day when I looked at him and felt something on my own – not a debt, not loyalty. I was wrong.”

“Your friend’s a big boy now, Mallory,” Negan grumbled, his eyes dashing to the sonogram in her hand. “You don’t owe him dick anymore.”

“He’s not my friend,” Mal snapped before sighing. Her fingers held out the sonogram between them, now a reminder of the love she’d once felt for her unborn baby. “I don’t even know why I keep this damn thing. It’s not my daughter, it’s not my son, it’s just a piece of paper at the end of the day, it’s empty. I used to look at it and think that I was doing something good, just once in my life. Like I had something with so much potential, but in a second it was gone forever. I couldn’t even keep my baby alive, Negan.” Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. “I got nothing. I can’t love anyone, I can’t even make a goddamn friend. So, why don’t you do what you gotta do to save your reputation as the biggest badass this side of the fucking Mississippi and I’ll fight you with whatever I got left? Let me go out in a blaze of glory, fighting tooth and nail to survive, and you can finally have the last laugh.”

Negan stared at her again, taking back the sonogram delicately. “What load of fucking crap. You’re not incapable of anything, Mallory, this world still means something to you – we both know that. People who can’t feel anything, the people who walk alone, they don’t survive for long, they don’t fight like you do. I’ve seen it, people walking into herds of the dead, making martyrs of themselves, sacrificing their lives for some asshole. That’s not you, Mallory. Nobody who fights back is numb.”

“I can’t do it anymore, Negan,” she muttered, wiping her cheeks roughly with the back of her hand.
“Peter’s nothing to me, I don’t hate him and I don’t love him either. What the Hell am I if not numb? How long do I have to keep fighting to try and feel something for him? I lost everything, and I thought… I wanted it to be a new start, I thought I could try and make a new family, make friends and survive like my Mom told me to but I… I just wound up back here with you!” Joyless laughter bubbled up in her throat and echoed around the room, her brain stuck on an endless loop at the futility of it all – she’d tried to run away from Negan and her past only to run right back into his path again and now she was breaking in front of him. “It was hard out there but it was my life. It belonged to me, no matter how shit it was, no matter how hard I fought or how many people died around me, it was all mine. That’s… that’s what really pisses me off, you know. I lost everything but I survived and then suddenly you come waltzing back into it with your goddamn bat, still fucking winning… because of course you win!” Mallory laughed again, realising how much she resented him for thriving, for fighting and succeeding. If he chose to kill her, if her death was going to cause him pain, it was all she had left over him. “You win again, Negan! I can’t escape from you!”

“Mallory-”

“You know what, it’s actually really fucking funny. Best part? I can’t love anyone else because I’m still in fucking love with you!” Mal admitted, hating herself and him and the world. “I love you and I hate myself for it. I can’t get away from that part of me that still craves you and isn’t that just the most fucked up thing you ever heard? All the shit you’ve pulled on me, all the times I wanted you to feel what I felt, and I still can’t get over you.” She was panting for breath, the words tumbling from her lips like water down a cliff. “If killing me is gonna make it finally stop, then fine – smash my fucking brains in with your precious Lucille and end it.”

Writing to him was more than he deserved. It was never going to get to him, it would never even reach his hand but her mother had told her to write a letter all the same. Mallory kept the sonogram propped up in front of her, too, like a reminder of what she was doing this for. She loved her mother but the woman had never known a broken heart like Mal had – her mother and father were childhood sweethearts and soulmates to the end. It almost made her believe in love and fate. Almost.

Mallory worked quickly as the words formed over and over in her head, her mind wanting to lash out and make it hurt as much as possible; she wanted to tear him to pieces. Negan. Even his name made her shake now. The hatred she had for him was building up and poisoning her from the inside, spewing onto the page with every word she put down and scratched back out. How could words ever do justice for how he betrayed her?

“Why am I even doing this?” she muttered to the sonogram. It made sense to ask the only other person this affected, even if they were just a cluster of cells. “You’re better off not knowing your Daddy, kid, trust me on that one.”

She picked up the pen again and thought about the day that baby went looking for its father. Could she lie to her own son or daughter? She couldn’t stand to think of her child ending up let down by him again and again. The other option seemed even worse: that he’d be a great father, a loving man and a kind man. It was cruel but she didn’t want either option to be a reality. Mallory couldn’t raise Negan’s baby but she could give it a chance with a real family.

‘I should never have loved you, Negan.’ Mal scrawled out quickly, each word a stab in her stomach. ‘I wish I could wipe out everything that happened between us but I can’t, no more than you can. However much I hate you now, I know deep inside that you hate yourself even more. Deep down, you hate yourself far more than I can ever hate you. Lucille was the one good thing you had in your life, wasn’t she? You’re still trying to protect what you and her have left together and I was the
mistake you didn’t count on. Was I not enough for you? I tried so hard to stop loving you. Was there any part of you that thought maybe I was worth something more? I guess not.’

Her heart hammered in her chest as she paused.

‘All your promises, all your rules and the games and obsession over controlling my life and still I was nothing to you. It takes a man dead on the inside to do that and that’s all you are, dead and rotten. You don’t even know what you’ve done. Do you remember the promise I made you, when I was begging for your help and you told me no? The joke is on me after all because a week ago, I found out that I’m pregnant with your baby. I’m pregnant and I had no idea what I was going to do at first. It kills me that the father of my child would be you, that I’ll have to look into my new-born’s face and wonder how much it’ll grow up to look like you. But it’s not that baby’s fault, is it? It’s yours. The baby deserves better than either of us as parents.’

Her fingers fluttered hesitantly over her stomach, that guilt settling in like an old friend.

‘I know one thing for certain – there’s no way you will ever be a father to this child, Negan. I hope that that rots at whatever’s left of your humanity. I hope it wakes you up in the middle of the night for the rest of your life, wondering if you have a son or a daughter somewhere, being raised in a good family, being given a shot at a good life. I might be a thief, or a whore or naïve but at least I get to do one good thing – I can give this baby a chance with a family fit to raise it. I hope you keep hating yourself because I damn sure hate you too.’

Her lungs heaved and Mal squeezed her eyes tight to stop the sobs of pain and fear from escaping her lips. Everything burned but she kept those tears at bay, forcing herself not to think about him, forcing her love and hate and crushed heart down deep inside her. It was over. She’d never have to see him again. It was done.

As Mallory opened her own eyes, she saw the sonogram, the blob in the middle staring at her. She gazed at her baby with longing until her anger dissolved into melancholy. It had no chance with her; a convict for a Mom and an asshole of a Dad. No. Mallory was going to go to prison and his baby would be born there and given to a better family. She’d have to learn to make her peace with that and just keep her nose clean, rebuild what she could and hope that her father would forgive her one day.

“Mallory!” her mother called from downstairs suddenly, interrupting her goodbye. “Come down, there’s something on the news!”

Tucking the sonogram into her back pocket without thinking, Mal took a deep breath and straightened herself out, glad for the sudden distraction. Her frown deepened as she came down the stairs and saw the familiar red banner of breaking news on the TV. “What’s going on?” she asked as she hopped off the bottom step into the living room. “That can’t be good…”

“Trouble’s going on,” her father grizzled, walking into the room with two hunting rifles over his shoulder. “It’s those so-called riots. People down south are buying up supplies and boarding themselves into their houses.”

“I thought the army had them contained?” Mal asked, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked between her Dad and the news rolling across the television screen. “It’s just some chemical accident, that’s all, union riots or something.”

“I’ve seen riots and that’s no riot,” her father replied, shaking his head. “They’re saying there’s been more attacks tonight, but that’s all the news people are talking about and I don’t trust it. My nose says something’s going on they’re not telling us.”
“Joe, I’m sure it’ll blow over,” her Mom said, trying to calm her conspiracy nut husband down. Every tornado season he got the same way, grabbing rifles and hoarding food because it was gonna be the big one. “The military know what they’re doing and we’re miles and miles away. They’ve evacuated the cities and suburbs down there already, if they thought there was any danger up here, we’d have had the same.”

“I’m not taking chances, Angie, we’re in lockdown until I hear otherwise.” Mal rolled her eyes and knew it was pretty much futile to argue with him.

“Dad, it’s okay,” Mal said, trying to be reassuring. “I’m sure it’ll all be over soon.”

They stood in the middle of the room together, the only remnant of their past life in Negan’s calloused hand. He didn’t want to have to kill her, she realised, no matter what he had to do to save his own neck. It didn’t matter that Mallory wanted the dignity of her choice, it was – in the end – his decision what to do. He could pretend it had never happened, they could burn that sonogram up and go back to how it had been before – except he’d have to kill Peter no matter what. Her gut churned. He was right though; doing nothing about her would cause so much shit between him and the Saviours, not to mention with the normal people living there too, all of them thinking he’d gone soft and wasn’t up to his job.

The man let out a world-weary sigh and took a step away from Mallory, his eyes crawling up the cracked walls to the ceiling, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck. He knew it too, that his choice today would set the path for his future. “Jesus fucking Christ, Princess. You really know how to put a guy on the spot. Ever think about not being a constant pain in my ass?”

“How is it this hard for you? We weren’t anything before, and what’s changed about that just because I was pregnant a million years ago?” she argued, wrapping her arms around her chest again. “Neither of us owes the other anything.”

“Ah that’s just some fucking bullshit right there,” he muttered, slipping the sonogram into his pocket as if it were clouding his mind. “You and I aren’t nothing, Mallory – we’re everything now.”

Mal barked in laughter. “Fucking Hell, Negan, get a goddamn grip here. You can’t let me leave and I don’t think you can let me live either. I mean, shit, you’re losing face just talking to me, I should have been dead a long, long time ago. Maybe I was always going to end up going out like this, just another one of your victims kneeling at your feet.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Just ask me the questions I know you want to ask and get this over with.”

He looked at her for the longest moment, his lip twitching like it wanted to curve into a smile. “Tell me how the baby died, Mallory - because I sure as shit know it’s not alive now. What happened to you? Did you have an abortion? A miscarriage?” He paused, like he didn’t want to say the next option; she didn’t want him to either. Negan stared right at her and, God, his eyes looked haunted by the possibilities neither of them wanted to think about – the real chance that something so innocent could have met the worst death in this world. She wouldn’t have been able to go on had that happened. It was the one small mercy she’d been granted.

Mallory let the tears fall this time as she remembered it all, holding her arms close to her chest. “I was just pregnant one day and the next day I wasn’t. I lost our baby and I lost my damn mind too,” she said quietly, glancing at the sonogram. “It was right at the start, before the army started shooting anyone who even looked like they might be sick. We were holed up in the house. I just woke up and there was so much blood on my bed, Negan, there was so much blood everywhere. I couldn’t get it off me…” her breath quickened and her chest tightened. She felt that rise of panic and bile in her
throat, the smell of it too much, the sound and flashes of her nightmares haunting Mallory for years.

The next thing she knew were his arms around her tightly and the smell of his leather jacket as he held her. Mal just sobbed into his chest and gripped him tight as everything rushed her at once and the room span. The memories of the world she’d buried deep down inside – the blood from her sheets, jabbing a knife into her mother’s brain, her father killed for nothing, the people she’d let down, – they burned and burned and burned.

Negan’s fingers threaded through her damp hair, his body tense as he held her like a sobbing child. “It’s not your fault, Mallory. It’s not your damn fault.”

She didn’t hear him, her eyes screwed shut at his denial. It had to be her fault, didn’t it? She had killed her own mother, let her father sacrifice himself, had turned away so many people in need. He was wrong, so wrong – she’d deserved that loss, in the end. “I can’t even remember anymore. Everything around us was like a living Hell. People were killing each other for a can of dog food, Negan, they were ransacking houses, raping women…” she lingered darkly over the last. Mal had killed more than her fair share of would-be rapists. “When I lost the baby, it seemed like I’d killed something purely good, like I was being punished… but I think was a good thing in the end, wasn’t it?” She looked up at him with crystalline eyes, hoping he’d understand why she’d kept fighting onwards. “I’m glad it died because to live in this world is worse. I could barely protect myself, that kid never stood a chance.”

There was so much unshed sorrow and pain flashing over his face, a cold anger she knew somehow wasn’t directed at her – he’d never have blamed her for losing the baby, never have tortured her the way she’d tortured herself. Negan was part of this world and he knew the odds of surviving it, too. He simply gripped Mallory tighter, as if he was scared she would fall like sand between his fingers.

“But you didn’t give up. You kept fighting, you kept surviving…” he mumbled into the top of her head, searching for something to keep her going. “I never thought I’d see you again, Mallory. They were all so fucking weak, every single one of them didn’t have the fucking balls to make it but you did and you found me. I can’t let you go, not again.”

“I don’t know how I lasted so long. My Mom told me to keep going, just keep moving forward and survive because I could, so I did it for her. We’ve all lost something, lost someone. Everyone I met, there was another story but they all were the same, in the end,” she paused, knowing that Negan would have had those losses too, would have heard those same stories. His shoulders tensed underneath her. “I thought that if I stopped, I’d be dead too and nobody was going to keep me from breathing another day, I killed…” she choked out, determined to be strong. “I killed a lot of people to survive. I don’t regret that – people died, one day or another, they died. Maybe this is it for me now, God knows I deserve it.” Mal tried to pull away, his comfort suddenly feeling like weakness in her eyes.

Negan kept a firm hold on her, looking down at her with pride shining in his eyes. “You did what you fucking had to do. I did the same shit, Mallory, I survived and I tried to help people but they were still weak. Being strong is what kept you alive and you’re here now. All those people down there, they’re the same, even the fucking kids. They got stronger because they had to, just like you and me – there’s not a single person here with clean hands.”

“I can’t…” she gasped, the idea of the things she’d done overwhelming her. Mal struggled out of his arms and managed to wriggle free just as Negan grabbed her wrist to keep them anchored together. Her head throbbed, the bruises forming on her body were a testament to the fight that was still inside her. She didn’t want to die. She didn’t.

“Stop it!” he hissed, yanking her body in to him. “We have all survived, we are taking this world
“You’ve not just survived, though, have you?!” she spat back after a moment, glaring up at him. “You’re the King of the dead, Negan! It’s sick but I don’t even blame you for it – I’m not sure that if I had that chance, I’d wouldn’t have done the exact same damn thing. I could have built an army, I could have kept pushing people, walking all over them, starving communities to death. I’ve done worse things, you know. I could have been worse than you.”

Negan’s eyes flared, looking her up and down, his grip on her wrist almost painfully tight. “No, you wouldn’t have done what I’ve done, Mallory. I’m rotten inside.”

“You didn’t know me out there, in the open,” she argued back. “I wasn’t the same person, I was cold, I lied to people, I killed them. Being here, being near you again, seeing you… I can’t do it anymore. I hate what this world has made me into, I hate that you make me feel alive, like nothing ever stopped between us. I can’t stop fighting and I hate it.”

“Don’t you fucking dare say that to me,” he snapped. “Don’t you fucking dare lie to yourself, saying you hate what you are; it’s pathetic. You love being strong, Mallory, you pick every fucking fight with me every damn day, you make sure that Simon and Arat know to watch out for you even when you’re at a fucking piano! You think the Saviours watch out for any other motherfucker in this place? Oh no, it’s all you, Princess. You love being here, that’s what this has all been about. Outside with your dickhead, fuckface friend, I bet you couldn’t wait to find a Biter hoard and go into battle. I can see that in your soul, you crave it, you want to fight because if you stop for one damn second, the losses get too much. All being here has done is made you stronger than you ever thought you could be on your own – you’re not just a survivor, you’re a fucking warrior and I am never letting you go again.”

Mallory’s eyes burned through his, wrestling with herself as he laid her soul bare to the sun. It was there, between them. She’d always be drawn to him, burning her wings on his flame and the malice in her core matched by the love of his chaos, the fight between the light and the darkness. “Go fuck yourself,” she said, her eyes sparking as she licked her lips.

Her slim fingers flexed around his jacket, Mallory gripping it tight as she pulled his head down to hers She kissed him with the taste of tears and rainwater on her lips, Negan groaning as he swept his tongue over hers. That kiss was her own punishment, submitting to the nightmares like she had wanted to, like she had dreamed of. He was a monster and so was she – she knew that now.

“Mallory-” he grunted out as she ripped the leather jacket off his back.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mal muttered, her fingers pulling at his faded t-shirt, her lips already swollen from his teeth nipping at the soft flesh.

Negan’s whole body changed as her fingertips met his flesh, his eyes flaring in heat and need as she touched him. It had been so long since she’d seen that ravenous fire. Mal’s stomach flipped, her heart pounded in her chest and her nerves lit up in technicolour as he crashed his lips back onto hers, drinking her in like a man starved of water. His rough hands teared manically at her ruined shirt, ripping it open with a desperate grunt to look at her. His lips and teeth latched onto her neck, like he was hungry for a taste of her sweet, scarred skin.

“So fucking beautiful,” he groaned against her neck, twisting her damp hair around his fingers. He pulled his body flush against hers, her lean curves meeting his taut flesh. “So fucking perfect.”

Mallory cried out as he scraped his teeth over that spot on her neck and sucked his mark back into her as if he never wanted her unbranded again. She could feel his cock already hard and thick
underneath his jeans and she wanted to touch him, to taste him and fuck him until he begged for her to let him come. Negan sucked at her neck until Mal was a writhing mess of need, her cunt soaking through her underwear as all the memories of being touched, of being fucked, of being his, came rushing back and blocked out all the bad. She wanted him, his teeth and tongue, his voice in her ear telling her she was beautiful, to make her feel again.

“Bed. Now.” Mallory commanded, walking him backwards towards the bare mattress on the frame, the sheets ripped off by his Saviours.

Negan pulled her with him as she pushed him towards their bare bed, her hands shoving him down so he was sitting on the edge, his face lined up with her chest. Mal’s body was skinnier now than it had been all those years ago, her skin marred by scars and buckshot still embedded somewhere near her hip. The freshest bruises and scrapes were put on show as she peeled off her sodden jeans, relieved to get them away from her itching skin. She expected him to pause at the sight of just her in her black underwear, her body changed so much from when he knew it, but he didn’t. Instead, his hands grabbed at her waist and kissed at her stomach, greedy as he reached up to get her bra off her body.

“Let me see you,” he mumbled heatedly, pulling the stiff fabric to the floor.

Her fingers ran through his hair, gripping tighter as he immediately started sucking on the underside of her breast, her skin singing as he touched her. She cried out when he moved up, teeth scraping delicately at her nipple, a shot of white hot pleasure running from her core to her throat. His hand ascended to her clothed cunt and yanked the fabric up until it rubbed at her clit, her wetness running deliciously down the curve of her ass. Mallory held herself up on his shoulder as it sent shockwaves down her spine at the rough friction.

“Fuck, fuck, please,” she bit out as he tugged her underwear up again so it caused the most delicious heat to roll through her. “Need more, need you.” She panted and shoved at his shoulders when Negan smirked against her breast. “Ass.”

“Good idea. Next time, maybe,” he growled in reply, grabbing her and tossing her onto the mattress beside him hard enough that she bounced, her head swimming with the promise of feeling that thrill again, the one she’d missed more than she’d realised.

Mallory gasped as he peeled her underwear off and sunk his tongue straight into her cunt, holding down her hips and eating her out voraciously. She bucked and cried out her pleasure as it zapped over her spine and through her, feeling it build up inside her like she’d never been able to do with her own fingers. Mal choked out his name as she came and could have cried in relief. She’d not come like that since the last time he’d fucked her, nobody could ever have made her scream like he made her scream, to play her body on the sharpest of edges. Why had she waited so damn long to fall back into bed with him?

Negan licked his lips as he gazed up at her with lustful animal eyes, just staring at her. “You still sound the same when you come, still taste of fucking ripe peaches,” he muttered, leaning down and pressing a kiss to her stomach. “I missed this, Princess. I missed you.”

He sat up slightly and pulled open the fly of his jeans, wrapping his hand around his hard cock. Her eyes flared in desire, remembering the taste of him on her tongue too. All those times they’d slept together, it was still not enough for her to be satisfied. Whatever this was – anger, hurt, comfort, love – it wasn’t enough.

“Fuck me,” Mallory said with a demanding voice, reaching for him as he finally pulled off his pants and boots. Negan had his own scars, she knew, but his back and his legs were strong and more
muscular than she remembered, his solid form turned to stone. They were different and the same, a present and a past meeting and colliding.

Those toned, aching legs of hers parted and Negan slipped between them, sinking his dick into her slowly as if he was making every second with her count. The world went still and it all came back in a rush. Mal cried out as his arm trembled next to her head, Negan pressing his lips to hers as he moved forward until she was full, her cunt clenching tight around him already. He slipped a hand around her thigh and moved it to his waist, his heavy breathing ghosting over her sweat-prickled skin. Her hands gripped tightly at his waist, wanting more, demanding more.

“You’re mine,” he growled, pulling out and pushing back inside her again and again, getting rougher, getting more desperate and hungry. “You’ll always be mine,” he repeated, picking up the pace and kissing her neck crudely, his beard scraping along his bite marks. “Doesn’t matter where you go, what you do, you’re mine.”

“Yes…” Mallory sobbed out as he rubbed at her clit with his rough fingertips, her back arching when her cunt clenched around his dick inside her, all of them desperate to cling to what they had. It couldn’t be the last time. “Negan!”

He cried out himself and fucked her hard and rough, pounding her into the bare mattress. His hand moved from her clit to her breast, groping and twisting her nipple as he fucked her. Mallory pulled both her legs around his waist and dug her nails deep into his arms, her head falling back in a silent scream as she came again, body rippling and contorting in delicious pleasure.

Negan roared out her name as he came inside her, branding her from the inside just as he had before. Mallory could feel his hips stutter, body pressing forward before he kissed her again. She groaned and wrapped her arms around him, shutting her eyes tight at the way it felt to be this close to him again. He didn’t let go of her, pressing his nose into her hair and gripping her almost painfully close.

They couldn’t say anything to each other and neither wanted to. It was home and comfort and need and safety. She could ignore what had happened before and what may come after if she just stayed forever in his bed. But the dawn would come and he’d have to make a choice about her, about his Saviours, about Peter, about the baby. He wanted her alive and, for the first time in forever, Mallory felt power at her fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I'm on vacation in a week or so and friends coming to stay and I don't think I'll have a lot of time to write so there may be a tiny delay on chapter 18. I feel bad but I hope 17 made up for the extra week's delay.

Please leave a comment with your thoughts about this chapter down below and I'll see you as soon as I can. <3
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

People make mistakes - Mallory knows that who she is underneath the bullshit and bravado is all she has left in the world. Her friends are dead, her family dead, her baby gone before she even held it in her arms. All she has left are two people who hate each other, both men who have needed her and betrayed her in equal measure. With so much at stake, she doesn't know which path is the right one moving forwards. Maybe Negan does.

Warnings for mentions of a near sexual assault, for miscarriage, violence, gore and death. Please read with caution if any of these affect you.

Chapter Notes

I'd like to say a giant thank you to everyone for the comments on the last chapter - I got so busy with work and then basically did nothing on vacation so I have no excuse but I'd like to thank everyone all the same. The response every time is just overwhelming and I can't believe I'm getting so near the end. So, special thanks go to Jamie, Megan and Amy for Beta'ing, being great friends and support workers (in Jamie's case) and generally fuelling my Negan obsession. Megan is the best Beta in the biz, and I owe her a debt of gratitude. Jamie, I just adore you now and hello to Jamie's husband too. He's a lucky son of a bitch.

Special shout outs go to last chapter's commenters: Bravesgirl99, alinova, Mayboo13, my awesome Jamie, jdmfanfiction (I still can't believe you recommended this thing on Tumblr, thank you!), Moomus, julyxvi, AudreyChaz, Ticktock_bb, Londonbridgesfall4me, jerbear11, Ella, Scream_dream99 and Guest101. Thank you all so much and I'm sorry I didn't respond to most of you but I see these names so often, it makes me so happy to know people care. Y'all are great!

If you can, please leave me a comment or kudos down below. I'd apologise for the length of this chapter but... is anyone shocked?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How long had it even been? Weeks? Months? Mal guessed that it had to be close to half a year since it all went to shit around her; the screams had long died down because living people were just so few and far between. Cities and hospitals had fallen first, taken down quickly because of the sheer number of people. Mallory should have counted herself as lucky to have survived so long but she still couldn’t summon up the will to believe luck even existed. They were all gone now, all the people she had called friends and family, all the people she just wanted to see one more time before they inevitably got killed. Barely anyone was alive now; every footstep was a dead, dragging stump behind her, hastily dispatched with cold, calculated ease and her bowie knife. All she had was another empty store, ravaged beyond hope; ten Biters put down with nothing to show for her own
Built-up places were no-go areas for supplies, the nearest city a complete bust because it was still so overrun. Mal was on her own and it was impossible to scavenge like that, looting the places crawling with Biters who hadn’t had fresh flesh in weeks. She didn’t want to go out like that, ripped apart by a hoard because she was that desperate. Instead, she stuck to the smaller towns where she could, taking her time and putting down Biters until she could take her hard-earned trophies. Being alone now had its advantages; no people to watch over, no more emotional ties, no sharing, no mouths to feed. It was easier to just sneak in and out of places, take what she needed and find a safe place to rest – keep moving, never look back at the footprints in the guts on the floor. They were rotten anyway.

Stalking down the aisles of another store she’d cleared out by herself, Mallory ripped apart the bare shelves, shoving whatever she could find into her backpack. She was convinced there had to be something worth taking for all her goddamn work in clearing out the place and smelling like death. Her feet glided quick and quiet down the bare aisles as she worked her way swiftly around the store, her knife drawn just in case. Her piercing, anxious eyes darted across everything with precision, making sure she left nothing worthwhile behind. Still, though, her gaze skipped over the remnants of the baby section, never once letting herself look at anything there, no matter if it killed her. It was the one place she never checked in any store she raided, no matter how hungry or desperate she got. It just wasn’t worth letting her guard slip and getting distracted just to get bitten. Looking at onesies wasn’t going to bring any of it back – she just kept moving instead.

Finally, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a packed box lying under a stack of shelves with torn cardboard and glass and other crap littered everywhere hiding it. The label on the box said it was delicious, protein-filled canned chili. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered at the idea of a whole case of edible, even delicious food – something she could just heat and eat or have cold. What did it fucking matter when she was hungry and hadn’t had a full meal in days? Mallory practically sprinted to the box and skidded to the floor on her knees like a little kid with the knife clattering by her side. She ripped the cardboard box open with her bare fingers, anticipating a fucking motherlode of food, cans of chili that could keep her going for fucking weeks if she was careful.

Her heart sunk as she found only a few cans left inside, the rest long gone.

“Fuckers...” she muttered, dumping the cans into her backpack. Angry that she’d gotten her hopes up for something she could only stretch into four days at the most, Mallory straightened up and rubbed at her tired eyes, shoving her aching body to the back of her mind. There had to be something else.

It was just a second, barely the blink of an eye, before she heard someone take a quiet breath and the click of a gun to her left side. Snapping her head into high gear, she twisted for the knife lying next to her thigh.

“Don’t you dare fucking think about it, sweetheart!” a gruff, smug voice called from behind a stack of shelves, a man she couldn’t see even in her peripheral vision. Mal’s hand stalled, hovering over the knife. It had been a while since she’d seen anyone alive and she’d let him sneak up on her like an idiot.

Her pissed-off level raised a thousand percent but she lifted her hands up to her shoulders automatically. “You gonna waste your bullets on a girl?” Mallory called back, trying to turn her head a fraction to see what he had aimed at her. She doubted it even had any rounds left in it – the gun stores were the first that got looted.
“I do when she’s stealing my fucking food,” he sneered. “Stand up, bitch.”

Mallory complied, going against the knot in her gut, turning her body to look at him as he walked out from behind the shelves with a pistol still trained between her eyes. “There’s more than one in there. We could share.”

As he came towards her, she could see a deep scar marring his tanned face. The puckered wound slashed right through his eye and into his forehead, his skin weather-worn and grubby as hers, though he had to be in his 40s at least, if not older, with greasy dark hair. The gun wasn’t wavering and she could see the glint of a skinny knife on his belt. Even the dead eye on his face seemed to be staring at her from top to toe, sizing her up in more ways than necessary. They always underestimated her, these assholes who thought she was an easy mark to rob and leave for dead. How many had tried more?

“Share?” he sneered, relaxing as he saw how skinny she was underneath her heavy denim jacket. “I got a gun, you got a knife. We ain’t gonna share. Throw the bag this way before you make me lose my temper.”

The anger pitted in her stomach. She couldn’t be sure if he had a bullet in the chamber meant for her or if he was just that fucking arrogant that he didn’t consider her a threat. Maybe she just didn’t care if she died anymore but Mal had to take a risk regardless. A loss was not on her cards.

“How about a trade, then?” she bit her bottom lip, trying to lure him closer. Mal bent slowly and picked up the backpack, keeping her gaze trained on his ugly-ass face. “It’s just cans of chili, man, it’s not worth the bullets.”

The man’s good eye flickered and she knew she’d hooked him in, the fire in his eyes blazing loudly. “I don’t think you get how this works, you dumb bitch…” he smirked and took a few more steps forward. “Throw me the fucking bag or I will blow your goddamn brains out. It’d be a shame to ruin that pretty face.”

Bile rose in her throat at the way he looked at her. Those kinds of guys were always the same, before and after the dead started walking, because some things never changed. Assholes were always assholes, they were just more brazen about it now and got away with it even more now there was no society. “You sure I can’t trade you anything?” she asked, her heart thumping loudly in her chest.

“No, but I’ll take your knife too,” he said abruptly, taking another step towards her as his guard lowered and lowered. “Kick it over to me.”

Mal’s eyes narrowed at him, her fist gathering the fabric of the bag in her hand slowly. “No. Not gonna fucking happen; that knife’s mine. I need it.”

The man stalked over as she told him no, aiming the barrel of his pistol right between her eyes. “You kick that fucking knife over or I will blow a hole in your skull and fuck your head with my dick after you’re dead!”

“Messed up son of a bitch…” she muttered, trying to get him just that little bit closer. “You want my fucking stuff, just come take it, you fucking redneck prick!”

“I’ll fucking give you my redneck prick, goddamn whore…” he said, coming another step closer until the gun was a few inches from her head, his finger hovering over the trigger threateningly.

In an instant, Mal swung the bag up and into his jaw with all the force she had, the cans cracking into his jawbone with a sickening crunch, head snapping back in an instant. His hand dropped his
gun in shock, Mal diving for it as he staggered back, grunting out in pained, wheezing gasps. She held the gun up to his head and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

It only clicked; every chamber empty.

“You fucking bullshitting motherfucker!” she screamed in frustration as he dived back towards her, his jaw visibly broken and the skin split, blood seeping from the open wound. He crashed on top of her and pinned her to the ground with his weight, the empty gun skidding across the floor and the bag nowhere. Mallory heaved for breath, trying to find anything to hit him with as she struggled to get out from under his weight.

“Yeah, bitch, got you now,” he slurred, eyes wild and piercing. Rough hands wrapped tight as a vice around her wrists and pinned her to the ground as she tried to hit him, his grip tight enough to make the bones in her wrist crunch and crack. Mallory thrashed and struggled under his weight, her blood boiling in panic and anger as he held both her wrists in one hand, the other squirming down to grope her.

“Don’t you fucking touch me, sick fucking freak!” She hissed, spitting in his face. The man’s eyes changed in an instant, like she’d turned on something that had hidden deep inside him long before the end of the world came around.

He yanked the skinny knife from his belt and waved it in her face threateningly, trailing the tip down her chest. “I’d hold still, if I were you,” he murmured, slicing off the top button on her jeans. “I can play rough, if that’s what you want.”

Mal had to do something before he touched her. She’d heard about those men who captured women like objects, carving their names into their skin, the Claimers. She’d rather die than take a chance he was one. “Go fuck yourself,” she growled and wrenched a leg free from his hold, anger fuelling her as she slammed her knee into his crotch.

He grunted in pain, instantly jabbing the skinny knife viciously into her leg as he let her go, stumbling away with the wind knocked from his lungs. Pain seared instantly down her leg as blood gushed from her thigh, Mallory scrabbling away from him towards the sleek metal of her own knife, fingers wrapping around the handle. Stretching her whole body as much as she could to reach it, she roared and plunged it into his arm as he came back towards her, slicing through flesh and bone as he screamed, the blade poking out the other side of his arm. He slumped back, still screaming as she twisted her beautiful knife until his arm was a mangled mess, her body now painted with his dripping, spurting blood. Mal used her good leg to kick herself desperately away from him as much as she could, her hand holding his skinny bitch-ass blade to her leg so she didn’t bleed to death like an idiot – at least she wasn’t his, she wasn’t another fucking victim with a name carved in her arm, identity erased.

“Redneck prick...” she spat out, watching in disgust as he pulled her bowie knife from his deadened arm, teeth cracking as he clenched his jaw. He groped forward for her and dragged her back towards him by the ankle, a pained scream ripping from her throat. Mal had to think, had to do something, anything. She grabbed a shelf to pull herself back, his blade still lodged in her thigh, ripping as he dragged her to Hell.

A thunderous boom echoed suddenly around the empty store, the redneck’s head half-exploding in front of her, brain spattering her legs. Mallory gaped in shock, his dead body twitching where it was slumped on the ground. Everything stopped. Her lungs burned as she breathed. Her heart raced with adrenaline.

Some tall, skinny guy peeked around the corner of a stack of boxes, his gun lowering as he looked at
her. Mal blinked and kept herself on her guard, looking for the bowie knife the dead prick had pulled from his own arm just so she had something.

“I’m gonna get it in the ass for that,” the man muttered, moving forwards slowly, his body tense. He was young and had pale, clean skin and long hair that fell in front of his clear blue eyes. Mallory didn’t say anything, her eyes flickering to his loaded gun as she ignored the pain in her limbs. “Hey, hey, it’s fine, no need to thank me for saving your damn life.”

“I didn’t need your help,” she said, leaning back against the shelving unit to get her breath back. “But thanks. You shouldn’t have wasted a shot on him.”

“Wasn’t for him,” the younger man said, his gun dangling by his side. “What’s your name?”

“Allie,” she lied, the fake name slipping out as easy as her real one. “You?”

“I’m Peter,” the man said plainly. “Don’t pull that thing out your leg unless you want to bleed to death in an old Kroger.”

Mallory glanced at the handle sticking out of her leg and grunted in frustration. “Fucking asshole was smarter than he looked,” she muttered. Peter held out his arm and helped her up, bearing a lot of her weight as she tried not to let her agony show. She didn’t want to have to rely on someone’s good nature but she didn’t have a chance in Hell without him. There were still Biters outside and she smelled of fresh blood. “Why’d you help?”

Peter looked away for a moment, letting her stand her weight on her good leg as he retrieved her backpack. “I wasn’t going to, but… I’m sick of not doing anything to help people…”

Mal peered curiously at his face for a moment before the trickle of blood from her leg made her push those thoughts aside. “Help get me out of here and I’ll give you every scrap of food I got.”

He swung her backpack onto his shoulders with a soft smile, letting her lean on him once more. “Got a better idea; come stay with us. Have you got people too?” he looked at her with innocent hope in his eyes, that tiny gleam that showed her he hadn’t yet felt the real loss like she had ten times over.

“No,” Mallory replied, bending gingerly to retrieve the bowie knife now covered in splinters of skull. “It’s just me. Last group I was with didn’t end great.”

“He lost someone a few days ago. He was our guy and the toughest nut I ever saw until a Biter ripped his guts out on a run. People gotta stick together, no matter what. Being out here alone isn’t safe and you know it or you’d have killed me with my own gun by now. I need another pair of eyes and a good hand, Allie, come on. You owe me.”

God. She was insane. But he looked so young and full of hope and she did need help from someone she had to be forced to trust. “Just until my leg’s healed, maybe. If it heals.”

“It’ll heal,” Peter assured her, keeping his arm under her shoulder. “You sound like you’re too stubborn not to.”
Mallory glanced back at the still-twitching dead body on the floor, the bowie knife she’d picked up now back in her hand. A long time ago, she’d felt remorse and disgust at herself for hurting the living but it wasn’t there anymore. She should have heard his breath sooner, should have seen the gun from behind the stacks and taken care of it when she could. Now she’d have another scar to add to the collection. Mal leant on Peter as she walked away, a steel setting in her spine as the adrenaline died down in her blood. It was only a matter of time before it came down to who was just quicker and smarter – she’d make sure that was her.

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Negan hadn’t said a word since she had slipped away from his arms when it all became too much, the tingle of happiness and power turning into a sick sense of dread as noise came from outside, the sun rising with his Saviours. No matter what she felt when he touched her, her mind was overwhelmed by the piercing pain and anger in her heart when she looked at his face. It hadn’t gone away and maybe it never would, the knowledge that something had to give. She had power over Negan, but his people were another matter.

One look at him and her sacrifices, her life, would mean nothing again, the spell he’d woven over her would break and reality would set back in like a cliffside crashing into the ocean. They couldn’t stay in her room forever, not when there were people outside braying for her death at his hands, some of them itching to do it themselves, like Arat had been for weeks. The scarlet letter Negan had placed on her chest had turned into a target and if Mallory didn’t play it carefully, she’d have an army of Saviours turning on them. Mal hoped his they were loyal to him because they’d never be her army in kind.

He was laying naked against the headboard behind her as she sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a sheet she’d found on the floor. Mallory could still feel his lips and fingers all over her skin, as if he had never stopped touching her, as if they had never left her body. She could pretend that it was just them if she shut her eyes and just focussed on the lingering wetness between her thighs and the chill down her spine. They could be back in her apartment, listening to the storms outside and watching as they lit up the room instead. Negan made her feel young and foolish again, forcing her to forget what they’d done to hurt each other in the past, only ever focussing on how they were now. She could ask him for anything and he’d give it to her willingly now.

Mallory ran her fingers across the nape of her neck, pushing rough curls away where they stuck to her sweaty skin. “I really shouldn’t have done… you,” she muttered eventually, looking at the fucking bat still lying at the foot of the door. “It’s even more complicated now, if that’s possible.”

“We do great with complicated, Princess,” Negan replied wearily, getting up from the bed as she refused to look back at him. “Didn’t you use to have your hair shorter?” Mallory could feel his demanding eyes on her still, as if he’d not stopped gazing longingly at the catalogue of marks on her neck and her shoulders, ignoring the scars and bruises she hid beneath the thin sheet. “Remember that vanilla crap you used to put in it? My dick would be buried in you and all I’d get is the smell of fucking vanilla, every goddamn time. Shit still gets me fucking hard. I’ll get you some, maybe Alexandria’s got a stock they’re holding out on.”

A smile almost tinged her lips as she remembered those late nights showering with him, his fingers inevitably ending up spending too much time washing her from head to toe and refusing to let her do the same to him. “I don’t think I’ve used that stuff in years. All I get here is some herbal cheap shit that makes my hair go like a bird’s nest. Your guys don’t know anything about hair.”

“Oh, I’ll go kill them all then,” he joked, finding his pants and shoving them on roughly. “Jesus, Mal, are you really still gonna go for the petty bullshit and not even look me in the eye? Am I that fucking
old and ugly now?”

Mallory suddenly glanced up with her jaw set stiffly, still avoiding him. Her gaze trailed instead over his undone pants, the heavy fabric clinging to his slim hips. “I just thought that if we fucked again, I’d feel different – but I don’t,” she replied quietly, ignoring the aches as she shifted, the sheet slipping. “I thought we’d change as people but I guess neither of us did. You didn’t forget any part of me, it was like we just picked right back up again. Nothing’s changed and I don’t know how to deal with that yet.”

“Come on, Princess, you and me both know we’ve changed. It just doesn’t mean dick when it comes to us screwing around like dumb teenagers,” Negan bit back, sitting down next to her on the bed. “This is how it is now; I’m not pretending anymore. I don’t give a tiny fuck if you want to regret the best sex you had since the last best sex you ever had, but us fucking isn’t a mistake. Grow the fuck up and accept that we are just awesome. For fuck’s sake, Mallory, look me in the eye, you motherfucking pussy…”

Her eyes snapped up to his in anger, and she found him smirking as his tactic worked. “Dickhole…” Mal muttered, look at him now that he’d won. She chalked it up to him knowing her too well – riling her up would make her look at him quicker than all the charm in the world would.

Negan just grinned still, chuckling slightly at her pissed-off look of realisation. “There you are. Thought I’d lost you for a moment, getting buried in that panicky brain again. You know this wasn’t a mistake, Mallory, if anything it was fucking inevitable.”

“We can’t stay in this room forever,” she pointed out, looking around at the wreckage they’d made of everything. She didn’t know if she had any clothes that weren’t torn to shreds among the piles at her feet. “Can’t just fuck and fight for the rest of our lives.”

“Sounds good though, doesn’t it?” he groaned lasciviously, kissing her bare shoulder as she rolled her eyes at him, not even bothering to bat him away. “Mallory, I’m not letting you go, even if you still hate what happened years ago. I spent a long fucking time wondering what happened to you, where you were, if you were dead, if you were a Biter, or fucking worse. Finding out you were alive, holy shit, it was like fucking breathing air after living underwater. You could put a fucking bullet in my brain right now and I’d die a happy son of a bitch with a half-hard dick.”

How many times had Mallory thought about that day he had found her again, put her on her knees, her hands zip-tied around her back? She’d been so convinced it was the end until she realised who was stepping right back into her goddamn life. He hadn’t known who she was until he saw her there, defying him again and again.

“You said you went looking for me,” Mal pointed out as he kissed her shoulder again, his lips faltering as she asked. “We were both alive this whole time, within a few hundred miles of each other and I never even heard your name. How is that even possible? What happened to you?”

Those deep eyes of his flickered with something darker for a moment before they landed on her face, the mirth and warmth gone in a second. “When it was all going down, people fleeing, I was in the hospital with Lucille. After it started spreading faster than anyone could fucking contain, the goddamn Army tried to get me to leave, put the whole place on lockdown…” Mal saw him swallow and look away for a moment before he looked back at her. “My Luce fucking turned into a Biter, back when we didn’t know any goddamn better about getting infected,” he said bitterly. “Everyone who died there started turning. I had to fight my way out of there, Mal, the Army was just shooting anyone there in the fucking head, not even hesitating. People were crawling over dead kids and I was just scared fucking shitless, just like everyone else.”
“Jesus…” she muttered before she could stop herself. Mallory had known the cities and hospitals had been no-go areas but Negan had apparently fought his way out of both.

“I found people, like everybody did. The same stories time after time, they made the same mistakes, got into the same fucking arguments and never once fucking listened to me.” His voice broke into anger on the last word. “I looked for you because you were the only fucking person I knew who’d have a shot at surviving in this shitty-ass world. You weren’t fucking dumb like these pricks I kept meeting, calling themselves leaders and thinking they knew it all. I got to your parents’ place and went to your apartment but it was ransacked, fucking empty, shit-loads of blood everywhere. I didn’t even think, just kept moving. You wanna know what I was, Mallory? I was that asshole who didn’t bother learning anyone’s name because I knew they’d be dead within a few days. None of ‘em meant anything. And then I fucking woke up and took goddamn control and people started to survive. Only the weak, the dickless, the pussies. They got ripped apart a long time ago.” Negan fixed her with a stare. “I’m what they need, Mallory. No more Biters, no more fights and no martyrs. They’re fucking alive and that’s what counts now.”

Mal remembered the first time she saw someone ripped apart by a Biter. She remembered the first man she killed but couldn’t remember the last one. It felt like another world ago now, when she had been alone and determined to have it stay that way until Peter found her and saved her from a person she couldn’t handle on her own. Her stomach knotted when she thought about how close she’d come to not surviving, to not be sitting next to this man who would protect her with everything he had, even if she didn’t need it anymore. He wasn’t the only one who had become stronger at the end of the world.

“I didn’t want to be with any group after a while,” Mal admitted quietly. “The first few people I found all died after one stupid plan to clear out a place, make it ours. I didn’t say anything and they all died. I was so angry, I was so fucking angry.” she said, her hand clenching aimlessly onto her knee as the screams echoed in her mind, the people faceless. “I only just walked out of there, Negan. I had their blood on my hands but I survived and that was what mattered to me. I was sleeping on roofs alone for weeks until I met Peter and he saved my life without hesitating, even then. Who wastes ammo saving someone they don’t know?”

Negan bristled next to her, his jaw tensing at the mention of Peter’s name. “That guy’s not fucking worth your time. Never was…” Mal rolled her eyes and moved to get up, not willing to hear it. Negan grabbed her bare arm as she turned, forcing her to look back at him and listen. “He’s not, Mal. He’s weak and you’re strong. You’re a fucking warrior.”

“Stop goddamn romanticising me,” she said, pulling her arm out of his hold. “I am hanging on by a fucking thread most days, Negan. I’m human and I know you are too, underneath all that big dick bullshit you swing around here. Don’t you think for a damn second I don’t see how full of it you are now, you’re just as scared as any of us, you’re just a fucking master at hiding it. Six layers of bullshit and a pussy underneath.”

“I’m not scared anymore,” he spat back almost bitterly. “I do what I have to so these fucking animals don’t turn on each other, Mal. I make the rules so I don’t gotta watch what they do without me leading them again. They need a fucking scary-as-shit asshole with a bat walking among them because it’s the only way they can sleep at night, knowing that nobody fucks with me. I am keeping you safe, I’m keeping my people safe, that’s more than you have ever done.”

Mallory just blinked at him incredulously. “Safe? You think this place is safe? Haven’t you looked at me, Negan?” she demanded quietly, her eyes wide at his lack of care. “My torso isn’t meant to be turning fucking purple. Safe doesn’t mean a cracked rib and dangerous people wishing I was dead so that you get your balls back.” She argued, her side aching now the adrenaline had waned and she felt
the pain more. In truth, Mal had no idea if her ribs were really cracked but Arat had kicked her so hard that it was possible. “I’m not safe here, nobody is. All your hard-line crap has done is made hard people harder too. Jesus, Negan, it’s not safe when I had to step in front of a sniper to keep him from killing you!”

He wouldn’t say a word, his eyes trained now on her torso, fingertips skipping around the edges of the thin sheet, peeling it back to look where she was starting to bruise. His eyes flickered over the dried blood in her hair and the chill on her skin. Mal saw him swallow and lick his lips, a war going on inside his eyes as he took in the litany of injuries – old and new – that mapped her body.

“I’ll fucking kill her,” Negan muttered angrily, shoving himself up from the bed, as if being near her pain hurt him in return. Mal wondered what he was doing when he picked his leather jacket from the floor, his eyes flickering briefly on Lucille by the door. Her stomach turned at the idea of him leaving her in the room alone to take revenge, her eyes darting as he dusted off the leather jacket dangling in his hand. “I never fucking told her to hurt you, Mal, not once. Fucking disobedience.”

“But it happened,” Mallory pointed out, still wondering what he was doing, just standing there with his jacket in his rough hand. “You can’t control everyone, no matter who you threaten. You kill Arat, you kill a good fighter, a loyal fighter, and they’ll know who I am to you. They’ll all know.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that, Princess. Can’t bring myself to fucking care what they think.” Negan looked at Mallory for a heartbeat before he stepped towards her and draped the jacket over her slim shoulders in an acceptance, scooping those damp, wild curls out of the way, fingers lingering on the back of her neck. He just stared down at her for a moment, the tension thick in the air again, looking at her as if she was everything he was willing to fight for, kill for, die for. Mallory realised that she had been right all along; one look right into his deep, dark eyes and she was gone. She was his again, no matter if it felt like she’d lost a war. “You looked cold,” he said, answering the question she hadn’t asked.

“Thanks.” Mal’s voice was sticking in her throat as she slipped her arms into the jacket properly, wearing it like armour. It smelled strongly of him, beyond the smell of the leather. She wondered if he knew what he was doing, whether this was another game, another way to keep her hooked on his line, baited and waiting for the reel in but she couldn’t bring herself to care anymore. The jacket warmed her skin and covered the bruises she knew he couldn’t ignore, not now she’d pointed them out.

Negan sat back down next to her on the mattress, his fingers reaching over to the top pocket of the jacket, pulling the sonogram back out. “Did you ever think up a name for the kid?” he asked quietly, staring at the picture again, as if he was lost in memories he didn’t have.

“No,” she replied, biting her lip. “I didn’t even know whether it was a boy or a girl, it was gone so fast. I had a feeling that it was a girl but I’m not sure. Never got a chance to think up a name.” She laid her head on his shoulder in exhaustion, both just staring at what they might have had. “I’m sure of that, Princess. Can’t bring myself to fucking care what they think.” Negan looked at Mallory for a heartbeat before he stepped towards her and draped the jacket over her slim shoulders in an acceptance, scooping those damp, wild curls out of the way, fingers lingering on the back of her neck. He just stared down at her for a moment, the tension thick in the air again, looking at her as if she was everything he was willing to fight for, kill for, die for. Mallory realised that she had been right all along; one look right into his deep, dark eyes and she was gone. She was his again, no matter if it felt like she’d lost a war. “You looked cold,” he said, answering the question she hadn’t asked.

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“I should have been there for you, both of you,” Negan said beside her, planting his hand protectively on her thigh as they simply looked at what they might have had. “Maybe we’d have a kid instead of a fucking sonogram if I had the balls to do right by you. When your boy toy said about you being fucking pregnant, I knew. I killed my own kid, Mallory. There was something you’d been keeping back and that was it. I don’t know if I’m allowed to be mad at you for that but I still am. I had a right to know if I caused this.”

“Negan, you didn’t...” she said, moving her head away from his shoulder as she spoke.
“Yeah, I fucking did,” he shot back before she could argue, before she could even think to disagree, his hand on her thigh holding her tighter. “I could have protected both of you. I could have done the right fucking thing in the first place, but I didn’t, I was a fucking moron pansy-ass prick. We could all have survived. You should have told me from the beginning, Mal. I deserved to know what I’d done to you.”

“I thought I was keeping this to use against you, because I wanted to make you hurt too,” she muttered softly. “But I just couldn’t do it. Maybe I didn’t wanna go through it all again, losing him. Her. Shit, I don’t even know for real, do I? What do you even say when you have no idea what your baby was?” Mal looked away from him to hide the beads of tears gathering in her eyes, the guilt setting into a bitter shame she never completely rid from her bones. It would always be there, she knew, the part of her that grieved. “It was a long time ago. I’ve lost more. I should feel normal, now, shouldn’t I? You can’t miss something you never really had in the first place.”

Negan just let go of her tender thigh and slipped the sonogram back into the pocket of his jacket, looking up as she blinked back her tears yet again. His fingers crooked around her jaw tenderly, turning her head so she would look at him. Mallory bit her lip as he reached up and pressed a warm, soothing kiss to her forehead.

“You’ll be fine, Princess,” he said softly as it seemed he could manage, pressing another kiss to the tip of her nose and another down to her lips, light pecks keeping her stapled together. “We’ll figure this shit out like fucking adults. We’re not pretending our baby never existed and nobody is ever touching you again.”

She wiped her eyes off on the back of her hands, putting space between them again. It was too much all at once, him and the baby, the threat beyond the door. She once thought of her room as a cage but now she knew stepping outside its walls would make her more vulnerable than ever. What other choice was there?

“I think it’s the only way, Negan, we have to burn it. If they know, it’ll just get used against us. Word travels, and they’ll know how to get you off your guard in Alexandria. It’s just a fucking piece of paper at the end of the day,” she said dismissively, though her heart wasn’t in the words. “Making it go away is the easiest thing.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” he replied almost angrily, like she’d stabbed him in the guts. “I’m not burning the only existence of our baby we’ll ever have. It’s not our kid but it’s not just paper either. It’s a bit of you, Mallory, painful or not. It’s you.”

“Then the only option I have is to let you kill Peter, isn’t it? I’ll be signing his fucking execution order,” she said bitterly. “He’s a fucking asshole but that’s why you hate him, isn’t it? Because he’s had me by his side and you haven’t and you can’t goddamn stand it.”

“He also fucking betrayed you,” the man hissed back, leaning forward on his elbows. “Fuck me with a fucking bat, don’t you dare say it, Mal…”

“You betrayed me too and I didn’t even try and kill you. I probably should have,” she sniped back, ignoring him. “I should just leave here, I should walk away and never come back. I was on my own for a long damn time, I can do it again. I don’t know if I can do that, I can’t let myself become like you, killing the only person here who’s saved my life. I owe him more than you can imagine, whatever mistakes he’s made, he made them because of you.”

“I never did.”

“Don’t you dare,” Mallory snapped, her eyes cold again. “You kept me and him apart, thinking it’d
make him hate me, but when it didn’t, you smashed his hand into the ground as my punishment. All you’ve done is hurt us. God, I fucking hate you sometimes. How can you expect me to just forget all that? I can’t stay, I’d rather sleep in the fucking treetops again than in your bed.”

Negan looked at her like she was insane, giving her a grim chuckle. “You fucking crazy ass…” he shook his head at the idea. “You wanna go live like that? You’ll be dead in a day or two, tops. If your sniper friend finds you, I’ll wake up to your head at my doorstep. You think he’d hesitate to hurt you for weeks? Months?”

Mallory wasn’t letting him scare her with his imagined scenarios. “You forget who you’re talking to, I’m not one of your precious, candy-eating wives, Negan, I hold my own. I killed scarier things than the people out there.”

“Ranger Rick and his dickless wonders blew up a dozen Saviours before he’d even met me. He’s seen your face, knows you protected my sweet ass. He’s not someone who’d think twice about using you to get to me if you step outside those gates without backup.” Negan gave out a groan and leant back, laughing again. “Fuck, letting you leave? That is the dumbest fucking plan I’ve ever heard.”

“I can’t keep doing this, I can’t keep loving and hating you like this, it’s killing me all over again. What do I do?” She said suddenly, tired and staring down a twisting, narrowing tunnel. “Tell me the answer, please! I can’t be your wife, I can’t be you, you won’t let me fucking leave, we can’t forget the baby… I’ve run out of options. Whatever we do, someone’s gonna get killed.”

“And if you leave here, it’ll be you,” Negan said plainly, staring into her eyes.

Mallory hated that he was right. Keeping both herself and Peter alive on the outside had been getting harder and harder. It just wasn’t possible that she’d survive more than a week or two on her own, not when the hordes had moved from the city, searching for living flesh. There was just no easy solution, not without death.

Her fingertips rubbed wearily across the back of her neck, sheer exhaustion setting in deep as tears pricked at her eyes. “Is this all we’re ever going to be? Fighting and fucking, trying to change each other even though we know we’re never going to?” Mal chuckled. “I don’t think we’ve ever done anything else but hurt each other.”

“Well that’s bullshit, for a start,” he replied quietly. Negan turned away from her slowly, bending down and sifting through the wreckage with his fingertips for a minute. Mal wondered what he was doing until he straightened up, shifting back around with a slim gold necklace hanging from his fingers, the musical note stuck in a knot of the gold. “That’s not all we are, it never has been,” he said, untangling the chain. “It was fucking hard, Princess, you and me aren’t easy but I can’t scrub you from my blood any more than you can me from yours. We’re worth the pain.”

“Are we?” Mal said stubbornly, as if her default was to disagree with him. He ignored her and kept working out the kinks in the necklace with thick, clumsy fingers and she sighed in annoyance. “What are you doing with that thing, Negan? It’s probably broken, you might as well throw it out.”

Negan ignored her still, almost smirking as he managed to smooth out the chain and untwist the clasp until it was near-perfect again. “It’s not the first one I got you, Princess,” he replied eventually, looping it carefully around her slender neck. “But you should still have it. It meant something to you, don’t fucking lie. You wouldn’t have thrown the first one out with the rest of my shit from your apartment if it was nothing more than pretty jewellery. I bought the first one because I wanted you to have it, I wanted it to be ours. I wanted to look at it and know you were mine. Why can’t this one mean the same fucking thing?”
Those piercing, dark eyes settled on her collarbone just for a second, his fingertips reaching out to place the music note carefully in the dead centre. Mal watched his face carefully, her eyes softening as he skimmed her collarbones. “Because it’s different now, no matter what you say. I’ve changed and so have you, I don’t think I could ever trust you again, not with anything.”

“I can’t make you trust me, Princess,” Negan replied simply, leaning in slowly and kissing the side of her neck when she didn’t turn away. “It’s called a fucking leap of faith. You have to let me try, let yourself trust that what I do is for you, to keep you safe.”

Mal turned into his body as he kept kissing her neck with a gentle tenderness unlike he’d ever shown her. “I loved that necklace,” she admitted as his fingertips skimmed over it, trailing down to pull off the sheet still wrapped loosely around her torso. Her resolve against him would crumble into dust. “I used to keep that one in a box by my bed, back at my apartment. I can’t even remember where I put the silver one you stole from that Gregory.”

She could feel the chuckle against her chest. “Gold looks better on you,” he agreed, sliding backwards slightly on the bed, dragging her with him. “I dream about you, Mallory, and you’re wearing nothing but that necklace, looking at me with those pink lips, coming all over my tongue until I’m drowning in you. I won’t ever stop trying ever again.”

“Negan…” Mal groaned softly, his rough fingertip grazing a hot path down her breast, her body lighting up again as he touched her. His leather jacket crinkled on her shoulders but he made no move to take it off her. She shouldn’t make the mistake again, she shouldn’t want him to touch her, to take her back to being young and stupid, in love with a man who could never love anyone. “Fuck it.”

Her knee swung over until she was straddling his lap, Negan’s eyes lighting up in mirthful delight as she relented one more time. “God, you look fucking hot in my jacket,” he groaned, placing another hot kiss on her neck, his fingers sliding into her wild, tangled hair and refusing to let go. “My fucking Princess.”

Just to make him stop talking, she kissed his lips with aching tenderness, his calloused, warm hands shifting to hold steady on her hips and pull her in closer, ripping the sheet from the lower half of her body. Mallory pulled away from him after a moment, biting her lip as she felt his hard dick in his pants. “Do you ever shut up?” she asked breathily as she reached between them and wrapped her hand around his cock, feeling in control as she pulled him free of his pants. He still felt the same, hot and hard and desperate. “Even for a second?”

“Not when you got my dick in your hand like a joystick,” he grumbled into her neck as his face fell forwards, his fingers kneading at her ass. “Use it or lose it, Princess.”

Mal shifted her hips up, sliding down slowly onto his hard cock. Her cunt still ached from him fucking her into the mattress but being so in charge made it feel that much better. He stretched and filled her wet pussy until she was dragging her nails down his back to keep from going too quickly and getting greedy. He was perfectly imperfect, the rough and smooth, his skin salty on her tongue as she kissed him.

“Jesus, fuck, Christ…” she whispered as he manipulated her legs so they were wrapped loosely around his waist, her eyes widening as it sent his cock deeper inside her, pressing her body right to the limit. “Negan, fuck, I can’t…”

“Yes, you fucking can, I know you can,” he panted into her hair, arms tight around her and his voice dangerously broken. “You’re a fucking goddess, Mallory, fucking Aphrodite would shit herself to see you.” Negan pulled back a little and really did gaze at her with awe, Mal’s body naked but for
the necklace and his jacket swallowing her frame. “I’m a fucking dickhole for letting you go.”

“Yeah, you fucking are,” Mal said curtly, shifting her hips slowly up and down to get used to the tight angle, her head exploding in pleasure when his thumb grazed her clit, his eyes fixated on her cunt swallowing him up inch by inch. “Fuck!”

Negan groaned in tandem, his hands flexing on her hips. They were buried so deep inside each other that she wondered why she hadn’t given in to him a long time ago, not when he was so fucking good at making her come when there was nothing left to give. Nothing else mattered when he was inside her, in her body and in her mind until they were nothing else except lovers.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he chanted against her ear as she bounced quicker on him, neither of them able to make it last long, not when it was so raw, rough and tender at the same time, desperate hands clinging and desperate lips seeking tender flesh to bite and kiss. “Fucking beautiful. Come on, Princess, come all over me. Soak me. Fuck me up again. You’re so fucking perfect.”

Mallory clenched at his filthy mouth even now, one of her hands shifting from his shoulder to his hair as he bit her neck. She cried out in pleasure again as his hand skimmed from her necklace to her cunt, rubbing at her clit delicately. “Negan!” she screamed, her body convulsing almost violently, coming hard and fast around his cock in a storm of pulsing pleasure.

Her hips faltered and Negan took over, pulling her up and slamming her back down on him until he came with a shout, shooting deep into her and twitching until he slumped backwards in relief, pulling Mal back down with him. She couldn’t speak, still running over the aftershocks like flickering lights behind her eyes. There were no more dark thoughts, no more loss or sadness, no destruction waiting for either of them on the outside – the cliffsides wouldn’t erode. If all they had to offer each other was fucking and fighting, spending eternity in a loop, she could live with that.

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“Allie?” Peter asked, his voice hesitant and quiet as they sat nursing a dying fire, safe for the time being, on the flat roof of a firehouse. Mallory still hadn’t said much to the people around her except Peter, his eagerness to ingratiate her so naively sweet. The fresh wound in her leg meant she couldn’t move properly and so she was stuck with a group of people she didn’t know and who didn’t know her. She wasn’t the only one keeping her distance. “Allie, you hungry?”

“I’m fine, really,” she replied almost curtly, feeling guilty for taking food she hadn’t scavenged. “You guys should have more.”

Most of the four she’d met had been willing to give up supplies to help her and an older man called Hunter stitched up her leg. It was just… different. These people seemed to know each other deeper than she’d expected them to; they communicated with looks and nods, laughed together and bickered like families did. Mal was the outsider, the new girl brought home for scrutiny.

“Not like she’s using up the energy, Pete,” a bedraggled blonde girl said, though she shot a smile at Mal as she stirred the pot in the fire. “Stop bugging her to eat and come get your own.”

“You’re not my Mom, Brit,” Peter replied, shuffling over closer in the fire. “What the Hell is that thing, anyway?”

“Let’s say it’s soup,” Brit replied, obviously trying to keep the laughter out of her face as a bulky man next to her sniffed. “What? It’s kinda like soup and it doesn’t smell bad. That’s a win in my book.”
“Yeah, looks… great, baby. Your cooking ain’t changed one bit,” he said with a wary look; Mallory wished she could remember his name. “God, you remember that Thanksgiving at my Mom’s? What was that yam thing you made?”

Brit’s eyes sparkled into life. “Oh, fuck me, yeah, that was fucking awful,” she laughed outright, leaning up against the man next to her. “I still maintain that your Mom sabotaged me and gave me a tablespoon measure instead of a teaspoon. Cinnamon with a slight hint of yam.”

“We never celebrated in our house,” Peter said, glancing towards his sister, a girl called Aimee, who was stringing up canopies from aerials away from the fire. “Mom and Dad were anthropologists and said it was disrespectful to the Native Americans.”

Hunter glanced up from the shabby book he was reading and snorted derisively. “Your Mama was right, kid, they fucking murdered them. Still loved me a turkey dinner every November.”

“What about you, Allie?” Peter asked as Mallory remained quiet. “You celebrate Thanksgiving?”

She froze as Hunter, Brit and the younger man looked at her and she glanced between them all in kind. “We did,” she swallowed thickly. “My husband worked a lot though, so I spent the last one with my Mom and Dad.”

“How’s that?” Brit asked first, her look of mirth softening into pity. “You’re married?”

It was easier to pretend, wasn’t it? She could be anyone now, and so could Negan. He could be whatever she needed. “Yeah. Was married, I guess. He was a beat cop, spent a few years in Baltimore, but uh… he wanted to join the FBI and we just argued about it for months. We nearly broke up just before all this shit started, had a fight just before he left for training camp. I don’t know where he was, I was never told anything.”

They all went quiet around her again and Mallory felt weird for lying about her life, about everything that had happened to her in the last couple years. It was easier to lie and ignore their pity than to say she was just a criminal and a cheater.

“He never called or came looking for you?” the man next to Brit asked. “What a fucking asshole.”

“Jackson!” Brit admonished, smacking his shoulder. “You don’t say stuff like that.”

“It’s fine,” Mal said, rubbing an ache from her bad leg. “He was an asshole sometimes, but I loved him. I wish I knew where he was. He was the kind of man who’d do anything for you, protect you, help you, listen when you needed it…” she muttered, the lies rolling off her tongue like mother’s milk, soothing her and building false walls. “But he walked away and that’s that.”

“Pussy,” Hunter said suddenly, shaking his head at her. “Honey, I wouldn’t worry too much over a guy who says he loves you then walks away. Means he didn’t love you enough in the first place if he weren’t willing to stay with you wanted.”

“Soup’s ready…” Brit said to cut the silence, ladling out a bowl and passing it around to Mallory with a knowing look. “God, Allie, you’re shivering… Peter, can you grab-”

“I got it.”

Jackson threw a spare coat to Peter, who draped it around Mal’s shoulders before she could think to protest. She was cold and tired but there was hot food in her lap and warm fabric over her shoulders making her feel human again. Brit ladled out more bowls and passed them around, everyone thanking her as they tucked in.
"Aimee, soup’s up!" Peter called, waving the spare bowl to his sister as she walked over, her eyes narrowing at Mallory as she did. "Come on, sit down. That storm’s blowing past us, I don’t think we’re gonna get hit."

"You said that last time and I got the flu," she said quietly. Aimee had short hair and the same crystal blue eyes as Peter, her eyes always guarded when Mallory tried to read her. She sat down in their circle, looking at the bowl of soup when it was handed to her. "Did you make this, Brit, or is it from a can?"

"I made it," Brit replied, arching her brow. "Eat it before it gets cold."

"It’s not bad," Mallory said, smiling softly over at Brit as she ate the thin soup, a mix of nettles, oats and a flavour of old garlic. It was just a little bland and gritty from the oats but it was edible and warmed her body up from the inside – that was what they all needed, really, to pretend like they were just normal.

"I am gonna like having you around, new girl," Brit grinned in reply, winking softly. "At least someone appreciates my cooking, not like all these uncultured morons."

"Here," Peter whispered as Mal finished her bowl, looking longingly at the pot on the fire. "You take mine, you look like you need it," he said, giving her the rest of his soup, his hand lingering on her shoulder.

"Thank you," she whispered back to him, glancing over at his sister, who was staring between them, her face inscrutable. Mallory waved it off as hesitation – it wasn’t like she could blame the girl for not opening her arms straight away. "I mean it," she said to Peter as she looked away from his sister. "Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

I'm curious - what do you think about Peter now? Has anyone's opinion changed?

Come visit me on my Tumblr and say hello. I'm always happy to talk about Malice or anything, really. Please keep a lookout for an outtake scene coming soon, written at the request of a new friend. It'll hopefully give you some more of Mallory and Negan in their explorations pre-apocalypse.

Thanks for reading. I hope I didn't ramble on.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

There's a lot that Mallory owed to other people; they saved her life, brought her back from the brink and made her stronger in the process when she thought she'd never feel whole again. It's been a battle just to keep her head above the water when she thought she'd drown long ago but finally she's back on dry land. But her complicated relationship with Negan is only beginning to get difficult when she has to choose between her friend and her lover.

WARNING: violence, character death, and gory scenes. Flashbacks are in italics and thank you for reading.

Chapter Notes

Whew, it's been too long since I've updated this thing. Three weeks is usually my maximum but too much got in the way and this one stretched to four weeks. I'm still getting over the last remnants of a chest cold so this chapter was a tricky motherfucker to write. I think I've re-written it three times...

Thanks for sticking it out with me anyway, I hope the final version of this ends up at least okay. Thank you all so much for the comments on the last chapter and shout-outs go to: Ticktok_bb, Jamie (hi honey!), Leslie Kmaan, alinova, Mayboo13 (my beautiful, patient beta), Bravesgirl99, Moomus, julyxvi, Londonbridgesfall4me, Scream_dream99, jerbear11, TheCradleofNin, Ella, AudreyChaz and Bonnelass.

See you in (I hope) three weeks. Not long left of this story...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The safety and security that came with her makeshift family was never going to last. Up until the moment one lone, skeletal Biter had sunk its teeth into Hunter’s leg, Mallory had thought that maybe they all had a shot at surviving together, that her life could feel real again and she could finally forget, let her old self die in her parents’ house where it was meant to. Using her fake name was all too easy; her fake stories, her fake life flowed like a waterfall when they asked about where she’d come from. Even the sonogram Mal had salvaged now made her conscious of how much time had passed, of how far away and foreign that life felt before the end of the world. Instead, Mallory was now the survivor among the survivors, her life lost and rebuilt brick by brick into something different and new. She was Allie and she was truly free.

Everything had been a dream right up until the moment Hunter had died in the middle of a forest, bleeding out into the dirt and leaves like an animal at her feet, rocking the foundations of her new life to the core.
Mallory’s leg had taken a solid month to even vaguely heal, a month for her body to recover from a place where every step was agony and tearing muscle, to where she was able to run and fight with the rest of the group and prove her worth. She owed all of them a deep debt – a debt she had been repaying day by day – but Hunter had been the one to push her to move around even when she screamed at him in frustration and in pain, her leg burning as the muscles learned to be strong again. Mal wished that she’d seen the Biter covered in moss and fungus, hidden on the forest floor before it sunk its rotten teeth into his flesh. By the time she’d managed to cut Hunter’s leg off below the knee with five whacks of her knife, it was already too late, the batteries in the radio dead as he was. Mal had watched him die with her fake name on his lips, gasping for help, shock on his pale face as she drove a hatchet between his eyes.

On that day, the world shifted once again, as it always had. She’d dragged herself back to camp, Hunter’s brains coating his own hatchet, the second chance she’d had at family torn apart by a single second of distraction. Not a word left her lips, it didn’t have to, not when they all saw her in blood stained clothes with two bags on her back and two weapons on her belt. Nothing needed to be said – the guilt was written across her face.

The hate they had for her now was palpable – hate they had for what she’d done, for what she hadn’t done, for her stupid mistakes and for Hunter’s, too. Her group would never be the same but Mal had never thought that they’d ever get as desperate as they were now. Two months after Hunter’s death, nearly everything was gone; food, water, medical supplies, shelter. Even the towns were getting overrun by Biters looking for fresh bodies. All they had left were a few protein bars and whatever they could find growing wild to share around shabby makeshift camps, surviving day-to-day and hour-to-hour as much as they could, through starvation and exhaustion. It had gone on for too long and something had to break and it turned out to be her.

“I can’t believe you think this is actually a good idea,” Mallory whispered as she, Peter and Aimee walked up to the entrance of an abandoned hospital, on high alert for hidden Biters coming too close. They were all exhausted and hungry, desperate to survive with what little they had left on them but they’d all learned lessons after their first real loss and were unwilling to make another big mistake. Mal held Hunter’s hatchet in her clenched palm, wary of how much she didn’t want to go into that damn building ahead of them; they’d had too many close calls all at once for her to not fear giant buildings with lots of corners and small rooms to get stuck in. Desperation had made them stupid, and it was going to make them weak. “We’re gonna get killed.”

“We don’t have another option,” Aimee said next to her, keeping Mallory’s knife by her side, fingers flexed in readiness around the handle. The girl was a mess of dirt and flyaway hair but her eyes were raging in anger, fiery and fierce, looking ready to kill in a split second. “Everything else is empty, there’s nothing left but this hospital – we need supplies now, and the only other option was going into a city. I don’t know why this is even a discussion, I don’t have to justify anything to you.”

Clenching her fist even tighter around the hatchet, Mal fought off the urge to snatch her own weapon back from Aimee’s grip. Instead, she focussed all her frustration on the plan they’d compromised on – get in, stay low, get out the back quick, and find Brit and Jackson.

“If we’re gonna do this, we stick to what we agreed to: stay on the ground floor, keep to the open areas, away from the wards. If we even take a single step into that maze upstairs, we’ll be eaten before you even realise it,” Mallory replied, her voice threatening and low. “You don’t know what’s up there, you don’t even know if the ground floor has any supplies left, let alone if any of the others do. We stay low and meet up with Brit and Jackson in the back lot like we planned. No arguments, Aimee.”

“I don’t remember asking your opinion,” Aimee muttered in reply, flanking closer to Mallory as
they stalled in the entrance hall of the hospital, Peter sighing softly next to her. “It’s five storeys high. We don’t have anything left to lose, do we? What does it matter?”

“Can you both please just stop this bullcrap?” Peter begged, weapon-less and defenceless between Mal and his sister. “You’ve had this argument three times already.”

“It matters that we’re alive,” Mal mumbled, ignoring him. She kept her voice down, certain that she could hear Biters trapped somewhere already, their limbs pounding at wooden doors. “I’m keeping us that way, even if this is the most dumb, foolish plan I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

“Maybe you’d like to fucking leave, then, if you think I’m such an idiot for suggesting this plan,” Aimee said, unconsciously lifting the knife and taking a step towards Mal.

Peter snapped and grabbed his sister’s arm, pulling her back from Mallory. “That’s enough,” he barked, his eyes cresting from his sister to his friend as both stepped back from each other, Mal’s head spinning with adrenaline. “We’re not making any changes to the plan without Brit and Jackson knowing about them. Neither of you has more say than the other. God, I can’t believe I even have to fucking talk about this again.”

Mallory tried to calm down as Peter held back his sister, his firm hand still wrapped around her arm. The tension ran across Aimee’s face before it dissipated with unease as the girl turned to look at Peter, her eyes wide and innocent, begging for him to back her up like she always did. “You know that I’m right, Pete. We’re gonna starve waiting for something to fall in our laps. If there’s even a chance of getting some supplies, it’ll be in here. I know there’s a goldmine somewhere, and it’s all we have left.”

“Tell that to Brit and Jackson when we meet with them like we promised,” he replied quietly, glancing over as Mal turned away from them in frustration, wishing she’d gone with the other two instead. Peter’s gaze flickered between Mal and Aimee, his eyes desperate for them to agree. “I’m not doing anything without all of us together; you don’t get to make choices for them when they’re expecting us to meet them.”

“You know he’s right, Aimee,” Mal said a little softer, aware that they were losing time for scavenging. The girl sighed and wrenched her arm away from Peter’s grip, turning the knife over and over in her hand as she was trying to fight the losing battle.

Peter watched his sister for a moment before he stepped over to Mallory, his jaw clenched in barely concealed frustration. “Please, please, just for my own fucking sanity can you please stop antagonising her? I know she’s stubborn but so are you and the rest of us are gonna suffer for it,” he glanced back at Aimee for a second, looking desperate for some peace. “Look, she… she loved Hunter, more than you know-”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Mal hissed back, her guard going up. “She doesn’t get to put everyone in danger just because she’s lost someone. Everyone’s lost someone.”

“All I’m asking is that you both put one damn foot in front of the other, even if you don’t want to get along. I know my sister, Allie, I know she’s hurting and I can’t do a fucking thing about it but help keep her alive. Please, just… help me,” Peter begged softly, keeping his voice quiet for Aimee’s benefit. “I need her.”

Mallory looked back at Aimee as the younger girl stared out into the hospital parking lot, her whole body looking as tense and as tight as Mal felt. The seconds ticked away on Peter’s wristwatch, precious time lost over a petty argument when they had bigger things to worry about.
“Fine. How long do we even have left?” Mallory asked suddenly, still uneasy at having left Brit and Jackson, though they had demanded that they clear the back exit of Biters on their own with two machetes between them. All Mallory wanted was to keep everyone safe, to keep them alive and breathing one day longer – every day extra was a miracle these days.

“Seven minutes,” Peter mumbled, looking at the watch. “We have to be quick or we’re gonna run into some trouble. Aimee, come on,” he said, stepping away from Mal to grab his sister and pull her forward. “Get your shit together, kiddo. Where first?”

“Nurses’ station,” Aimee whispered, nodding anxiously at them both as the tension seemed to disappear from her body in an instant. “There’s a vending machine down the hall but I don’t know if there’s anything worthwhile in there.”

“Vending machines are a smash and grab job, it’s worth a shot,” Mal agreed softly, walking inside and leading the way. “Nurse’s station first, then we check the vending machine.”

All three moved swiftly and silently as they could through the entrance hall and down to the nurses’ station, the hospital dark and the walls spattered with dried blood, the breeze from the open doors making it feel chilly even in mid-summer. The whole thing was too quiet, every sound they made echoing through the empty corridors and amplified. Mallory’s heart pounded in her chest in fear of every corner, of every flickering light and swinging door banging in the distance. She took a deep breath and thought about Peter, about how he’d made that call to save her life when even she wouldn’t have done that. She’d be dead without him, she’d be crippled without Hunter; all of them had helped her and they helped each other in turn.

She almost felt like a kid again as she helped them rip open drawers and clear out the half-empty shelves of the nurses’ station, even though it was mostly empty. Mal kept her ears and eyes open as much as she could while they worked together quickly, managing to score some bandages, duct tape and a half box of granola bars someone had stashed away. Aimee dumped everything useful into the bag on Peter’s back before a hiss and footsteps caught Mal’s ear.

“Hurry up!” she hissed, not liking the eerie lack of Biters. She’d been sure it would be infested, that there’d be rotting corpses walking around everywhere they went. She jumped when Aimee ripped a drawer clean out and it clattered onto the floor. “Fuck! Do it quietly, you idiot!”

“Why don’t you just shut your mouth then?” Aimee whispered, loading up the bag with sterile bandages.

Mal rolled her eyes and took a few steps out, hatchet at the ready. Her eyes widened as she realised her mistake: down a dark hall, shifting figures barely moved past a window, the emaciated head of one Biter turning towards her, its dead eyes set on her. It shifted and all of them came suddenly towards her, one dragging half a broken leg behind it, snarling and groaning as the small hoard came down the hall.

“Fuck, move, move!” she snapped, shoving Peter and Aimee as they were piling packets of baby wipes into the backpack. “Move! Now!” Mal shoved at them again and they all ran, feet pounding on linoleum as the lurching, scraping feet chased them down the opposite corridor towards the light of day to an enclosed courtyard. She knew it had been too quiet, too easy to be true. They were going to get eaten. Mallory couldn’t take all those Biters, maybe a half dozen or more, with a just a dull hatchet and only Aimee to give her back up with the bowie knife. They jostled each other as all three ran into a tiny square courtyard, slamming the double doors shut behind them, lungs lurching for breath as they realised they were trapped there. Mal screamed as the Biters caught up to them after a moment, shoving against the doors desperate and vacant. Peter pushed his whole body flat against the doors, holding them down as the Biters pressed up against them, snarling at the glass
and banging, the stench horrid even through the thick, heavy wood.

“Aimee, grab the bench!” Peter yelled desperately as Mal helped him in holding the doors closed, her bad leg burning as she pushed against the weight of six rotting corpses. “Now!”

Aimee sprang back and went to the heavy wooden bench nearest the door, dragging it over and grunting as she did. Its legs scraped across the concrete until Peter was close enough to reach it, helping her hook the back panel under the handles of the doors while Mal did her best to hold them closed with her arms, her heart pounding in her chest. They shoved at the bench together, jamming it under the handles until they weren’t even shaking.

Cautiously, they stepped away together, waiting with their two weapons at the ready. The Biters shoved and snarled, slimy skin scraping away from their bones as they tried to get to the fresh meat behind the glass. It rattled dangerously but the doors were jammed shut.

“That was close,” Mal whispered, breathless and still staring into the soulless eyes of all the Biters grasping at the glass. “We should never have come here. This was a fucking mistake, and now we’re trapped. Brit and Jackson are on their own, waiting for us to come find them. We can’t take that many with what we have, what are we gonna do?”

Peter stepped backwards, running his palms over his face and into his hair. “We… we… we need to fight,” he said, stuttering in panic. “There’s no other option. There’s no other fucking doors and all this glass is triple glazed. We’re fucking trapped in a goddamn fishbowl!”

It was then that Mallory saw the movement through the window, just visible in the distance – clean, golden blonde hair scraped back and flecked with deep red blood, and a guy a head taller than her in a dirty blue t-shirt, both of panic stricken and screaming wordlessly. “Oh no. No, no, fuck…” her eyes bugged as she spotted Brit with her arm around Jackson, limply jogging down another corridor, their faces stricken with worry as they tried to find Aimee, Peter and Mallory. She wanted to put the world on pause, to fight the Biters like Peter said to but it was already too late. Brit and Jackson were walking right towards the path of the Biters still snarling at the courtyard doors. “Hey!” Mal screamed as she ran up to the glass at the end of the courtyard closest to her friends, hoping they’d hear her, hoping they’d notice, get some warning before they walked into a dead-end trap. “Brit! Jackson!” She screamed, banging her fists on the glass. “Fuck!”

“No, no, fuck, they’re fucking fucked!” Peter said as he spotted them too and joined Mal, both banging hard on the glass, trying to warn their friends. Aimee jumped up and down, waving her arms around in the air. “Get out, get out, get out! Brit! Jackson! Get the fuck out!”

“They’re gonna die…” Aimee whispered in horror as the couple disappeared out of sight, Jackson stumbling on his feet down the hallway. “Fuck, they’re gonna die. What are we gonna do?”

The world did pause, Mal would realise later. It paused when neither Jackson or Brit saw them banging and screaming to warn them. It paused when the young lovers ran headlong into the path of the Biters, all of them turning away from the courtyard to the easier pickings served on a platter to them. It paused when Jackson’s ankle twisted underneath him in shock. It paused when Jackson screamed in pain.

Mallory ran back, bringing the hatchet down onto the wood, trying in vain to break the bench free from under the door handles, desperate to save them. Peter and Aimee leapt after her, pulling her back from the doors, swearing and yelling at her to stop.

“No, we have to help! What the fuck are you doing, we have to help!” she screamed, throwing both of them off her.
“We’ll die too!” Aimee shouted, trying again to wrench Mallory’s arms back behind her. Mal had to do something, she had to keep them safe, she had to try.

But it was already too late. They could only watch in horror as Jackson stumbled and was ripped apart limb from limb in seconds, the flesh torn from his arms and neck before any of them could think to turn away from it; his look of white-hot shock and pain would be forever etched onto her memory, right alongside Hunter’s. Right behind him, Brit screamed in abject rage, taking her machete and swinging wildly through the air until it sunk into the limbs of the Biters holding down her already dead boyfriend. Mallory stumbled back numbly from Aimee’s grip and felt bile rise hot in her throat as Brit finally saw the three of them standing in the courtyard, the distraction enough for the remaining Biters to tear their rotten, broken teeth into her shoulder. Her face contorted as she screamed too, even though none of them could hear a thing through the courtyard windows, a silent horror movie of their friends’ violent, needless deaths.

“No!” Mal sobbed in rage, swinging the hatchet into the bench with all she had, whacking at the splintering wood again and again and again. “No, no, no…” The bench cracked and Mallory yanked it out from under the handles with as much strength as she could muster, shoving off Aimee and Peter as they tried to tear her away from going into the carnage.

“Allie, no!” Peter pleaded as she shoved his hands off her like they were nothing. “Allie, it’s too late. You can’t take them!”

“Fuck this shit,” she yelled, giving the bench a final hard jerk until it cracked. Grunting, she tugged it free enough so that she could fit through the door opening. “Fuck you!”

Mal snatched her bowie knife from Aimee’s limp hand, wasting no time in vaulting over the broken bench, slipping in through the doorway while the Biters were feasting on the flesh of her already dead friends. She stormed like a berserker up to the few remaining dead, screaming in anger, smashing the hatchet into their skulls and arms and jaws as they came for her, turning their heads towards her with blank eyes and snarling hisses. Mal slaughtered them all in a frenzy, screaming pointlessly as she did, bathed in their blood, drowning in her anger. Her body was numb as she slammed her boot into the last one’s head over and over until it was a smear of nothing on the sticky floor. None of them twitched any more. It was only then that she stopped to wipe the brains off from her cheek with the back of her hand, the halls echoing silence around her.

There was nothing but anger inside her, but she knew there was one job left to do, the job that she had never wanted to do again but always had to do nevertheless. Mal stepped over to Brit’s half-eaten body and grunted as she sunk the hatchet into her head, bitter tears sliding down Mallory’s cheeks as it caved in. Ripping the weapon from Brit’s skull, she took the few steps over to what was left of Jackson and did him the same courtesy, her heart breaking once more. They were another failure; more haunted eyes staring at her in betrayal that would never leave her memories. It was only then that Mal glanced up and saw Peter staring at her from the courtyard with shock and fear on his face, his hand shaking slightly as he raised it to his head. She didn’t even spare a damn glance at his sister. Mallory strode out of that hospital, stepping over the dead bodies of half her group lying on the floor, her bare arms dripping with sweat and rotten flesh.

She put one foot in front of the other and had learned another lesson.

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“I can’t stay here anymore, can I?” Mallory asked wearily as the sun warmed her bare thighs where she lay on the mattress still. Negan’s arms were locked around her torso like a vice, unwilling to let her move from his side. Maybe they were just enjoying the time they had left before the peace was shattered by reality but she still felt different, like they were living on borrowed time before a noose.
was lowered around their necks. They were wrapped around each other, half-dressed and each exhausted but she was unable to keep her mind away from what could happen. Happiness was never that easy. “I mean, look at it. This place is a wreck.”

Negan lifted his head slightly and surveyed the damage he’d brought down on her, both to her body and her possessions, the remnants littering the floor. “No, you’re right, you can’t stay here, not fucking now,” he muttered gruffly. She didn’t miss the flicker of his eyes down her bare legs, her knee between his own. “But you can’t go live down in the sticks either. Not gonna fucking happen, Princess.”

A sigh escaped her lips and she rubbed her eyes, exhaustion dragging her down. “Where d’you think I’m gonna go then?” she asked softly, pulling herself out of his hold as much as he’d let her. “I’m not bunking with your wives, if that’s what you’re suggesting. Fairly sure I’d wake up with a leg missing at the very least.”

“There you go again, assuming shit,” Negan argued back, reluctantly allowing her sit back up. “I didn’t fucking say shit about you sleeping with them. Not unless you’re amenable to some kinda three-way sex sandwich where I’m the tasty filling…” he smirked as she rolled her eyes and whacked his arm. “It’s okay, you’re not fucking staying anywhere else but with me. No arguing with me this time.”

Mal looked at him in disbelief for a second, almost laughing at the idea of it. “Me? Stay with you? Are you actually being serious?”

“Why the fuck not? All you’re gonna get with my wives is fucking jealousy and… girly shit,” he said with a grimace; Mal had to admit that she didn’t like the idea either. “You’d go insane in like five minutes. No, no, you’re staying with me. It’ll be just us, no fucker ever dares come in there without my say so and I know you are gonna love my private bathroom. I’ve actually got a goddamn bathtub that doesn’t leak.”

Shaking her head vehemently, Mallory backed even further away from him. “You’re insane, everyone’s gonna know that we’re sleeping together now.”

“I don’t give a fuck what they think about you and me, Mallory,” Negan snapped, tension threaded throughout his voice. “I just don’t give a flying, pigs-with-wings fuck anymore. They can paint a goddamn target on my back if they want, as long as it’s not on yours.”

“How in the Hell are you gonna stop them?” she asked, arching her brow as she made to get off the bed.

Negan leaned forward and grabbed her wrist tightly, jerking her back towards him. “You forget how much they’re scared of me, Princess. I snap my goddamn fingers and their friends, their families are all dead. That’s power, that’s real power, and I am gonna use it to the best of my fucking ability to keep you safe. You’re staying with me – end of discussion.”

If she didn’t feel tired all the way down to her very bones, Mallory might have argued back like she should have, like she wanted to. It would have been another ten-minute-long argument about control and boundaries and what they were to each other now but she didn’t have the energy for it, not when her sides and legs and arms and head ached and burned. Negan had always had a bug up his ass about being in control, about knowing everything that was going on, about how many fucking bullets he owned. Nothing Mal could ever say to him would change that need in him to keep count of what was his and where it was, including the women in his life.

Instead, she sighed and slipped away from his grip and off the mattress wordlessly. Mal could feel
his gaze on her as she found her jeans and slid them on with a soft grimace as they fell loosely around her waist and hips. Her eyes caught the glint of Lucille lying forgotten at the doorway as she zipped his jacket up around her bare torso; Negan had his back to her as he glanced out the window, his fingers rubbing the dirt from the glass. Silently, Mallory stepped towards the doorway and picked the bat from the ground, feeling its weight in her hand and the deep scratches on the shaft. God, she knew why he did it this way. Why he swung the bat around like it was his own dick wrapped in barbed wire. Lucille’s power was undeniable: before, the bat hadn’t been a weapon in her hands but his leash around her neck, Negan tightening the rope when he would give it to her to hold. But standing there with his jacket on her shoulders and his teeth-marks on her neck, Lucille felt like a jewelled sword. She really was beautiful when the light hit her just right.

Negan turned after a moment looking out through the window and glanced at Mallory as she stood at the threshold, wearing his leather jacket over her bare chest, Lucille in her hand and the necklace around her throat, skin pink and sore with bruises and hickeys. She saw his eyes blaze in need, even from across the room.

“I think I get it, you know,” Mallory muttered as he pulled his t-shirt over his head, barely able to look away from her. “Why you do this whole ‘I’m Negan’ shit, why you like doing it ...”

“You do, huh?” he said with a smirk, shoving his feet into his heavy boots, barely looking away from her.

“Control,” she replied as he strode slowly towards her, running his fingers through his messy hair to get it to lay flat again. “It’s all you ever wanted, even before all this bullshit went down – you always needed the world to be the way you wanted it to be. And now you’re finally getting your own way, now they all jump when you ask them to. They don’t argue, they just obey.”

“Except for you,” Negan pointed out softly, keeping his eyes trained on her face as if she were the only person in the world left alive. “You’re always fucking arguing with me, picking fights, making my life difficult and you always have done. Even now, you’re swaying on your feet from exhaustion and you still wanna go there, Princess, you still wanna talk about my need for control. Maybe I’m not the only asshole around here with control issues, huh? What a fucking pair we really are.”

Mal swallowed thickly in her throat as his eyes blazed in fire still, her fingers tightening around Lucille’s handle. “I know. We shouldn’t work well together. Maybe we don’t, though, and that’s what we both like. We like fighting and fucking, we love the hunt and the violence. I should have known I’d find you again someday. If anyone’s surviving the fucking apocalypse and industrialising it, it’s you.”

“I thought you were fucking dead, Mallory,” he muttered, wrapping his hand around her wrist. “I don’t give a flying fuck if we don’t work or if we do. You’re alive and nobody’s taking that away from me again. You have no idea what I’m capable of. How on earth you could have ever loved me then, or love me still now, I don’t know. You’re as fucked in the head as I am.”

He bent over slightly and her eyes widened as he lifted her easily into the strong cradle of his arms, carrying her with Lucille still heavy in her hand. “Negan, what in the Hell are you doing?” Mal asked wearily, bringing the bat up to her shoulder.

Smirking, Negan somehow managed to open the door with her curled tightly to his chest, striding out into the hallway, leaving the mess behind them. “You in that fucking jacket giving me your bullshit, you’re driving me crazy again. I’m putting you to bed before you get any ideas about inciting a mutiny. I see the way you’re looking at Lucille, Princess, don’t think I didn’t notice,” he muttered. They managed to take three whole strides before they were accosted by bemused-looking guards, whose eyes all ran down her body and the bat on her shoulder. “Just get the fuck out of my way,
fucking jumped-up Nancy-ass pricks…” Negan barked, sending his men scattering like rats at the sharp tone in his voice. “Fucking look at my girl like that.”

“Classy, Negan. And super subtle,” Mal said sardonically, her free arm looped tight around his neck in case he dropped her just for shits and giggles.

“You know you love it,” he replied, squeezing her thigh affectionately. “Never a day off from being the nastiest little shit in the new world, Mallory. You’ll see why.”

It did amaze her how he could make grown men scurry like he had, men who wouldn’t have thought twice about trying to steal from her outside the Sanctuary. Inside, things were different; there were people who wanted her dead but there were more who were still scared of the man who wanted to protect her. There was a different kind of security with Negan and maybe it wouldn’t be untested but she felt confident that he’d have people at his beck and call to back them up if they needed it. Simon was beyond loyal, and Arat was vicious.

It wasn’t until they got to his office that Negan set her down on her feet again, taking the bat from her hand and tossing it onto his couch without a second thought, the façade dropping at the door. Mallory’s head spun a little as she found her balance again, her stomach achingly empty and body exhausted.

“Did you really have to carry me?” she said, rubbing her weary eyes as he unlocked his bedroom door and held it open for her, just smirking like an idiot. “I could have walked, I’m not that damn tired.”

“Just quit your complaining and get your ass inside before I change my goddamn mind and throw you with the rats,” he groaned in frustration, although there was a spark in his voice that he could never hide.

Mal rolled her eyes again but stepped into his bedroom, yawning widely. She immediately crawled on top of his bed as it called to her, her body lying flat on the silk sheets as if they were the pillows of a cloud, soft and rich. “Now this, this I can get used to,” she grinned lazily, stretching her arms out, her bones popping as she did. “If you told me that I’d be allowed to sleep on these, I’d have married you weeks ago. Fuck, this is nice.”

“Now she tells me…” Negan mumbled, locking the door behind them and sliding the deadbolt across just in case. He chuckled as she made the most of his luxury by wrapping herself around his sheets until she was cocooned in silk.

Mallory feeling the bed dip around her as Negan crawled on his hands and knees until he was right above her, his hands on either side of her head. Slowly, he bent his head and kissed her lips as softly as he’d ever kissed them, chaste and sweet. She could have lost herself in that moment, that kiss as meaningful as she needed it to be. Letting the sheets fall away from her body, Mal threaded her fingers through his messy hair, kissing him back just as tenderly. He pulled at the zipper on the leather jacket and let it fall open from her bare chest.

“I am too tired to have sex with you again,” she muttered as they broke apart from their teenager kisses. “It’s been the longest night of my life and I just need a break. Tomorrow’s going to be hard enough, facing all those people. Figuring out what to do…”

“There’s no after in this room,” he replied, kissing behind her ear. “There’s no tomorrow, no next month, no next year. Not in here, not while you’re in my bed.”

Feeling his hair between her fingers as he kissed down her neck and to her collarbone, Mallory
sighed. “When I said we couldn’t stay here forever, I didn’t just mean the Sanctuary,” she muttered, letting him nip at her skin with his teeth. “We can’t just fuck and fight, be enemies and lovers at the same time. I can’t take that kind of shit from you.”

His frustrated growl crawled over her skin from where he kissed between her bare breasts, his fingers curling into fists on either side of her head. “If it’s all I’m gonna get, I’ll take it. There’s only this or nothing, isn’t there?”

“I love you, you moron,” Mallory said plainly, letting him kiss around the curve of her breast. “If that’s not good enough for you-”

“It’s not good enough, no,” he argued back, slipping down further, tongue lathing at her navel. “I want you by my goddamn side, I want you guarding my back while I guard yours, I want your fucking trust, Mallory, not just your love. Love means nothing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she replied sharply, leaning up to glare down at him. “You don’t think I trust you or you don’t think I love you.”

“Both,” Negan grunted and pushed her back down onto his bed in frustration, kicking her clothed legs apart and settling between them. “Look, you’re never going to trust me, I fucking get it. You’re in love with the man I used to be, that’s why you say you love me now, but I’m not the same and neither are you. We’re different people in this world, Princess – we’re people with a fucking complicated history together but we’re still different. You love what I used to be, not who I am now and maybe that’s the one fucking thing that’ll never change. You still think I’m the same man who hurt you all those years ago.”

Mallory swallowed again, tears pricking at her eyes. “I know you’re not the same, you don’t have to tell me that. It doesn’t mean that I don’t trust you, that I don’t love you, right here and now. I’ve changed too, I’m not the same girl I was when I fell in love with you. The things I’ve done, the things we’ve both done... how are we ever going to get on the same damn page?”

He placed a lingering kiss to the pitted scars on her stomach. “You can forgive me,” he said simply, looking up at her from her navel. “And while you’re at it, forgive yourself for whatever the fuck it is that happened out there when we weren’t together. Let go of the past, Princess, let go of your guilt over that asshole you call a friend and let him rot. Put yourself first.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” she replied, her voice catching. “Maybe it’s easy for you, since you don’t give a shit about what you’ve done to people but I’m not sure I can ever forgive myself or forget or any of that bullshit. I need to keep my promise to Peter, I have to protect him from himself, from-”

“From me.” Negan interrupted, leaning back away from her, his eyes like a raging fire, the anger building slowly inside him. It wasn’t even a question, merely a fact. Mallory didn’t trust him to not hurt Peter of his own accord.

Mal’s breath caught in her throat as he just stared at her, the tension thick in the air. “Yes. I need to protect him from you. It’s not like your reputation was un-earned, Negan, you fucking smashed his hand in just because I broke Arat’s nose. What’s to stop you from going down there and shooting him in the head when I’m asleep?”

Tongue rolling over his lips, Negan simply kept his gaze on her face, his jaw set hard and teeth clenched. “Fuck me, do you fucking love him, Mallory? Is that what all this has all been about?”

“No,” she snapped, pulling at Negan’s arm as he tried to back away from her, his arm taut and stiff. “I don’t love him, we’ve never been like that, he’s not-”
“We can’t fucking forget what we’ve done to survive, I get that,” he growled, dipping his head and
dragging his teeth over her breast indelicately until she hissed in pain. “But you need to forgive
yourself. You don’t owe anyone a damn thing. We do what we do and it changes us, it makes us
stronger, and it hurts, but you’re never going to be able to move forward until you let your guilt over
him go. Whatever it is you think you owe, it’s not to Peter, it’s to yourself. I want you for your whole
fucking being, the pain and the pleasure, the fighting and fucking. I want it all. But I’m never going
to get that until you move past what happened to you. Forgive me, forgive yourself. Let the fuck go.”

Her tears fell silently over her cheeks as he sucked another mark of ownership into her breast as a
punishment, her head falling back. Mallory wiped her hot cheeks furiously as he kissed the suck-
mark, his breath ragged and dangerous, like a cornered animal.

“You don’t know what I did to him, to his family,” she muttered hollowly. “I’m not sure I even
know what I did.”

Negan slid away from her slowly, his hand cupping her cheek with a bright tenderness he rarely
showed her. “Mallory, you don’t have to-”

“Just promise me that you’ll let me talk to him before anything happens,” she said softly. Mallory
curl back around him, desperately wanting to feel safe in his arms again. “Just one more time. I
need to do this myself, I have to get it out of my system.”

He just kissed her forehead and reached behind her, pulling the silk up around her until they were
wrapped up together. “For you, Princess, I fucking promise.”

***

It had all fallen apart so quickly that her head was just empty and rattling, a permanent state of
numbness. Mallory hadn’t felt anything like human after she’d slaughtered all those Biters single-
headed, after she’d sunk Hunter’s hatchet into the skulls of her dead friends. She was only numb and
cold and quiet as they set up camp in an abandoned house for the night. It was all a lie, wasn’t it?
This life on the road with another make-shift family and their stories, their pains and fears the same
as everyone else’s, it meant nothing. They lived short lives and died a meaningless, violent death that
could have been prevented if she’d just taken control, if she’d stopped the egos at the door. They
needed order, they needed control and trust. Every second of every minute since she’d sunk that last
blow into Jackson’s skull, Mallory had come to same conclusion over and over again. Every time
that she tried to make sense of why this had all come crumbling down around her feet, there was
only one answer.

Mallory knew what she had to do.

“This isn’t going to work,” Aimee muttered as she set up her sleeping bag on the bare floor, her skin
pale and golden in the light of the single lamp they had left with fuel in. Peter had already boarded
up the windows and doors around them, had barricaded everything that needed barricading and
had made sure that Mallory wasn’t going to attempt to rip them down again. “We don’t have
enough supplies still. We need to go back into that hospital tomorrow.”

“We’re not going back,” Mal muttered in reply, her eyes focussed on the slits of the outside world
through the boarded windows. She hadn’t let the bowie knife out of her hand for a second since
she’d walked away from that hospital, not looking back to even check that Aimee and Peter were
following her. “This is not a discussion.”

“Where else are we going to get any food?” Peter asked as he checked all the seals and edges one
more time before stepping back, seemingly satisfied. “We’ve checked this whole neighbourhood,
walked around for miles and there’s nothing left.”

“We are not going back into that fucking hospital,” she repeated sternly, her voice unwavering. “We need to pack what we’ve got and move out of here, find another town and hope to all fucking hope that there’s something out there still to eat. I was pretty good with a shotgun, maybe I can bag us a deer or a rabbit or something.”

Aimee chuckled mirthlessly and stood up, shaking her head. “We don’t have a shotgun, though, do we? You dropped it off the overpass when you got ambushed by that Biter. It’s long gone.”

Mallory sighed softly and rubbed her weary eyes, turning away from the window to look at Aimee. “I’ll find something. Maybe there’s a hunting cabin nearby, Virginia’s got a lot of hunting stores that are hidden under camouflage, some are even underground. People might not have found all of them yet.”

“How are we going to find them if nobody else already has?” Peter asked softly, crouching as he set up his own sleeping back. His clothes were hanging off his frame now, skin sallow and eyes sunken as if he was dead already. “I know you’re scared, Allie.”

“I am not fucking scared,” Mallory snapped, grip tightening around the knife. “It’s suicide. We just lost two good people in that goddamn place and you both wanna go back? No. Not letting you do that. We don’t make the same mistake twice, we learn the goddamn lesson. Isn’t that what Hunter always told you guys?”

“Just stop fucking pretending to give a shit about us. This all your fault anyway, jumped-up bitch,” Aimee snapped, wrapping her arms over her chest. “You never cared, why are you acting like you’re the only fucking one of us grieving about Jackson and Brit?”

The guilt twisted around in her stomach but she wouldn’t let anyone manipulate her feelings, least of all some 21-year-old with a short fuse. “You wanna say that again?” she asked, lip quirking at the corner and eyes sparking. “Or are you just trying to get a rise out of me like you always do, you spoiled little girl?”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Aimee seethed in reply, stepping forwards. “They’re all dead because of you, Brit and Jackson and Hunter are dead because you kept making mistakes, you never listened to anything anyone else suggested, just did whatever you wanted to do. You’re not our leader, Allie.”

“Aimee,” Peter warned wearily, rising to his feet. “Stop this, it’s not going to bring anyone back. You’re not helping.”

“Aimee,” Peter warned wearily, rising to his feet. “Stop this, it’s not going to bring anyone back. You’re not helping.”

“And she is?!” Aimee replied incredulously, her eyes wide and innocent. Mallory was still caked in blood and guts and brains, her eyes flickering to the bare strip of light between the boards on the windows. Biters were roaming in the streets down-a-ways, like they always did, hunting for sounds and smells of fresh meat.

“Neither of you are helping,” he said softly. Mal knew he was worried about the noise, about the commotion and attention they’d draw if Aimee picked a fight again. “Let’s just calm down, okay? We need to get some sleep before we make any decisions as a group.”

“Fuck this fucking bullshit, this isn’t a group,” Aimee said, her voice still tense and angry. “You and me are leaving in the morning, I don’t fucking trust her not to get us killed as well…”

Peter pinched the bridge of his nose. “Aimee, just stop it. Nobody’s leaving anyone, we’re still safer together than we are apart. Just get some damn sleep, okay? You’re gonna get us in trouble again.”
Mal nodded her head softly, barely glancing back at Aimee or Peter as her eyes kept watch on the Biters outside. “You should both sleep, I’ll keep first watch, it’ll be dawn in a few hours and we can switch out.”

“What about you?” Peter asked her quietly as Aimee turned to her backpack in silent anger. “You need a break too, Allie, you’re no good to anyone if you haven’t slept or eaten.”

“I’ll be fine,” Mallory smiled at him, though it felt forced and wrong. She didn’t want to smile, she didn’t want to close her eyes and watch her friends get ripped apart again. She didn’t want to do anything but keep the Biters away. “I’d rather stay up a few hours, it’s not like I can sleep.”

Aimee scoffed quietly and glanced up at Mallory and Peter. “Why? Because you feel so damn guilty? You should never have saved her life, Peter, look what’s happened since she found us. We’ve got no people to help scavenge or keep watch, no supplies, no fucking campsite. We’ll freeze come winter, if we don’t starve first. All of this started the second her leg healed.”

She sighed and hung her head for a second, her jaw twitching. “No, because I know what’s been happening lately, about why it’s gone so wrong so quickly. It never should have happened and maybe that’s why you’re so angry all the time at me now. Maybe it was my fault. I don’t know, not really. But I know what you’ve been doing, Aimee. I should have seen it months ago. I didn’t want to talk about it tonight but here we are.”

“Allie…” Peter muttered as Aimee turned her head away, her shoulders set. “What are you talking about?”

“Aimee was the one who wanted so desperately to go into that hospital,” she muttered, turning around to look at the girl in question. “You were the one who really wanted to use my knife instead of Hunter’s rusty old hatchet, but you made Peter ask because you thought I’d say no. You knew I couldn’t say no to the man who saved my life. It was you who made me go in front, who suggested that I be the lookout for every scout mission we’ve ever done together. All you’ve ever done with us since I’ve been able to move around is go into dangerous places because we’re so desperate for food. I’m just… I’m done with the games, Aimee. I’m done with the manipulation. It’s never gonna work on a girl like me.”

“What the Hell is this?” Aimee whispered in reply, her eyes hardening. “I didn’t force you to do anything, you were the one who wanted to be a fucking leader. Half of the scout missions were the ones you volunteered to head-up.”

It was true. Mallory had a choice, and the choices she’d made were the ones of a martyr. Aimee knew full well what happened to martyrs and had played on her ego perfectly. “I don’t really have to prove that you’ve been doing anything, I’m not going to defend myself. All I’m saying is that I know what you’ve been doing to me since we first met. All I want to know now is why.”

“Aimee?” Peter said after a moment, penetrating the silence and the emptiness. His voice almost cracked and Mal could see his brain slide the pieces into place finally. Whatever it was Aimee had been hiding from her own brother, it was no longer a secret. They looked at each other and Peter stepped back, his hand over his mouth. “Holy fuck. It’s true, isn’t it?”

There was a moment when Mal wasn’t sure whether Aimee would try and deny it, try to brush it off as paranoia and hunger and desperation but one glance at her brother’s shaking form seemed to crack her into pieces.

“What?” Mallory pressed her again, her own voice breaking with betrayal. “What did I ever do to you? What did Hunter and Brit and Jackson ever do to you?”
“There’s something in you,” Aimee sniffed, her lip quivering. “I can see it in your eyes when you think nobody’s watching you. There’s a black hole inside that heart of yours, Allie. Whoever the fuck you really are. All your stories, the husband, the family, I know they’re all just lies! I don’t even think you care about anyone. You’re cold, just cold and dead and, and… rotting on the inside. I never wanted you standing next to me, keeping my friends safe, my brother safe,” she laughed softly, her eyes wild and watery. “I was just trying to get you out of the way. Hunter was a mistake, I regret that. I fucking…” she sniffled and wiped her cheeks, hiding her face as she did so.

“You took the batteries out of the radio, didn’t you?” Mal whispered, almost in shock. It was plain as day now. “You wanted to make me look like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Aimee nodded, and clenched her jaw, turning back to Mallory. “I never thought Hunter would die. He was everything to me and you let him die!” She screamed, her head hanging down between her knees. “I hate you. I hate you. You took my own fucking brother from me, you killed the only man who ever loved me. I was going to cut your fucking throat after you killed Hunter. Nobody would have mourned for a cold, dead whore like you, least of all me.”

“It’s not her fault that Hunter got bitten,” Peter said, stepping between them as Aimee rose to her feet. “You know that it’s not her fault; accidents happen in this world. Whatever it is you think is going on here, Aimee, I promise you that it’s not anything that can’t be solved. We can work it out.”

“No, we can’t,” Mallory breathed shakily, nodding towards his sister. “I thought I could find something better than I had, being alone, but this is never going to work.”

“For once, you’re bang on the goddamn money,” Aimee replied, her cheeks bright pink and eyes crystal blue and watering. “We’re never going to be family.”

It was only a split second after Mal noticed that Aimee still had her hand behind her back before the hatchet was flying towards her head, the metal glinting. Peter shoved her shoulder hard, the side of it only just missing his head.

Aimee dove for the hatchet with that fire raging in her eyes, screaming her lungs out. Mal made a grab for her and tackled Aimee to the ground, plunging her knife straight into the girl’s soft stomach before she could reach her weapon. Aimee’s eyes widened in shock, staring down at her stomach as the bowie knife stuck out of her gut. Mallory panted and stared down at what she’d done, the damage already too great to be fixed. Her fingers wrapped around the handle and yanked the blade from Aimee’s stomach, coated red with her blood.

Peter scrambled to his sister as she tried to hold her own stomach together, the floor beneath them coated in a slick layer of blood and guts. “No, no, no, Aimee…” he gasped in shock, gripping his sister’s head in his hands. “Please!”

“You… you…” Aimee gurgled as the blood gushed from her gaping stomach and onto the floor. “Peter…”

Mallory fell back in shock at what she’d done, her hand shaking. “I know, I know, I’m sorry. I promise you I will keep him safe. I am not letting anyone hurt us anymore,” she muttered, crouching over Aimee as the girl twitched and writhed one more time before she stopped completely.

“Aimee?” Peter begged, tapping his sister on the cheek. “Aimee, wake up. Please.”

“It’s too late,” Mal muttered, letting the knife clatter to the floor. “I… I never wanted this. You have to believe me, I never wanted this.”
Peter leant back, dropping his hands from the body of his sister lying still on the floor. He picked up the bowie knife between them and Mallory waited for the death blow, for him to sink it into her stomach like she had done to his only family. She waited. And waited.

He only breathed, still and silent.

“No more,” Peter grunted, still not looking at Mallory. Aimee’s finger started to twitch in reanimation, her eyelids fluttering only once before he drove the blade down into his sister's forehead, bone cracking audibly. "It's over."

Chapter End Notes

Please, please, please leave me a comment down below if you enjoyed this chapter or the story as a whole. All of the comments and kudos you guys leave is like fuel on the writing fire for my Negan-dominated soul.

So, give me feedback either below or come follow me on my Tumblr page! Tell me what you're thinking! I'd love to know ::grin::
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

At her lowest point, when all hope is lost, Mallory remembers who she is and what she's worth when backed into a corner. Both Negan and Peter have seen her at her best and her worst and loved her through them both. Deciding what to do isn't going to be easy, not when she's making the most of the quiet before the storm.

The coin will land on its edge and threaten to fall on one side or the other.

WARNINGS: brief miscarriage talk and minor violent images. Flashbacks in italics.

Chapter Notes

God, this is up to chapter twenty now, isn't it? There's only three more to go until the end and then I'll have way too much free time on my hands. I wanna take the time now to say thank you for all the incredible support you guys give me on these chapters because they can be a fucking nightmare to get out when you feel like crap. I owe a lot of the confidence boosts to Jamie and her constant pestering for clues about the last few chapters and her telling me to get off my ass and write but I love all the names I see in the comments every week. I hope this rocks your world (in a good way).

Giant thanks to my beta Mayboo13 for her reassurance and guidance, and to the people who left me comments last time: Scream_dream99, Ella, a lovely Guest, Londonbridgesfall4me, Ticktok_bb, Leslie Kmann, MusicActorsBooksCharacters_xo, and TheCradleOfNin (that comment gives me lifeeee).

Thanks to everybody reading this, I hope this one is even better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She could go on a little longer. The trees reeked of pine-plastic and rot, feet sinking into the ground, the arm around her waist slowing her down and dragging. He ran ahead of her, laughing and smiling and waving frantically in the sun. A deep voice rattled her brain. She could go a little longer. Her little girl glanced back, holding his hand, those crystal eyes. Sad eyes. Peter smiled and laughed and waved and ran further onwards into the mist. There was dead silence, her girl in front of her, alone, desperate, gone. Mallory stilled.

‘Stop,’ the deep voice demanded. ‘Don’t look.’

Fingers threaded through her hair and tugged and pulled, trailing down around her throat and across her breasts, down her stomach. He lingered. She grabbed the thick wrist and shook her head. ‘No. It’s not the end.’
'It has to be,' he answered, putting warm metal in her open hand. Blade sharp, beautiful, glinting in the light of his dark eyes. ‘You’re ending. You’re rotting.’

He stole the breath from her lungs and the beat from her heart.

The sheets were warm and soft as Mallory opened her eyes achingly slowly, her body stiff but wrapped in silk. She tried to shake the dream from her head but the feel of the fingers around her throat lingered like a ghost, whispering to make her remember what was said. She could feel the fingers and the weight of the knife in her hand but they slipped away too, the feeling of sadness clinging to her like a gauze. The more her conscious mind tried to hold on to the images in her dreams, the more they slipped away from her until she could only remember seeing the sadness as a haze all around her. It wasn’t surprising to her that she had woken up alone in Negan’s bed but the disappointment hit her still, if only for a second, before she realised he was standing and staring out his bedroom window with his back to her. Before Lucille died, Mal had only ever rarely woken up to find him next to her, holding her like she wanted, like she needed. She didn’t know why she was disappointed to wake up alone now – it wasn’t like they were back together or anything so idiotic – but the tingle of pain waved before it passed. Mallory rubbed the last of the sleep from her eyes with her fingertips, unwilling to move from the warmth of the bedsheets as her brain tried to play catch up.

“Rise and fucking shine, sleepy Jean, it’s a beautiful day,” Negan said loudly, lifting a mug to his lips and sipping before he laughed. “Fucking fuck, there’s two people screwing up against one of the back walls,” he said, leaning and glancing back at her for a second. “Sneaky. We should try that.”

Negan could be a lot to take in all at once, especially when her brain hadn’t quite caught up to where she was and how she was feeling. “Peeping Tom,” Mallory muttered sleepily, sinking into the mattress a little more, clutching at the sheets. The luxury of a real deep sleep had been lost on her, even inside the Sanctuary, but now she didn’t seem to want to move now and her body didn’t feel up to it either. “Time?”

“A little after two. You were way the fuck out of it there, Princess. When’s the last time you slept like a human being?” he asked, still staring out the window over his kingdom. “Oh man, you gotta look at this guy, he is going for the fucking gold. Sloppy technique but the enthusiasm makes up for it, I think.”

Mallory rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself, her lips quirking at the teenaged man-boy with his back to her. “You looking for pointers? You could use them.” Her voice was as gravelly and languorous as her limbs felt.

The man finally turned to look at her and appeared to be mortally offended at her suggestion. “Pointers, huh? Didn’t hear you complaining about my dick yesterday. Or this morning. I guess a few years without a good, hard fuck makes you all sorts of pissed-the-Hell-off. All I needed to do was get you back into bed again and that ‘screw you’ attitude went out the window.”

God, she’d forgotten how touchy he could be, all macho and hyper-masculine about sex. Mallory shot him a deep glare. “Give me five more minutes to wake up and I’ll show you my ‘screw you’ attitude.”

“Promise?” He grinned almost manically, raising the mug to his lips again at her tone. “At least you’re awake now. Was worried for a moment there that I’d fucked you into a coma.”

“I don’t think that’s humanly possible,” she muttered, pulling the sheets reluctantly from around her arms. “But it must be fun trying.”

“Yeah it kinda is,” he smirked still before glancing back outside at the live pornography. “Ahh fuck.
I missed the big finish.”

“So did she, probably,” Mal said lazily, watching him with a soft smile on her lips. She’d noticed a long time ago how he did this, people-watch in the mornings with a cup of coffee and see what they were up to. Back before the end of the world, she guessed it was just a habit but it served its purpose now. He had to keep an eye on everyone and where better from than the room with the best view in the place. All Mallory could see was the Negan she’d known, spying on his neighbours and telling her every detail. She didn’t remember any of what he’d said but the image lingered.

“I’ll ask them later, watch the smiles on their faces just fucking drop,” he chuckled like a gleeful child. “It’s gonna be hilarious.”

Mallory rolled her eyes, yawning slightly. “You will not. Leave them be, it’s just sex. Unless they were fucking on someone’s grave, I think it’s fine.” She made to get up but winced immediately, a dull ache in her side turning insistently into a burn, her stomach turning over as pain radiated from her ribs inwards. “Ow, fuck…”

Setting down his mug on the window ledge, Negan stepped over to the bed, kneeling over to where Mal was pulling up the side of her shirt to look at the damage Arat and her boot had ultimately made of her torso. “Shit, Mallory, they look worse,” he said, voice dark and dangerous as she let him inspect her bruised ribs. Her skin was purple and blue from just under her breast to the level of her navel, the muscles protesting loudly when she moved. It looked worse, sure, but not the worst pain she’d ever had. “You breathing alright?”

“I’d have said if I wasn’t,” she grimaced again as he ran his fingers around the length of the bruising, grunting in pain when he pressed down slightly. “Fucking fuck, stop that, asshole,” she snapped, shying away from his touch. “I think my ribs are broken or something.”

He shook his head slightly and brought the t-shirt back down over her torso as if he didn’t want to look at her bruised body anymore. “No, they’re not broken. If they were, you’d know it.”

Mal rolled her eyes, “I hate people who say that…” she muttered in frustration before looking up at him, not able to move now that she wanted to. “Well, if they’re not broken then they’re bruised to fuck at least.”

It would have been more bearable if she was still asleep, weird, sad dreams aside. Mallory had been so warm and comfortable and happy wrapped around his sheets, watching him act like a creepy old man and laughing to herself. The bruises on her ribs must have run deep at the very least and she’d need to strap them up either way, broken or not. Luckily, she was used to having to work around pain and injuries, though broken bones weren’t usually her area; bullet wounds and stab wounds were her wheelhouse and she’d got good at giving herself crude stitches.

“So, ask me for a favour,” he said as he delicately pulled her legs free of the entwined sheets around them. Both of them knew she was loathed to ask for help, even when she was desperate. Shit, she hadn’t even asked for help when she actually needed it. “You’re gonna be a stubborn bitch about it still, aren’t you?”

Mallory swallowed her petty pride as much as she could bear to and looked up at him, wincing as she tried to sit up. She gritted her teeth and asked as steady a voice she could manage without sounding sarcastic. “Negan, would you help me get up, please?”

He grinned and, for a fraction of a moment, Mal thought he was actually going to help her but that mischievous look in his eye was telling her otherwise. “No. You need painkillers and a bath, Princess, and that really is a fucking order. Let’s see what I got left in Negan’s pharmacy of fun…”
“I don’t need painkillers,” she protested immediately. Ignoring her as usual, he pulled open the second drawer of his nightstand to her left, rummaging around the thing until he found what he was looking for. Mal frowned as he pulled out a clear Ziploc bag full of pills.

“Here, take one, it’s gonna smooth the edge off for a few hours at least,” Negan opened the bag up and shook out a pale pink pill, holding it out in his palm for her to take. It was a small thing, the shape of an oval with pointed ends and some numbers imprinted on it but she still didn’t have a clue what it was, though it had to be something strong for him to stash it for himself. Vaguely, she wondered what else he was keeping in there.

Mal frowned still, not exactly willing to take something she didn’t know, though the pain was only going to get worse the more she moved. “What is it?” she asked, picking the pill up from his hand. “Vicodin?”

He chuckled softly and shook his head, retrieving his mug of coffee for her to sip. “Percocet, small dose. All the Vicodin’s gone now, so unless you want to have the generic shit for cramps, take the Percocet. Trust me, it’s fine. You’ll be thanking me.”

Hesitantly, she put the pill on her tongue and took the coffee he offered, swallowing both down together, his smile warming as she did. Her ribs really did hurt like a motherfucker. “How long will it take to kick in?” she asked, giving the cup back to him and lying flat back on the bed.

“About a half hour, but you’re small and you haven’t had anything to eat so it might be quicker than that…” he muttered, his fingers pushing her hair back away from her face. “Have a hot bath, eat some food, get some more sleep. That’s what you need, Princess.”

Maybe he needed this more than she did, she thought as he leant forward and kissed the corner of her lips, his beard scratching her skin. Negan wasn’t the mollycoddle type but her stout refusal to take his help grated on him; she was stubborn and independent to the point of stupidity sometimes. If it’d make him feel better to look after her for a few hours, it didn’t matter if she gave in, did it? They were alone together in peace, locked away from the outside world. Mal just hoped that what he’d given her was actually Percocet.

“Fine,” she breathed calmly, looking into his eyes. Negan grinned back at her with a look he only gave her when she acquiesced to his orders, which was rare at the very least. “I could do with a bath anyway.”

“Good,” he replied, leaning back. “You’re finally seeing things my way.”

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When he talked about running her a bath and letting the heat work, she had naively thought he’d leave her alone to soak and float away on painkillers and bubbling foam. Instead of leaving her to enjoy her little luxury, Negan had perched his ass on the counter top around the sink, his broad shoulders blocking most of the daylight that streamed through the gauzy blind to his side. Mallory had thought to ask him to leave but the second her aching ribs hit the hot water, all arguments and attitude left her and she wondered what the point of arguing was. Mal let her head drift away from the stress and the pain, her eyes closing as she sank into the delicious heat that surrounded her. Nothing bad would happen to her here, in this bathtub, in this room. The world could fight and bleed and die and she wouldn’t care about any of it.

“I can’t believe you’re letting me sit here,” he murmured quietly, checking his watch. “Ten minutes and you haven’t once told me to fuck off.”
“Keep talking and I might,” Mallory replied, dipping her arms under the surface of the water. “Haven’t done this in years, gotta enjoy it while it lasts.” Her eyes drifted closed and her head lolled, the painkillers starting to kick in through the ache.

They stayed like that for a while before she heard him shift around, her eyes still closed tight. “Don’t fall asleep yet, Princess, I’ve got food coming and you’re gonna eat the finish off the fucking plate if I have to hold Lucille to your head.”

Mallory chuckled lazily and opened her eyes. “I’m not fighting you on a meal, Negan, I’m fucking starved. I just want to enjoy this while I can.”

He hummed knowingly at the back of his throat and Mallory watched his eyes graze down her collarbones. “You’re still not back like to your old self the way you should be, though. Lifting you up this morning was too fucking easy.”

“Maybe it’s the stress,” she muttered before she could stop herself, the water sloshing around her muscles as the heat made them loosen. “Nightmares don’t help either.”

She sank deeper under the water until her toes peeked out of the other end. His entire bathroom wasn’t as flashy as she’d thought it’d be but it was spotlessly clean and white, fresh and new, chrome gleaming. The tub was enormous, too, taking nearly her whole length and it was deep enough to come up to her neck. Silence echoed more between the tiled walls and she ran her wet, soapy hands over her grimy face, wiping away the build-up. Mal’s red hair was soaking wet and dark against her tanned shoulders and was getting heavier as the steam rose around them, although the bath water was already cooling. She would stay there for hours.

“What nightmares do you have, exactly?” Negan asked after a moment as if he had a genuine interest. Mal rested her head on the back of the bath, frowning slightly at him. “Biters?”

“Not anymore,” she replied, looking back down into the depths of the water, her naked body barely visible under the surface foam. “I used to, like everybody used to, but I haven’t been scared of Biters in a long time. They’re easy.”

“Then what do you—”

“Come on, Negan, don’t do that,” she interrupted softly, turning her eyes on him. “You already know what I have nightmares about, don’t manipulate me into some kind of therapy session. Just ask what you want to ask me.”

He gave a soft shake of his head before he slid off the counter-tops and sat instead on the tiled ledge around the bathtub, near her head. “You said his fucking name when you were asleep this morning,” he muttered, reaching for a bottle of shampoo on the shelf above her. “What were you dreaming about with him?”

The next thing she knew, his fingers were working her tangled mess of wet hair into a lather, the vaguely honeyed scent of the shampoo sweet and sickly. “I don’t remember,” Mal replied. “I never remember the dreams, only the nightmares. Fucking sucks.”

“It wasn’t a nightmare?” he said carefully, fingertips tracing more delicately over the scar on her head. “If you don’t remember what was going on in that banged-up brain of yours…”

“I know that I wasn’t scared,” Mallory admitted, trying not to moan at how good it felt to have her hair washed again. “But I don’t remember, not really. Just…” she trailed off.

“Just what?” Negan asked again, his fingers grazing her throat to pull the ends of her hair up into the
foamy lather.

She had to let herself not think about it before it came to her, the only thing she could recall from the entire thing. “I was sad but I don’t know why. It was just some stupid dream, that’s all.”

There was just silence for a few moments as he worked diligently on her hair, letting her drift away into bliss and painlessness at his fingertips. He would always wash her hair when they had a bath together in his home. The smell of the honey didn’t feel so sickly in the back of her throat once he’d worked it into her scalp. “I had hellish fucking nightmares at the beginning,” he said without a hint of fear in his voice. “First man I killed, living one, that fucking haunted me for a long damn time. Usual shit, like you said. I’ve got a few things I’m not proud of but killing a man does things, even to the monsters among us. I don’t remember his face anymore.”

“I never dreamed about the first,” Mal replied, feeling more at ease as he admitted his own truth. It could have been a lie for all she knew but there had to be a leap of faith at some point. “The only one I killed that I had nightmares over was Peter’s sister. She was just a kid, even younger than me. I think she was 21, maybe younger…” She could see it now as the guilt and shamed shot through her core: Aimee with an apron of blood over her body, her guts spilled open on the floor, the screams and the cold and the dark. “I murdered her. I’d already killed a guy to save her damn life. I bashed the poor bastard over the head, squeezed his throat until he turned blue and I still slept like a baby. But Aimee? I murdered her and saw her for months in every nightmare I had.”

“Murdered?” Negan repeated more insistently, dipping a cup into the bathwater to rinse out her hair. “Not killed after you snapped like you told me? You murdered her?”

Mallory swallowed the thickness in her throat, the drugs dulling whatever she felt about the tears slipping from her eyes. “Yeah. I didn’t have to do it. She was never going to hurt me, not really, I know that now. I just wanted to kill her, I wanted her to leave me alone. Peter thinks it was an accident, but I know what I did when I saw the light die in her eyes. I saved her life once and then I took it because I wanted to. I think I liked it, just for that moment, before I saw all the blood on the floor. It was freeing.”

Roughened, soapy fingers trailed across her chin, Negan bending down to kiss the top of her head in reverence. “Welcome to the fucking club, Princess. I’m proud of you.”

“God, don’t say that,” she said, gripping his thick wrist as he mollycoddled her. “I murdered a girl for nothing, what the Hell is there to be proud of? I wasn’t backed up against a wall, I made the choice.”

Her heart thudded as he slipped down to squat by the side of the tub, his eyes burning and bright. The sun still shone through the blinds and steam rose from the surface of the rippling water, filling the room with hazy light. “You made the choice to take control back, that’s all you did. I can see it, you wanted her gone because she took it from you when it was all you had, Princess, that’s why you wanted to see her die.”

The stone-cold truth drowned her senses for a moment, her head heavy as she tried to process it. All Mal could do was stare at him. “You’re some kind of expert on me, is that it? You know exactly everything I think about, how I felt, even when I don’t know for sure?”

“No, it’s because that’s how it always happens. Before the Biters and after, it’s always the same fucking story, tale as old as goddamn time. You take back control from the people you kill, people who push you, who hurt you, who give you those bruises,” he said vehemently. “It was murder but who gives one tiny goddamn rat’s ass about it? You got control back, got your shit together again. All you’re doing now is realising that and excuse the fuck out of me, but I’m proud of you for it.”
Mal didn’t want to believe that murder could come down to something so simple but the truth really was black and white, dancing in front of her face. Still, it couldn’t be that unassuming – or justified.
“No, no, you took control from me and I didn’t kill you,” she pointed out, the Percocet starting to numb her brain to the words coming from her mouth. “I could have but I didn’t.”

Negan just smiled brightly. “Yet. If you ever do, I’m sure I’ll fucking deserve it.”

She let out the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and sank back against the edge of the tub, exhausted in every way. “I’m pretty messed up, aren’t I?” She said, looking at him. “This was therapy after all.”

“ Anything else you want to cleanse your soul of?” he asked more jokingly, getting up to sit on the edge of the bathtub again. “I’m all ears, Mallory.”

There was one thing that had played around her head. Something she had wondered about for a long time. “Well, I stole the bowie knife from your house…” she said casually, wrapping her arm around her torso as she moved her body up slightly.

“Hardly a fucking confession, Mallory, I knew that already. It’s got my fucking grip moulded into the handle,” Negan laughed and reached for another bottle above her head again; Mal wasn’t about to protest if he wanted to pamper her. “You were the one who lied and said you didn’t try and find me after all the dead started eating people like crackerjack.”

“I wasn’t trying to hunt you down, asshole,” she said as he squirted something into his palms and worked it through her hair again. “I only went to yours out of desperation. I was on my own and your house was the last place I wanted to go but like I said, I was desperate. There’s not a lot you can do when you’re in an apocalypse alone, you gotta think small and easy.”

Negan worked his thumbs down the base of her skull and over her neck, Mallory’s eyes closing as her whole body relaxed further into the water. “That gun and the knife were in a locked safe under my fucking floorboards. What made you think they’d still be there? Some prick could have found them; Hell, I might have already taken them.”

Mal rolled her eyes. “You don’t understand; I had literally nothing left, Negan. I just took a shot and it paid off in the end. I got lucky. The ammo ran out with the gun but the knife was easier, it was lighter and it’s saved my ass on multiple occasions. Why didn’t you take them? They were pretty well hidden.”

“I was at the hospital when the city went to shit, I was 20 miles away. Didn’t seem like it was worth it for a single knife and a gun with a half box of bullets. Then I got acquainted with Lucille and they didn’t matter,” he laughed. “You know, after Simon brought out the stash we got from two sneaky little thieves at the house, I saw that fucking knife. All he had to say to me was that the girl was a redhead and I knew it was you. Life’s too fucking weird for it not to be you, right? Maybe we’re just fucking cursed to circle back around to each other after all.”

“Cursed seems about right,” she mumbled. It was the answer to the question that had bugged the shit out of her for weeks: he’d known it was her when he’d walked into that room, her kneeling at his feet, terrified and pissed off and in pain. She should have been angry now, maybe even offended that he’d walked in there and manipulated her all over again but really Mallory should have realised he’d known all along. He wasn’t an idiot and the bowie knife was special but it was hers now and that was what counted.

His thumbs stopped at the nape of her neck and he rinsed out the small smear of conditioner he’d put in her hair, the deep-red tresses now silky and lighter. “I know you feel like something’s wrong, not
having that knife on you, Mallory,” he muttered into her ear, voice deep and warm. “It belongs in your hand, every fucking idiot around you knows that.”

“It’s mine,” she agreed, running her fingers through her hair and squeezing out the excess water. “I want it back one day, Negan.”

“Oh, I’m just holding it for you, Princess. It’s in the safe on the back wall in my office, nice and secure. Ain’t nobody gonna steal your Lucille from you.” She could hear the smirk in his voice and though she sighed in annoyance, she knew he wasn’t wrong on that count either.

Mallory scoffed slightly, her lips quirking into a lazy smile as she laid back into the water again, stretching her arm out on the edge of the tub. “Lucille… I can’t believe you named that thing after your dead wife. Does anybody know but me?” she asked softly. The whole room had filled with a warm, vaguely honey-scented steam that relaxed her.

“Not my fault if they don’t ask,” he replied, looking down at her. “The question falls out of people’s minds when she comes a-swinging at them. Poor fuckers always clam up on the poor girl.”

“She’s pretty thirsty,” Mal muttered, yawning slightly. She turned her head and rested her temple on the outside of his thigh, her eyes heavy. After a second, she felt his fingertips trail around the shell of her ear in gentle circles, his movements making invisible patterns on her forehead and her cheek. Her eyes drifted shut again for a moment, her pain completely gone. “All these wives, Negan, how d’you have time for anything else? Isn’t it exhausting?”

He was still aside from the way he stroked her skin, her eyes cracking open as he swept over her cheekbone. “They’re just looking for an easy life, Princess, not everybody’s like you, like me; maybe they just want a break from fighting for the scraps people toss them out of pity.”

“Then I’m another affair again,” she realised with a bitter-sounding chuckle, barely opening her weary eyes. “But hey, what else is new? I was your mistress for a long damn time and we’re coming back around in that circle again.”

“You’re not an affair,” he protested immediately, turning her face so she’d look him in the eye. “This is you and me and who gives a shit about anybody else?”

“I give a shit and a half,” Mal replied with a quiet, sad realisation, her tone soft and even as he released her chin. “You have no idea how it makes me feel, knowing that someone you love is looking for what’s missing in you by sticking it in another woman. I’m not Lucille, I’m never going to be okay with you having more wives than you do hot meals in a day. I don’t wanna be second anymore.”

Negan sighed and leant back away from her, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Jesus, Mallory, what do you want me to do? Throw them out on their lace-panties and say, ‘have at ‘em, boys, it’s a pussy party’? Because I am not doing that. This isn’t a democracy.”

In truth, she didn’t think it was much to ask for. She loved the man but it didn’t mean she’d tolerate being the runner-up ever again, looking like a stupid slut or – worse – another wife to add to his collection. It mattered what she thought of herself, now more than ever.

“Every time you ever got jealous over me, every time you put parameters on me, I’ve taken them and did things your way. Okay, I fought you half the time but I swallowed the goddamn pill,” she said vehemently, quiet but determined. “I’m taking control this time.”

“You’re not taking control from me, you’ll be taking it away from the girls,” he argued, his voice
steadier than she’d ever heard it. “I can’t keep my fucking eye on all the assholes that go through here, what if just one of them slips through the net and won’t take the word ‘no’ for an answer?”

Mal laughed a little as she sat up slowly in the bath, not wanting to aggravate her bruised ribs any further, turning her head to look at him. “Isn’t that the goddamn point of you being you? You’re Negan; scary ass motherfucker who just loves making weak men piss their pants at the sound of your name! What’s the fucking point in swinging that bat around if your men can’t be fucking controlled?”

His eyes went dark for a moment, sadness and anger. “There’s always gonna be guys, Mallory, you know that. Guys who think that I won’t care, that it’s fine, that it won’t matter or that they can get away with it. It won’t be me or them that gets hurt by that, I don’t give a fuck how many raping pieces of shit I gotta make into pig food. It’s the girls who get hurt, who feel that every damn day. With me up here at least, protecting the ones who want to be protected, those assholes down there know not to touch what doesn’t belong to them, even if it’s not one of my wives.”

The stab of guilt went straight to her stomach like a fire poker. Mallory ran a hand over the back of her neck as she stared everywhere except at the man sitting at the end of the bath, asking her to give up her dignity and self-worth. “But you don’t have to fuck them, do you?” she said after a moment, trying to wrap her mind around what it was he wanted. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Word travels fast around here, Princess. Soon as people know I’m not touching them, it’ll make me look weak as shit,” he countered, his expression set in stone. “I know how you hate it but I’m not budging on this one. Every goddamn nightmare you and I have ever had would come back if something happened to any woman here because you decided to be selfish.”

“Selfish?” she repeated a little incredulously. “There’s a guy sitting in front of me, arguing that he has to have sex with five beautiful women or society dies and I’m the one getting called selfish? I can’t believe you sometimes…”

She winced in pain as she moved to get out of the tub without thinking, the painkillers not helping one bit. Grunting, Mal grabbed the edge of the bath and stiffened, screwing her eyes shut at the pain as it radiated in pulses for a few moments, her head spinning.

“Mallory?” Negan asked, his tone concerned. “Shit. Be fucking careful, okay? If you slip and actually break a rib, it’s not gonna be my fault.”

“Nothing ever is, is it?” she snapped. Gritting her teeth, she decided he wasn’t worth the pain and sank back down into the water, taking deep breaths to stay herself from anger. Him keeping those girls was worse than the kick to the gut. “All I wanted… was to know that I was enough. Can’t even have that. I was your dirty little secret then and that’s all I am still. We can’t be anything else than that.”

Negan looked at her in confusion again for a moment as she sat in the cooling bath water, her arm wrapped around her bruised torso. “That’s what you think you were? Mallory, when we were together, back then, I was only with you. I didn’t need anyone else.”

It was clear to her that he meant it as a good thing and Mal laughed despite herself, her shoulders sagging in exhaustion. “You expect me to believe that you weren’t fucking any other girls? I know Lucille was too sick but, God, a woman just had to smile at you and you’d be fucking her in the freezer aisle.”

“You were the one and only, I swear on my own goddamn grave,” he grumbled angrily. “When did you think I had energy to, let alone wanted? Jesus Christ, Mal, we were fucking in the supply closet
because I couldn’t get enough of your peachy little cunt. All I ever wanted was you.”

“I should take that as your way of complimenting me, shouldn’t I? It’s the last time one woman ever kept your attention for more than a week,” Mal laughed despite herself, rubbing her wet hands over her cheeks. “I can’t believe this mess sometimes.”

Laughing alongside her, Negan got to his feet and retrieved the frayed, off-white towel sitting on a rack by the sink and shook it out. “It was more than keeping my attention, Princess. I was fucking addicted to you. Still am because right now, all I can think about is how sweet you’re gonna taste tonight when you’re feeling more human again. Sit up slowly for me, I’ll help you out of there if you’re done being a mean bitch about everything. Remind me to give you two Percocet next time, it’ll knock you out.”

“If I’m a mean bitch, then you’re a dirty old man,” Mallory retorted as she followed his request and sat up slowly out of the bath, pushing herself up with one hand while she held her torso with her other arm. “I think that’s why I’m… stalling on sorting this whole Peter thing out.”

He rolled his eyes and wrapped the towel around her torso as she stood carefully, Negan supporting her weight as she did. The water rippled at her feet. “Can we not talk about that asswipe in here, please? I was enjoying the view.”

“Fucking just shut up,” she said, grunting a little in pain as he swept her easily up into his arms again, his clothes getting damp from her arms and legs. “I’m stalling because I don’t want this to end. You and me together like this was all I wanted back then. Just talking, like normal people used to do together, acting like nothing else exists outside the damn door.” Mallory curled into his chest again as he carried her back into the bedroom carefully, guarding her ribs against further knocks. “I don’t want to walk out there and see your Saviours looking at me like I’m weak and I don’t want to think about you screwing other women to keep your reputation. That life is a whole new thing to navigate and I want to keep it away as long as I can.”

“There’s gonna come a point when we both have to deal with the outside world, Princess,” he said as he set her down on the bed again, her damp hair dripping water across her shoulders and down between her breasts, the cool air chilling her skin. “But it can be whenever you want. A day, a week, a month…”

Mallory smiled softly at him as he stood above her, the damp imprints of her limbs all over his white t-shirt. “A day or two is gonna have to do. I don’t wanna deal with all those eyes-”

“Then you won’t have to,” he said, squatting down to her eye level again. “I don’t need any fucking guards when I’m here, I’ll send every last one of them away if that’s what you want.” A wide palm curled around her cheek and Mallory closed her eyes at his sudden warmth. Where had his need to protect her above everyone else been this whole time? “Say the word and you can walk out of here without even thinking about them looking at you.”

“Please?” she said quietly, her arm wrapped back around her torso. “Just for a day, even. I need to figure this shit out on my own and it’ll be easier without them on my back.”

“Okay. I can get that shit done in five minutes,” Negan said, leaning forwards once more, kissing her lips again. With his palms flat on her shoulder blades to steady her movements, Mallory felt him lower her back onto the bed, his lips lazy as they kissed her neck. “You can have anything you want, as long as it’s something I’m willing to give.”

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Her skin was mottled with cold and goose bumps beneath the layers of winter clothes she had on, her breath visible in front of her eyes. There wasn’t much point of a fire in an enclosed space like the basement they were now squatting in since they’d suffocate in a few minutes, the thin window boarded up against surprise attacks from Biters. Instead of a campfire, all she and Peter had to fight the cold and the damp were the clothes and blankets and sleeping bags they’d found on their scavenger hunts. Both of them had stolen everything they could find to help them wait out the short Virginia winter in as much comfort as possible to stave off pneumonia and hypothermia. The cold was still jarring even under five layers, her bones rattling inside her as she tried desperately to keep warm. For a month, maybe more, they’d been scraping a living by surviving off scraps, taking everything and deciding later if it was worth keeping. Mallory still refused to go far from their bunker, knowing that nightfall could be the last mistake they’d ever make.

Peter still wouldn’t look her in the eye, though. He rarely talked to her, and instead leaned on angry words said in the heat of danger when he would save her life and her guilt would deepen. There were times she’d been exhausted, hungry or simply distracted enough for a Biter to sneak up on her and he’d been the one to put them down. Mal protected him back with every guilt-ridden ounce of her strength but her head was back with Aimee, the girl’s face haunting her nightmares still. What she and Peter had become was nothing more than symbiotic, each needing the other to stay alive, to keep fighting and make it to spring time. There was some food for the next week or so if they were careful, but if the snow didn’t die down, there was a different death in sight. The basement would freeze them solid if they weren’t careful.

She rubbed her eyes to stay awake, looking across to Peter, his sleeping bag wrapped around his thin frame like hers was. He looked down blankly at the foam gym-mat he was sitting on, as if he was imagining it to be a thick, soft mattress. They didn’t have much but she’d given up the tiny luxuries to him regardless.

“Do you remember when it snowed over January 1996, just after new year?” Peter asked quietly, still staring down, picking at the edges of his gloves. “Aimee and me were way up north, up in Winchester with our Dad. Got twenty inches at least, just this layer of thick, white snow over all the houses, all the land as far as you could go. I was eight years old and I don’t ever remember being as happy as I was then, waking up and seeing that. We tried to build igloos in the back yard but they just collapsed.”

“I remember that blizzard,” Mallory said carefully, her mind drifting to the Christmas breaks of her childhood. “I was staying with family in Richmond for Christmas and New Year. Didn’t get twenty inches but enough for my Mom and Dad to cancel the trip back home for another week until it was safer to drive,” she said carefully. “I was just happy to not be in school.”

Peter smiled weakly down at the ground, shifting his legs underneath him. “Must have been fifteen years ago, right? I remember that storm like it was yesterday, it was all anyone talked about for weeks.”

Glancing upwards at the boarded windows, Mal wished that she felt the way as she did then. The blizzard they were caught up in now wasn’t the same as the one from their childhoods; it was life or death, struggling to keep warm, keep sane, stuck together like they were. They’d freeze or starve, she was sure. And he was trapped with her.

“Same for me, too. My Dad saw everybody panicking, buying up supplies and just said they were talking shit on the news, just people acting crazy,” she remembered, tearing up at the memory of her father. “My Mom ignored him and stockpiled everything you’d ever need for it. She made Dad say he was wrong.”
“Power went out pretty quick for us. We made a fire and Dad let us toast bread and make s’mores, pretended like we were just camping in the living room. God, I fucking loved the snow as a kid,” Peter said, grinning manically even though his eyes looked lost. “Watching it fall, hitting the back of Aimee’s head with snowballs, playing games inside, Dad trying to get us with ghost stories, I mean,” he chuckled wryly. “What kind of man tells his eight-year-old and three-year-old ghost stories during a blackout? Aimee cried for a day.”

The more Peter talked, the more it ate at her, the more the tears rolled down her cheeks for the people that had been lost, for the lies she’d told him. Her fake name, her fake stories, her fake life. They gnawed at her insides, grating and raw. How could she tell him it had all been a crock of shit she’d cooked up because the reality was so much worse?

“I bet you were a great brother,” Mallory said, biting her lip as she wiped away the silent tears. “I never had one and I was… my parents and I didn’t have the best relationship sometimes when it came to me.”

Peter fell silent for a moment before she saw his eyes glide up to hers, his gaze unreadable before his head snapped back down as if looking at her burned him. “I’m not surprised,” he muttered, wrapping the sleeping bag tighter around his legs. “Family was everything I had but now I’m just me, aren’t I? Mom’s dead, Dad’s dead, Aimee’s dead. At least you already know how to be alone, what the fuck do I have left?”

She’d take hit after hit if it made him look at her. It was the avoidance she couldn’t understand, why he refused to walk away but instead stay and ignore her existence half the time.

“I’m not sure I know anything,” Mal replied softly, a chill going down her spine as the winter storms raged outside. “My Dad was a hunter. He taught me how to shoot a gun, track animals, listen for tiny sounds. I thought that it’d help me, that my Dad’s the reason I survived so long now but maybe it’s just luck. Where’s it gotten us? We’re stuck here until the storm’s blown over. Who fucking knows if we’re buried under three feet of snow or six inches? No weather reports now.”

Her fingertips were going numb from the way she gripped the sleeping bag around her neck to trap every ounce of warmth out of it but she still felt that chill down her spine like nothing she’d ever felt before, a deep-seated cold that would never feel the warmth again. Maybe she was dead already and this was her icy-cold version of Hell.

“I shouldn’t be here either,” Peter said with quiet bitterness. “I don’t know why I stayed with you, not really. Should have walked away when I could because I can’t even look at you without this… this lump of anger in my throat, Allie. And now I’m fucking stuck here with the woman who killed my sister, freezing to death in the basement of a house in suburbia.”

There was nothing left, she realised. They were breaking apart, each watching the other ripping at the seams and trying to stitch themselves together.

Mal bit her dry, cracked lips, looking up at the ceiling. She took a deep breath. “I was never married,” she admitted, her gaze dragging from the ceiling to Peter. “I never had a husband who wanted to be a cop, never had any of it. I was on bail from prison for theft and living at my parents’ house when all this shit went down,” she let the tears fall freely, revelling in how they warmed some tiny part of her. “And I was pregnant and I wanted to keep it but the father was this married guy. His wife had cancer and he couldn’t deal with it so he just… used me to escape, I guess. My Dad died disappointed in me. I had to put my Mom down before she turned. I’m not… I was nothing before all this, probably not much more now. That’s the truth, okay? Aimee was right about me all along, you should have listened to her. I’ll say and do whatever it takes to keep breathing. Load of good it did me now.”
The burning anger and shock came off Peter in waves, his eyes piercing and dark looking right at her. “You lied to me? To all of us? Brit gave you her last fucking square of chocolate and you took it, even though you were lying the whole time?” His voice was low and full of barely concealed rage thrown in her direction and she knew she deserved all of what he’d kept bottled inside. “Give me one fucking reason why I shouldn’t kill you in your goddamn sleep tonight.”

“I don’t have one,” she said plainly. “I don’t. But maybe it’ll be better for you if don’t even try because I know one thing about myself, the one thing we both know is true: I’ll survive at all costs, I’ll fight you, tooth and fucking nail if I have to. I don’t want to, God knows I don’t want to, but I will. And you’re going to lose if you try and kill me.” She almost couldn’t believe the words falling from her mouth. “Every time, you’re gonna lose if you try and hurt me. I’m sorry, it’s who I am.”

Peter was silent again, his eyes clearer as she said the words she didn’t want to have to say. “Why? Why are you sorry?” he muttered back, breath visible as vapour in the air. “After all this shit, why are you sorry now?”

“Because I am. I have lost too fucking much to just give up now, okay?” she said through gritted teeth. “The mistakes I’ve made, I can’t un-make them so I’m going with them instead. I’ll ride the luck as long as I can.”

It was as if he was staring straight at her bared, burning soul, taking in all she had to give. Peter’s jaw clenched and unclenched at the words he wasn’t saying, at the anger she knew he still had left. “You said you were pregnant?” he said carefully. “What happened to the baby?”

“What happens to everything good in this world: dead. It died, never even born. I was… I was alone. I don’t want to be alone,” she said, her heart hammering. “The sonogram was the only thing I took when I had to leave home, when the Biters got too much. I still have it with me, everywhere I go. I didn’t want to say goodbye yet, still don’t.”

Tears ran down from Peter’s eyes now too. “God. What the fuck are we doing to each other?” he whispered, ripping off his gloves angrily. “I don’t wanna die.”

“We might not have a choice,” she said quietly, glancing up to the boarded-up window, the sound of the storms lashing down on them a more ominous threat. “I promised Aimee I’d keep you safe and I’m failing already.”

Peter set her with a wild glare, free from the gulf that had been between them. “We’re not failing. We make it work, we stick together because if we don’t then all we’ve lost so far is for fucking nothing and I can’t let that happen, okay? I don’t know if I’ll ever forget but we’ve both done shit, we’ve let things get out of hand, we’ve made choices and now we’re gonna die by them. Agreed?”

Mallory could do nothing but nod, wiping her face clean one more time. “You’re right. We’re not dying here, we’re not dying tonight or tomorrow or the next day.”

She hoped.

It wasn’t until the cold abated that she remembered she’d never told him what her real name was. In the bright white glow of the snow fields two days later, pink cheeked and trekking for warmer shelter in the thick of the forest, Mallory realised it didn’t matter anymore. Names didn’t matter when their worst was behind them.
Please, please leave a poor, hard-working writer a comment if you liked this chapter. In fact, give every other fic you read and like a comment as well. They're free, for goodness sake and the writers work their asses off. PSA over.

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Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

She remembers a time when there was life and there was death, where she looked through the window wanting more and never quite getting it. Negan can't offer her the world but something has to be better than nothing. In order for Mallory to start living again, Allie has to make a sacrifice she wasn't willing to make.

Chapter Notes

It's been a hot minute, huh? I'm sorry for keeping everyone hanging but my brain got melted by a combination of working overtime for six straight weeks, a lack of confidence and some MAJOR writer's block. It took me three weeks and a shit load of indecision to write this chapter. I hope you all think the wait is worth it. I'm just happy I got something out that sounds like it could be good.

I want to say thank you first and foremost to my beta Mayboo13, who saved me from thinking this chapter was garbage and scrapping it for the third time. I owe you bigtime, honey. As always, I wanna thank the people who commented on the last one: Leslie Kussmann, Scream_dream99, YorkieNYXX, Tlc_tockbb, Ella, Jamie, Elegantchaos, brandyo123, aycasenbakan, a lovely guest commenter and whoever I've missed.

Here goes nothing...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As it turned out, Mallory was not a woman to rest.

The bruises were fading, the alarm clock ticked over again and again, hours going by slower the more she waited for her body to heal. She had already poured through every book on his meagre shelf and it was only the fifth day. Maybe it was the walls closing in on her, or the piss-your-pants scared people who brought her food, but she was completely done with being injured, back to being locked away for her own good, so he claimed. Every fucking breath had grated at her raw nerves at first but now her side was a mere agonising hum with every sharp movement she made. Just a few more days and he wouldn’t be able to hide her presence any more, she’d stop feeling out of the fucking loop. Being shut away from the world had been great when she wasn’t alone, unable to move because Arat had kicked in her torso with a steel-capped boot but now, it was her actual Hell.

Mal would never understand just how stupid she’d been to let it happen, how she’d let herself get hurt worse than if she’d surrendered and put her ego on a back burner. Instead, it had boiled over and she was suffering the echoes of that blow down her side every ten goddamn minutes, just as she’d forget about her ribs and think she was fine. Even now, she wondered when she wasn’t going to need the Percocet he’d left her like little candy treats that made the worst of it go away. That first morning, he’d graced her with his presence when she’d woken up, ordering her to eat and sleep, take
the damn pills and let him repair what he could of his tattered reputation, Lucille in hand ready to make a loud statement for all his realm to hear. God help the poor bastard he and that bat were coming for. It was like it had been, back when they were in the middle of the affair, before the world had gone to shit: she’d go to sleep with him by her side, happy, complete, and wake to nothing but herself and a gut full of shame. Mallory wasn’t surprised that she’d had nothing but a cold, empty bed and a locked damn door every morning since. She had no idea how she and Negan had been able to fuck a couple times when it felt like her sides were splitting apart slowly every time she breathed too deep. Her brain had been too distracted, caught up in the idea of him needing her, of him hurting over her, to care about herself.

F**k the pills. F**k the almost-broken ribs. F**k the man who’d promised her the world and gave her nothing of it in turn.

The sun blinded her eyes as it came sneaking in through the window to the bed, her skin prickling in sweat, sheathed in silk; Mal wanted to throw something at the light for waking her up from her dreams. The pain was easing up day-to-day, but she still braced herself for it with every movement, clutching at the bedside table for purchase as she sat up. It had to be just after dawn, her head fuzzy, on the teetering edge between pain and her last Percocet. It wasn’t as bad as it had been the day before, but she wasn’t taking any chances, making it worse before it was better. With an arm wrapped around her torso, she pushed herself up and out of bed, angry at her own body for wanting another pill to take the edge off. Mal rose slowly, pressing the heel of her hand into her eye to wipe away the fuzziness from her brain, determined to at least shower and dress without needing them. Her footsteps halted as she crossed by the closed bedroom door.

“Now that’s a real fucking shame. I was hoping for more,” a deep, unmistakable voice came from the office next door. Negan. He was holding court with someone. “You promised me more, Simon, didn’t you promise me more?”

“Call it a work in progress,” came Simon’s surprisingly calm reply. “He’s uh… he doesn’t know what’s good for him, but I can change his mind easy. It’s worked before, it’ll work again.”

Mallory lingered, bracing herself up against the wall just in case they saw her shadow. They were in a meeting in his office, fucking early in the goddamn morning before anyone else would even notice it was going on. Her ribs ached again as her back straightened flat to the wall, but she put the thought of it out of her mind, her fuzzy head clearing as she focussed on a third voice that sounded further away, drawling but feminine. She didn’t know why she was eavesdropping.

“... enough time?” the new voice asked, too distant for Mallory to make out exactly. She didn’t know every one of his army but how many were women? Three, four maybe? And how many were trusted to be in his inner circles? No. Mal knew who that was, and her stomach curled in on itself.

“How long have we got left until they’re ready to roll?” Negan asked after a moment’s hesitation. “I know there’s all the time in the world these days, but my legendary patience is wearing fucking thin. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride…”

“A week or so, won’t be longer,” Simon replied. “If you’re sure you wanna do this, which I don’t doubt.”

“Technically you just fucking did,” Negan argued back lazily, sounding weary at the edges, as if he couldn’t focus. “I’ll get that prick to fall in step or I’ll shoot his feet trying. Maybe I can get him to dance for us, huh?”

“Sounds like a party,” Arat said, a slight chuckle in her voice.
Mal pressed herself in tighter to the wall as she heard the thud and shuffle of footsteps inside the office, vague low voices and stilted laughter that she couldn’t quite make out again. Her heart thudded in her chest as she heard the footsteps get closer to her, someone coming right for her before she could even think to react.

“Fuck, I forgot something, hold on,” Negan grumbled. A jolt like lightning shot down her spine as the door right in front of her was wrenched open suddenly, the man himself towering over her, his face taut and eyes piercing. “You got anything you want to add to that, Mallory? We’re all waiting for your approval.”

Both Simon and Arat were staring at her with varying degrees of amusement: Arat in the far corner with her arms folded and a smirk on her thin lips in an uncanny impression of her own boss and Simon with his look of exasperation and impatience, as if he was simply waiting to see what Negan would do with her next. Her life was a fucking soap opera played out for their entertainment, and there she was with sleep in her eyes.

“I wasn’t-” Mal said, stepping sideways away from the wall.

“What? Eavesdropping? Guess you really fucking love the paint job then,” Negan replied, looking her up and down as if there was a limb missing from her body. She wasn’t meant to be there. “Go back to bed, Princess, this is the grownup’s playtime.”

Mal’s cheeks wanted desperately to burn bright red in embarrassment, but she stepped forwards as he went to shut the door back on her, her foot blocking the jamb. “You’re talking about him, aren’t you? About Rick. Something’s happening soon.”

Negan sighed dramatically in frustration, leaning one hand on the doorframe. “You know, you’re still heavy on your feet, it’s not great for sneaking up and listening in, only getting half the fucking conversation, which didn’t include you in the first motherfucking place. Go. To. Bed.”

Arat smirked even wider, bowing her head to hide her mirth away from Negan. “You should listen to him, honey, you look like you’re about to hurl. Just leave the work to the real fighters and go take a nice bubble bath…”

His hand shot out and snatched at Mal’s arm as she took a purposeful step towards Arat, her mind set straight on getting in a good shot of her own just once. “You better watch I don’t break your nose again, you talk to me like that. Pair of black eyes would suit you down to the ground, honey,” Mallory seethed, not letting Negan make her look weak even as he kept her back from lunging at Arat. All she could think of was that boot landing in her side, the kicks and the cracks and the sound of the rushing blood in her ears as the rain fell hard on her skin; it’d be the last time she’d ever let someone hurt her if she could stop it.

“As much as it pains me to break up a good chick fight, I really do have shit I gotta do, so…” Negan growled, hauling Mallory into his office. He threw off her arm unceremoniously and grabbed Lucille as she lay on the top of his desk, waving the tip threateningly in Arat’s direction. “You… you watch your fucking mouth, there’s no snooze button on that: one warning’s all you’re getting.”

The threat lingered in the air, Negan’s voice seething and dangerous until Arat nodded her head only once in compliance, her jaw set hard and eyes flickering to Mallory in contempt. They both knew it was some deeper hatred and mistrust between them, more than a loyal soldier doing her job and the ex-lover who’d thrown it all upside down and inside out. Mal was sure that Arat would never respect anything she said or did to help, even though Arat would forever and always follow Negan’s lead and his order. They all looked at her like she was Yoko fucking Ono breaking up The Beatles.
A moment later, Simon cleared his throat and all eyes snapped towards where he stood, his taut arms folded across his chest, watching everything carefully still. “That was gosh-darned dramatic. So, Plan C?”

“Plan C,” Negan agreed curtly, glaring at Mallory. “Simon, take Arat with you so she doesn’t try to test my very patient willpower. I’ll meet you out the front when I’m done with this one.”

“You got it; come on Chuckles, let’s leave them to duke it out.” Simon winked at Mallory before pushing on Arat’s shoulder to get her out of the office with him. The woman didn’t spare Mal more than a withering glare as she and Simon left, snapping the office door closed behind them. The room suddenly felt cold and empty; part of her wished she’d taken his damn order and gone back to bed instead of making a fool of herself in front of his two best soldiers. They were about to end up in another argument again, one she didn’t want to have today.

Mallory simply stood there, Negan staring at her as if she’d just betrayed his very core. “Whatever lecture you’re gonna lay on me, don’t waste my time or yours,” she muttered, only now feeling the burning ache in her side coming back. “I really, really don’t want to hear it right now.”

It was never going to work. He had that look in his eyes, the sparkle of danger that threatened to overspill at the slightest touch. Maybe he was just pissed off that she’d disobeyed him in front of the two people he trusted most in the world, even above her, but there was something else there too, something it implied than ran deeper than his anger.

Negan took in a sharp breath before he took a step away from her, swinging Lucille idly in his hand. “Trust me, I don’t wanna go over this again, Princess, but here we are: you are not a part of this in here,” he grumbled, gesturing around the office with his spare hand. “This is the war room and I am Franklin Delano fucking Roosevelt. No more goddamn eavesdropping, I don’t have the time to teach you why it’s a bad idea for you to get involved in this. It’s gonna fuck it all up to high Heaven.”

“I really don’t get you sometimes,” she replied, putting a palm on her side as subtly as she could to press her own pain back as she hurt. “You wanted me to trust you and yet you don’t trust me. Anything I asked for, those were your goddamn words.”

“As long as I wanted to give it,” he said pointedly. “I’m not giving you the key to my goddamn Ferrari, just so you can just drive it into a tree. This is my show, my Saviours, my plan; you’re not going anywhere near it. This is a whole other ballgame than what you’ve dealt with before.”

Mallory bit back her own anger as it swelled in the centre of her chest, threatening to break. “It’s always layers on layers of bullshit with you. Am I ever gonna know exactly what’s going on here? There’s no place for me beyond being your fucking mistress, why am I even bothering to argue with you about it? You never listen to a damn thing I say!”

Licking his lip, Negan glared at her, threatening to wave that bat right in her face as he raised it. God help him if he did. “I never gave much of a fuck and a half about politics, but what I’m running here is not a democracy. The plans I make – none of them need your approval or your special brand of ‘fuck everything up because people are good inside’ bullshit. What I say goes for everyone, even for Princess Mallory and her tight little ass,” he growled, waving Lucille higher in her face.

Her palm connected audibly with his cheek, the crack of her slap echoing down her arm. Her injury screamed out at her as she did, but the stab of pain was worth it for the way he stumbled back a step, taken aback by the sheer gall of her anger.

Mal gritted her teeth and focussed on the way her heart was thudding even harder, fingers shaking from the blow. “You wave that fucking bat in my face one more time, Negan, and I’ll shove it up
your tight little ass,” she spat out viciously, watching as the dazed look on his face turned gradually hungry. “That’s a promise.”

Negan blinked just once before his face broke into a softly manic grin, lowering Lucille back down. “God, I missed you – my Mallory,” he said breathily, reaching up and stroking the hair away from her face with his fingertips. “If you didn’t look like complete shit right now, I’d already have your panties stuffed inside your mouth-”

“Jesus, Negan….” she said, rolling her eyes and letting out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding, pushing his hand away from her face. “You can’t distract me, talking like that. There’s still a problem that needs to be discussed, like human beings. You remember being a human being?”

“I meant what I said; it’s not your problem,” he said dismissively, drawing back a little to give her space “Rick’s-”

“I’m not talking about Rick…” Mal snapped. “You know what problem I mean. You’re going to kill my friend, someone I was meant to protect, and I can’t let it happen. You’ve been avoiding me for four fucking days because you know how this is gonna go.”

His jaw clenched imperceptibly, eyes glaring hotly at her face. “Peter made me look like a fucking fool for you. The word’s already out there that I’m going soft, that you’re important to me. He’s put a fucking target on both of our backs and that puts everybody here at risk; there’s no way out of it that doesn’t end in either you or him dying and, excuse the fuck out of me, but I’d rather it was him. I’d kill that motherfucker a hundred times over if it meant you got to live another day. There’s no choice to make anymore, he made it for us.”

It was as close as he’d ever get to telling her that he loved her. Nothing he’d ever said came close to the word. Instead, it was veiled threats, fear of losing what he’d already lost once, actions and selfish choices he made all in the service of keeping her for himself for as long as possible. Whatever Negan felt for her, love obviously wasn’t the right word in his mind. Obsession maybe was. Control. Need.

“All I want,” Mallory said carefully and quietly, bracing herself for the worst. “Is to talk to Peter alone. Give me ten minutes, to just talk. I think I owe him at least that. All of this was my fault, everything I’ve done since we got here has just... I’ve fucked him over enough, no matter how much you think it was only him.”

“You’re not going to change my mind,” he warned in reply, voice low. “You know that I can’t let him slide. We’re on the brink of war and letting him live puts all of us in danger. You think Rick and the pussy posse is just gonna come here and shoot me in the head? They want to make me suffer by making you suffer. Peter has to die, Princess.”

She knew, though her heart broke for the sacrifice someone else was making just to put on an act. All the Percocet in the world wouldn’t kill her guilt.

“I’m not trying to change your mind, I don’t think anyone has ever been able do that. I just need to do this for Peter,” she muttered softly, resigned as he killed a part of her past. “I know you don’t understand what me and him were, I’m not sure I even understand it, but I need to... I need to say goodbye.”

Negan seemed to relent, giving her a slight nod after a moment of contemplation. “Fine, but you’re not going alone, Arat’s going with you. And before you start back up on me, that’s really not a point of discussion either. You need an escort, the tunnels under here are a fucking maze if you don’t know where you’re going.”
A derisive chuckle escaped Mal’s lips before she could stop it. “Arat? She’ll slit my fucking throat first chance she gets. You’re trusting her to help me? You’re fucking crazier than people think.”

“The woman’s got some nuts on her, but she’s hardly gonna lay a finger on you without my say-so, Mallory,” he said smugly. “Simon and me are gonna be busy and Arat’s got some breath-taking anger management issues, but she knows what’s best for her and right now, that means not straight-up murdering you. You gotta meet me in the middle here, it’s kinda my thing. Half yours, half mine.”

Mal trusted that woman about as little as it was possible to, but if there was one thing they both could count on, it was Arat’s loyalty to Negan above everything. All Mallory had to do was ignore whatever bullshit got thrown her way and she’d be able to talk to Peter one more time, if only to clean her rotten conscience. It was never going to work but she had to try all the same, for her own soul if not for Peter’s.

“Fine,” Mal said eventually, already working on insults she could heave back in Arat’s face. “I’ll be nice as long as she is, which will end up being about three seconds into the conversation. Don’t blame me when I come back with her ears as my trophy.”

He scrubbed a palm flat over his face, fingers scratching at the rough stubble as he stepped backwards. “You’re killing me here, Mallory. Soon as those fucking ribs are healed, I swear to God, I’m fucking you into a wall…”

***

Years ago, Mallory Keenan had had a number of bad habits, ones she’d tried her hardest to break over and over again: she picked her nails, break out into random bursts of song, and would forget every morning whether or not she locked her front door before heading out to work. They’d been part of who she was her entire life. For people who’d known her before the end of the world, before everything had changed, they were just white noise, but the world was different. She was different. She didn’t sing below her breath, her rough nails were invisible beyond the scratches and callouses, and there wasn’t even a front door to lock. The world had eaten her, piece by piece, death by death.

Walking down to the cells with Arat just ahead of her, passing all the humanity left in the world, Mallory could see what loss did, why keeping Peter alive had meant so much to her and still did. All of these people were the same; every single survivor they walked past was washed out in sepia-toned colour, missing a part of who they’d been, their laughter, their families, their ambition and achievements non-existent. What the fuck did an education mean now – what did anything of the old world mean? Even the fucking walls were neutral and grey, the lights harsh and fake and buzzing overhead. Mallory Keenan used to have a lot of bad habits, but she wished she still had them, even if it was just to feel like she hadn’t been washed out by the world too.

“You still look like shit,” Arat said, breaking her silence as soon as they were down into the corridors, away from the eyes of Negan’s people. “Thought you’d make a pleasant appearance for me in the least.”

“All that bitterness inside you is just gonna rot away at your insides, you know,” Mal muttered, keeping her distance behind Arat as the woman led her through the bowels of the Sanctuary. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I broke your nose.”

“No, you’re not,” Arat mumbled in reply, rolling her eyes as she glanced back at Mallory.

A ghost of a proud smile flickered across her face. “No, I’m not.”

“I meant what I said that day,” the woman said curtly, unlocking a heavy steel door with a set of
keys on her hip. “You would’ve made a fucking awesome Saviour if you could’ve pulled that stick from your ass for long enough to step away from that party-of-one thing you do.”

“Yeah maybe.” Mallory didn’t want to admit to herself that Arat was right, that she’d have made a loyal soldier to Negan, but it was too obvious for anyone to deny now. She knew she was a warrior, whatever it meant. “At least then you and me could have had a real fight – no holding back, nobody making us do anything. I’d break more than your nose.”

“You can’t be a knight defending the castle and the Queen inside it. You’d have to choose where you fit in, like all of us,” Arat pointed out, heaving the door open with a screeching scrape. She paused to look at Mallory, her cold eyes focussing on her face. “Down this way.”

“I’m not a fucking Queen, I’m not trying to be anything but alive,” Mal snapped, following Arat through the door. “I don’t know what I am, and it’s not like anyone’s telling me either.”

“Look, there’s pretty much only three options: you can be a Queen,” she counted off on her fingers as they walked side by side. “A knight or a slave. I don’t give much of a flying fuck which, but that’s the choice you’ve gotta make,” Arat said flippantly. “I know who I’d rather be. It’s a no-brainer.”

It was already out there, people looking at her differently already, wondering who she was. The whispers and the rumours. They were watching her to see who she’d turn out to be. Mallory was waiting too.

Her eyes flickered to the floor, a pit opening in her stomach. “What kind of a choice is that?” she asked, her side starting to ache from the walking. The Percocet was wearing down already. “Why am I even talking to you about this shit? I don’t know how to make myself fit into a mould.”

“Then learn,” Arat snapped, keeping her eyes forward. “Figure it out fast and try to do it before this whole goddamn building gets blown to pieces, cos maybe, just maybe, you’ll realise how good you’ve got it here. All you newbies are the fucking same in the beginning, you think you know what it’s like out there, that you can survive on your own. You have no idea what’s waiting.”

Mallory’s eyes caught it then, a glimpse of that burned-in brand she’d seen before, a mark seared onto the inside of Arat’s wrist. How many women got to run away from that gang of psychopathic rapists? A few, maybe even less, got to taste freedom from the torture, from the chains. Arat’s loyalty made all the sense in the world to Mal now.

“I guess you’d know, wouldn’t you?” she said carefully. “I mean, how many women get to walk away from the Claimers?”

Before the word exited her mouth, her back was slammed against the wall, a skinny arm pinning her throat down hard until she could just barely breathe, her chest burning. Arat’s eyes were wild and lost, full of sour anger and fear as she trapped Mallory, the light gone from her.

“Don’t,” Arat spat. “I didn’t get to walk away. Say another word and I’ll dig your pretty eyes out with a spoon.”

Shock jolted through her spine, but Mallory set her jaw tight and nodded just once before Arat stepped back and relented. Mal leant forward to catch her breath, watching as the other woman pulled her leather glove back down over her wrist to make sure the brand was hidden again. All that blow-hard hot-tempered bluster and inside was something they were both scared of; hardened rage.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t-”

“Shut up,” Arat growled. She grabbed her keys from the ring and ripped one off, a key that looked
heavier than the rest. “I’m not tagging along for this babysitting bullshit anymore,” she spat, tossing the key onto the ground at Mallory’s feet. “You want number twenty-six. Have fun finding your own way out of here.”

It took a few minutes for Mal’s heart to stop thudding in her chest, having watched Arat walk back the way they’d come and leave her in the labyrinthine corridors of the Sanctuary. At least it’d give her some time on her own without anyone breathing over her shoulder, someone who’d report every word verbatim back to Negan. Still, the fear she’d seen in Arat’s eyes was difficult to shake; the stories of the Claimers were legendary, but Mallory had assumed most of it to be bullshit, things that just got spread from group to group to scare people away from certain caches of supplies, despite what Negan had told her about rescuing broken women. Now, though? She wasn’t sure how much of it had been fiction.

Thankfully, number twenty-six was only a few yards down, the number spray painted in orange on the door. Deep scratch marks marred the outside floor and round the door frame, like someone had been clawing at the wood and cement with their fingernails trying to get out, desperate and terrified. Mal hesitated looking at them and swallowed back down her nerves and fears about the state she’d find Peter in, if he was even still alive in there. The last time she’d seen him, she’d been so damn angry and ignored every word from his lips, had written him off completely. How had that been a week ago?

Her heart had leapt up into her throat by the time she knocked on the wood of the door, just in case, wanting to make sure Arat hadn’t set her up. “Peter?” she asked softly, close to the jamb. “You in there?”

There was a guttural groan from the inside, laboured breathing rough and rattling. He sounded sick. “Allie?” Peter called out after a minute. “Fuck. What are you doing? Get the fuck out of here.”

“I wanna talk,” she said curtly, still checking her flank for other people who could be watching, waiting for her to get distracted. “Listen to me, I have the key, but you need to promise me you won’t run. If you run, we’re both dead. Do you understand?”

There was a snort from inside. “Yeah, I get you,” Peter grumbled, his voice just barely audible. “In a second, you’ll see why that’s so fucking funny.”

Her brow knit in confusion as she slid the key into the padlock on the outside, turning it with a clank until it was free. Mal slid open the three outside bolts and opened the door warily. Inside was almost pitch black, no windows, no air. All Peter had for light was a waning gas lantern, running low on fuel judging by how it flickered manically across the room as he laid on the scant cot bed. But her eyes fixated on only one thing as they travelled down his too-slim body: his ankle, wrapped in a heavy chain, was locked to the metal bed frame so he couldn’t move beyond it. That was the damn joke.

“Shit…” she muttered, stepping inside slowly, her eyes flickering from his battered face to his shackled foot. “He did this?”

“Not personally, if that’s what you’re asking,” Peter replied, pushing himself to sit up with the only hand he had left. He sighed as he fell against the wall, eyes travelling down her body. “They all told me you were alive, that you were his favourite now. I didn’t think it was true but here we are again.”

His face looked as if it had partially healed but even Mallory could see what a mess it still was, his eyes black half way round and lip crusted with blood, skin sallow and dry. Even his clothes were the same ones he was wearing that night, the night he sold her out to Negan. She shouldn’t have come. This was just making it harder. She was better off locked in Negan’s bedroom, watching the world
go on without her.

Words caught around her tongue. “Whatever I am, I don’t think it’s his favourite,” she mumbled, wincing as she crouched to look at his ankle. It was almost pale and blue around his bare toes, cold to the touch when she ran her fingers down it, eyes flicking to the padlock “Jesus, Peter... how did we get into this mess?”

“We? From where I’m sitting, it’s just me,” Peter muttered, his eyes vacant and cold as she touched his foot. “I know what a fucking hickey looks like when I see it. You really are playing happy families up there, aren’t you? Screwing the enemy. You know, if you were just gonna whore around, you could have saved me the pain and jumped into bed with him from the beginning. Maybe I’d still have both hands if you’d fucked him sooner. It’s all you were good for and you missed the boat.”

Mal stood upright and bit the inside of her cheek, telling herself that he was still her friend, still her responsibility. “I might have done a lot of shitty things in my day, but I’m not a goddamn whore,” she snapped before pausing to keep herself from saying things she would only regret. “I screw who I wanna screw. It’s just... complicated.”

“Understatement of the fucking apocalypse,” he replied quickly, shifting enough that the chain around his ankle clanked and clanged. He chuckled mirthlessly, shaking his head as he shifted to sit on the edge of the bed as much as he could. “I’m chained up like a dog, Allie. Mallory. Whoever the fuck you really are. Complicated don’t describe it.”

It was all too broken now. Whatever they’d been, friends, temporary family, they weren’t either of those things anymore. Mal cleared her sore throat and stood with her arms wrapped around her torso, half bathed in the fluorescent light from the hallway outside.

“My name is Mallory Jane Keenan,” she said firmly, not wanting to take any shit anymore. “I’m twenty... something years old. Maybe thirty something now, I don’t know. I was born in Wolfrap but spent most of my childhood in Lynchburg and Richmond. I broke my arm when I was six and told all my friends at school the boogieman did it because I didn’t want to tell them I’d fallen out of my own treehouse,” she smiled despite herself. “And I used to love Virginia, I used to love going fruit picking with my Mom, making ice tea for my grandmother. Those was the best times of my life. I know I should have told you all this a long damn time ago, Peter, but I’m telling you them now.”

He was quiet as he looked at her, looking torn between the versions of the woman she was, which one he trusted and which he didn’t. She knew the feeling well. “But you’re not that person anymore, yeah, I get it,” he said softly, gripping the edge of the cot bed with his one hand. “I should have kept my fucking mouth shut about that sonogram but, fucking Christ, Mallory, I thought you were better.”

“Better than what?” she asked in confusion, brow drawn down and wary.

“I wanted you to be smarter.” Peter glared back up at her as hurt as he’d ever looked. “Why d’you trust him more than you trust me? Even if you put aside the monster he is to other people and look at just what he’s done to you, what he’s doing to you, even now, you still trust him more than me. You should be worth more than a quick fuck and a cup of coffee.”

“Well, I guess I’m not,” she snapped. Mallory didn’t belong in this room. She didn’t want to be anywhere near him now, near his anger and his spite, but she owed him the truth regardless. “I love him. Don’t know if that means trust but it’s... it’s the closest I’ve got to something real. You sold me out the first chance you got, used what happened to me to hurt him, and you still expect me to trust you more than Negan?”

Angry tears shone in Peter’s eyes as he nodded, teeth gritting together audibly. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.
He is everything you should hate, he’s everything wrong with this shitty world. Why the fuck are you even here? Just to crap all over me while I’m rotting away in a goddamn chain?” He spat, looking up at her with crystal clear eyes. But then his face fell. Mallory could see the crashing waves of realisation. She could see all of it and turned her head down. “You’re here to say goodbye. God, you’re here to say goodbye.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding slightly. “I tried to make him change his mind, believe me, I tried but time’s running out. There’s gonna be a war between the colonies soon and-”

“You can’t,” Peter said curtly, shifting his weight again. “You can’t win, you can’t even try because you’re barely even here now. Just let him do what he wants, let him walk all over us. Let him go to war, try and bring them all back in line again. He’ll win anyway so just… don’t try anymore. We all belong to him now, especially you.”

Mallory didn’t know what to say beyond telling him he was wrong. Negan had never truly owned her or the choices she made, not a single damn part of her. Her anger stuck in her mind and refused to be scrubbed away.

“I belong to me,” she warned, clenching her fist around the key to Peter’s cell. She could turn around and lock the door on him, walk away and bury whatever part of her wanted to do some good for once, throw herself headlong into being in the Sanctuary. “I survive because I’m fucking strong enough to.”

Peter snorted derisively. “Survivor, warrior, Saviour… they’ll all just another word for murderer. We kill because we can, not because we need to.”

“I’ve never killed anyone I didn’t need to,” she snapped, knowing it was a lie as the words left her tongue.

“You killed Aimee. You murdered her,” he spat right back. “I saw you, you murdered her. Even if it was for a half a goddamn second, it was murder. You wanna talk about choice, Mallory? You talk about surviving, about living. Tell me where it ends. You gonna die for that psychopath?”

Her eyes stung with unshed tears as she stepped closer to him, closer into the light. He drew her in with his anger, cutting deep into half-healed wounds. “It ended a long time ago,” she muttered under her breath. “Besides, if you thought I killed your fucking sister in cold blood then why’d you stay with me? Come on, you pussy, you wanna talk about surviving too? I killed your sister and you stick around? You’re the one who’s gotta be fucked in the head. If I’m a monster, then what the fuck does that make you?”

“You even sound like Negan,” Peter grunted, wiping wet blood from his lip as it split back open. “He’s infecting you.”

“Don’t avoid the goddamn question,” she seethed, standing tall above him. “If I sickened you so much, why did you stay? Why not just kill me when my back was turned?”

Peter looked away from her, the light barely licking over his features as he glared into the dark. “Because I loved you once, for a moment. I thought… I thought I could save whatever good I saw in you, but you were already long gone, Mallory. Negan was in your head before he found you again, I was just too fucking stupid to see it.”

She shook her head angrily, clutching at the key. “That’s not true. Nobody’s in my head, he doesn’t dictate what I do! It’s this place, it fucks with you, it tears you apart. I’m still in control, I’m me!”
He only shrugged, staring back at her with an avid hatred. “Open your eyes – he doesn’t give a shit about you. You’re never gonna be enough for him, not on your own. Haven’t you figured it out yet?” His cracked lips split into a knowing grin, blood staining his front teeth. “Negan only really wanted you after he found out that you’d been pregnant with his kid…” he laughed softly, shifting back down the bed casually. “You even told him you can’t have any more?”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” she threatened, eyes blazing in sudden anger. There was nothing inside her. She’d pushed out the idea, never even let herself think about it. “Don’t.”

“What makes you think he’s gonna fall head over heels in love with you when he realises you can’t have his baby?” Peter whispered, taunting her, punishing her. Her brain pulsed in the silence. “I thought so. He doesn’t know. You don’t want him to-”

“Stop it…”

“…because you know he doesn’t love you enough,” Peter said determinedly, ignoring her warning plea. “And he never will.”

Mallory had been beaten, she’d been shot and stabbed, she’d been violated and nearly died a hundred times and all she’d got was angrier. Every scar fused into armour, every piece of metal that tore her body up got spat back out to the ground and made her better. But this? She fell into herself. Rage washed over her until she was a hurricane, eyes narrowing imperceptibly. “Me not being able to have kids… you think that makes a damn bit of difference to me? Like I feel I’m not enough?” she chuckled mirthlessly. “Maybe I can’t have kids, maybe I can, I don’t honestly know, but what does it fucking matter anyway?” Mal dangled the key from her fingertip, looking him in the eye. “I’m more than that. You really have no idea.”

“I know what you are,” Peter said, eyes flickering over to the key in her fingers. “You murdered my sister, left me to choke on my own blood, and now you’re killing me to keep that man safe.”

Her eyes sparkled dangerously, the adrenaline surging through her body. “To keep me safe,” she clarified, crouching down by his cot. “And I’d do it all again, every fucking time.”

Peter wheezed as she got nearer, his eyes flicking between her and the key in her tight grip, breath wet and ragged. “You really would,” he muttered quietly. “I can’t do a damn thing about it, can I?”

“Not anymore,” Mallory answered quietly, keeping her eyes on his face. “It’s over.”

“Fine.”

A sick grunt tore from Peter’s throat as he suddenly lunged forward, swinging his whole body towards her, his eyes wild and desperate. Pain sliced through Mal’s arm as he caught her off-guard, her agonising scream tearing through the dank cell in a blur. Her vision tilted, the shock of it turning her. Warm, wet blood flowed from her arm, the key dropping to the ground as she fell backwards. Her fingers pressed against slippery flesh and the wooden top of a prison shiv lodged into the muscle, her flesh torn apart again. She screamed in pain, trying desperately to grip the wood with her blood-soaked hand to yank it out of her bone, to sink it into his own flesh. This was his revenge.

Peter scrambled for the key, his shaking, bloody fingers snatching the thing up from the cement floor before she could stop him, before she could even realise what he had been doing, what he had done. Another scream tore through her as she jerked the shiv from her arm, clasping it in her other hand. Mal squeezed her arm until her fingers were white, turning to find Peter ripping his foot from the heavy chain around until he was free. He fell with a jarring thud off the cot as she dragged herself
back up, lunging at him and stabbing him between the shoulder blades with as much force as she could muster before he could even stand straight on his deadened leg, the wood piercing his own flesh. She grinned. He screamed in sheer agony.

He coughed and spluttered, crawling towards the open door as if it’d make him safe. As if it was a victory.

***

The Biter stumbled determinedly towards them, the rotting flesh of its bare feet scraping off as it walked over the roughened asphalt road. It was just another day with her stomach aching in hunger, stuck in the middle of an empty nightmare of nothing but rotten flesh and fucking oak trees. Mallory sighed as she sank her bowie knife straight through the Biter’s skull, its body dropping like a sack of wet sand to the ground. Just more roadkill for the birds to peck at. The sun was starting to get lower in the sky, the heat dropping down a few degrees as they walked side by side.

“How much further?” Peter asked, his own knife by his side just in case there were more Biters around the corner. The skinny road was flanked by dense forest; Mallory would have been wistful if it wasn’t for the stench of corpses in the air. They hadn’t been part of her childhood memory of this place.

She peered up ahead, wiping her blade clean on her pants. “Driving, about a half hour so maybe 20 miles. We’ve done more with less time.”

“We need to get back before dark,” he warned, keeping his own eyes on his side of the forest. “I don’t wanna get into more trouble, Allie, there’s not much food left if we get stuck sleeping in the trees.”

Mallory chuckled. “I ever tell you that I fell out of my own treehouse when I was a kid?” she said softly, her feet heavy as they walked. “I was so embarrassed, I told my friends the boogieman broke my arm, so I’d seem cool.”

He laughed too, glancing sideways at her. “And they believed you?”

“What can I say, I’m very talented at lying,” she shrugged, reaching for her canteen of water. “I’m a natural.”

Peter held out his hand to take the water from her, drinking down as little as they could get away with before handing it back to her. “There’s another word for that, you know.”

“Oh?” she asked in amusement.

“Sociopath,” he chuckled. “They’re great liars. They make great politicians, lawyers, CEOs. All your basic scumbag jobs. Lying’s a kind of power, right? Control?”

“Yeah, when an adult does it,” Mal smirked in reply. “I was six – kids lie all the time, I’m not sociopathic just because I got embarrassed about falling out of a fucking tree.”

“If you say so,” he muttered teasingly. Peter looked at her up and down, sweat beading on his top lip again. They were both just trying to ignore the hunger, the blisters on their feet and the walk back to their basement bunker. “That where we’re going? To where you fell out of the tree?”

“What? No, no, I never lived here,” she said, shifting her backpack up her arms again. There were two holes straight through it where some hotshot had fired at them, the crossbow bolt piercing through her backpack as they ran for their car: that had been weeks ago. “It’s a cottage that
belonged to an old conspiracy nut friend of my Dad’s. He was the stockpile-for-the-impending-apocalypse kind of guy, I only went there once or twice. If we’re gonna find something out in this forest, it’ll be at his place.”

He frowned softly at her, sounding concerned. “You think he’s still surviving there, then?”

Mallory shook her head. “No, he died a few years back, ironically enough. Giant heart attack. Waited for the end of the world and it never came. I know it’s still kind of a long shot but it’s the only one I think we might have a chance with. It’s pretty deep into the forest, nobody would even know to look for it.”

Peter looked at her pointedly. “Except you.”

“Except me,” she agreed, nodding at Peter’s side of the woods as another Biter came towards them, the bottom half of its body a smear on the road behind it, flesh turned into tire tracks. It pulled itself along with its fingertips, snarling, jaw snapping. “Wanna even bother?”

“No!” Mal yelled, gripping his leg with both bloodied hands and dragging him back inside the cell, his fingertips scraping sickly along the cement. Her injured arm roared in pain.

There was a crack as he kicked at her torso, the feel of it reverberating down her spine, breath knocked out from her body again. Mallory spluttered and lurched for the shiv sticking out of his back, twisting the hilt before she ripped it out, letting it clatter to the floor as he screeched in pain like a dying pig.

“No!” he cried out, gasping for breath and trying to kick her head in desperation. “You should be the one dying, not me!” he wheezed.

The next few seconds were a blur as they both hurled themselves at the weapon on the floor. Her gut rocked inwards as he punched her, everything blackening for just a fraction of a second too long. Peter tried to pull himself up slowly, dragging his body as if he ready to crawl over broken glass to get to freedom. She could see the light from the door, the buzz of the fluorescence like home.

Mallory coughed as she stood, half-doubled from the piercing pain in her torso spreading into her stomach, sucker-punching him square in the face. His bruised cheek split open, and Peter was just a sack of unconscious flesh on the floor, immovable.

Her ears rang, screeching sounds getting louder as she stumbled limply towards the open door, holding onto the wall to keep herself from falling. Her hand shook violently, blood smearing across the dank, grey walls as the shock of everything hit her all at once. One foot in front of the other. Keep going. She was stronger than this. She’d made it through so much more. Scars were armour. She was meaner than her demons.

Face set in steel, she waited for people, waited for help. Negan would come for her, he had to come for her. Mal slumped further towards the ground as she made it to the open steel door. Blood dripped from her limp arm in soft droplets splashing to the floor, soaking into the cement. Her eyes dragged her down.
It was only in that moment, the screeching gone, the halls silent, that Mallory had ever felt truly, unquestionably alone.

Chapter End Notes

So there's two more chapters left. I wish I could tell you when I'll be able to write but I promise to work through any blocks I get again.

Please don't forget to comment, even if it's just to tell me that I'm a heartless bitch. I'll still love you.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Letting go is impossible; she can't let go of the impossible, she can't let go of the world trying to kill her, she can't let go of the man who wants to own her soul. The darkness tried to claim her time and time again but it has always burrowed deep into her heart. Mallory knows the truth about loving a monster; you have to become one yourself.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Hoped someone out there missed me. It's been a little too long since this was updated and I have no excuses other than a lack of energy on my own part and maybe a little reluctance to end this whole thing but here I am with the penultimate chapter. This is the last one from Mallory's perspective so I hope I did my baby some justice.

Thanks to Mayboo13 or Beta'ing once again and for picking me up after the last chapter kinda flailed. And to Jamie for screeching at me when I sent her the first draft of this. I love you too.

To brandy0123, Saudade_Sehnsucht, vitavenio, Ticktok_bb and Ella for commenting too. You all saved me from total self-destruction. Thank you.

So here it is, chapter 22 of 23.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The world went in and out. The dark and the cold.

Emptiness appeared behind her eyes, daring her, laughing as she tried to fill it up with life, make the terrifying world come back because the nothingness was worse. Softened edges slipped away again and again from her bloodied fingers, like she was trying to grasp silk as thin as a single hair to haul herself up with. Mallory tried, she tried so hard, dragging herself over broken glass just to fail and fall back down again. It was just too much; too much pain, too much fear, too much fatigue. Nothingness looked better the harder she tried to just wake up. It was all she had to do and she couldn't do it.

Failure had always stalked close behind her, teeth bared, waiting for her to show the parts of her it could chew on. It drove Mallory onward away from it, her mind and body crawling slowly towards the world again as best she could. It all hurt, it all hurt so much that she thought that maybe it was better not to try at all. Let it chew her up, let it choke on her bones.

But he was there.

Mal didn’t know how she knew it, but he was above her, turning the silk to rough rope so she could haul herself upright. Her dreams were dead, completely devoid of any hope, any pain or sadness, but
that didn’t scare her anymore. There was a weight on her arm, warm and calloused and strong as shit, something for her to grip on to. Light was blinding as it anchored her.

Trying to breathe was harder the more she attempted to wake up, only to close her eyes again when it became too much to bear. She heard his heart somewhere near her head, pounding, thundering, beating, and tried to cling to the sound. Her own wet breath rattled in her chest like a spray paint can, though; sticking too long, collapsing back inwards. It would have been easier to let the nothingness take her, to give up, roll back into the jaws of the beast that stalked her. If she was just as blank and cold. If she were weak, if she was done.

Mallory wasn’t that person.

Her eyes sprang open and she battled for breath, clutching desperately at flesh and cloth, body bouncing softly in warm, thick arms. Her head tilted heavily backwards, her vision blurring and spotting as it got harder to breathe, chest constricting, tightening, choking. It was all going away too quickly and all at once, snatched from her bloodied fingers. She couldn’t see anything, not a damn thing, only feel, only hear faint sounds.

“Stay with me,” he said distantly above her, moving faster and faster, each pounding footstep jarring her half-broken body. His heart was pounding next to her ear. “Stay awake.”

Static became the only thing Mallory could see and hear, the world turning back to nothingness as if someone had turned off the light in a snap. Mal couldn’t do anything, couldn’t save herself, couldn’t heal on her own.

The only thing she wanted was her Mom, craving nothing other than to feel the warmth of her smile and the touch of her soft skin against her cheek like she had every night as a child when the monsters got too much. Mallory wanted her Dad, beaming proudly, handing her a hunting rifle and telling her to breathe and squeeze the trigger at the right time to nab a clean buck. Her friends, all laughing and drunk and normal, she wanted to see every one of them just one more time, listen to their bullshit and take their crappy advice. Their baby. She wanted her baby, dead in a blink of an eye. They were all long gone, empty voids she’d tried to fill with anger and violence and blood and calling it survival.

Memories slipped away – faces weren’t quite right anymore, the voices like caricatures of the people she’d known and loved, somehow wrong and right at the same time, taunting and cruel. He must have felt the same about Lucille, her face twisting the more he tried to think about her too. It broke her into pieces – all they had left was each other and maybe she’d just be another twisted face in his mind soon as well.

Mallory wanted to live, to feel loved again, to feel anything again. Her body jarred, the burning travelling to her throat and down to her stomach as if there was a weight crushing her down. He anchored her body tighter, she could tell, clenching fearful arms securing her to his beating, thunderous heart. His face twisted in her blanking mind.

“Please…” he begged one more time before the rope turned back to silk. “Please.”

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Fuck. Breathing had been easier when she was unconscious; the bleach or chlorine or whatever the fuck it was burned her nose until she could taste it on her tongue and the back of her sore throat. Her whole body was still now, flat and unmoving as her brain tried to play tag with her limbs. Part of Mal had hoped that she’d wake up and find all the goddamn Biters and death had been a vivid nightmare, that she’d be back in her old bedroom or her apartment, trying to figure out why her nightmares had tricked her for so long. Instead, her twitching fingers found leather and she knew it wasn’t a dream.
“Negan?” Mallory gasped, voice hoarse and croaking. She blinked her eyes and looked down, only able to see the few inches or so in front of her that wasn’t blurred out and hazy. The jacket was draped in her lap, empty and cold. Disappointment flooded over her in waves as she groped the fabric, grunting in pain as she tried to sit up in a panic, the pain growing less fierce in her determination to push it aside.

“Mallory… oh fuck me,” a rough voice barked from beyond the point her eyes could focus. “Fuck are you doing? Stay fucking still.”

Negan, his face smeared with sweat and blood, came striding up to her without hesitation, worry etched beneath the dirt that masked him. Letting out another shaking, agonising breath, Mal leant her head into his wide palm as he reached out to touch her, the simple gesture conveying everything that needed to be said. He looked as haggard and pained as she felt, though relief at being alive washed over her – finally, the rope was wrapped around her hands.

“Negan…” she croaked in warning, trying again to sit up.

"Fucking Christ, I said don't move!” he commanded, quiet but thunderous. He swiped a thumb across her cheekbone like she was the petal of some delicate flower. "You got a fucking hole in your chest, Mallory. Sit your tiny ass still for once. Fuck me, you’re out for a few hours and you think you’re all healed and ready for another battle…"

Pulling her head upright and away from his hand, Mal peered down at her prone form to see that he was both wrong and right. Instead of just a hole, there was a skinny tube sticking into and out of her chest, around near her collarbone, capped off at the end. The room was empty except for them, though she expected the asshole doctor to not be too far out of earshot.

"You suck," Mallory groaned, looking at him pointedly. "That's barely the size of a needle, asshole."

Whatever retort was on his lips died as she fell back onto the hard gurney, her shirt missing and replaced with a clean sheet, draped over her like they used to do to dead bodies in morgues. She knew it had been a close call this time, closer than she’d thought. The tightness around her chest wasn’t as crushing but her breath still sounded rattling. For all Peter’s efforts to kill her with a piece of sharpened wood, it hadn’t been the shiv that had caused her all this pain. How the fuck had a one-handed man made a shiv inside a concrete room anyway?

"Might wanna take it easy, you were dying for a hot minute there," he muttered, eyes flicking over her quickly. "Peter the Prick did a number on you, Mallory."

"Did a number on him too," she said quietly, only now noticing the numbed ache deep in her bandaged arm. Mallory grunted as she sat back up, breathing laboured and wet. "You see?"

A small, proud smile ghosted over his lips like it always did. "Yeah I saw. You're fucking brutal as shit," he replied, standing upright a little more. "Place looks like a fucking crime scene, I gotta get the bleach on the walls to get the bloodstains out."

Mal leant back on the gurney and smiled weakly, exhausted and relieved and half-broken from it all. "You don't gotta say it, Negan. I shouldn't have gone down there, not with Arat, not even with you. It was a trap, wasn’t it? Can’t believe it...

There was a sharp, screeching noise on the linoleum floor by Negan as he drew a stool to sit next to her, his face hardening. "Hindsight’s 20-20, as they used to say when that meant something. You’re too fucking trusting of assholes by half, me included. What in the shit did that creep say to piss you off so much you stabbed him in the back?" His smile tugged at the corner of his lips again. “Loving
the literal metaphor, by the way. Outstanding work."

Licking her dry lips as a distraction, she peered away as she tried to remember the details. Everything was still more of a blur, all the words they had said to each other fading from her memory the more she tried to think about them. It was a mess of chaos, except for a few stark words she would never forget and the cold look he gave her.

"Just that he didn't want to win, only wanted you to lose." Her fingers kneaded at the leather jacket draped over her lap like a blanket, taking comfort in the familiarity, imagining that she was clinging to his chest, hearing his pounding heartbeat again. “Meaning… killing me, I guess.”

“He knew he couldn’t get close enough to me to even try,” Negan grumbled, voice teetering with anger. “Knew that I didn’t have any trust he could exploit, but you did.” Mal glanced back up at him, blue eyes watering. “Florence fucking Nightingale. He was chained up for a reason, you ever think of that?”

She wanted to laugh but just the idea made her gut ache, so she settled for shaking her head. “Well that’s bullshit. Peter… he knew you wouldn’t say no to me if I asked you. I’m too trusting and you really are too much of a soft touch when it comes to pretty girls.”

“Maybe. Yeah, maybe,” Negan mumbled, rubbing a palm over his face roughly. He was leaning forward, his elbows planted on his knees, looking like he was trying to say things he didn’t want to say. They both had them. “And it got you three broken ribs, fucked-up lungs and a gaping hole in your arm for it.”

Mallory could have done without the blow-by-blow of her near misses. Even before today, there’d been hundreds of them at the hands of Biters and the living alike, things he was seemingly keen to ignore. “But I won,” she said defiantly, gritting her jaw. “Hurt like Hell, but I goddamn won. You know, you were right about-”

“Normally am…” he mumbled towards the ground, interrupting.

“About needing control,” she snapped back. “I took control back from Peter. He pushed me, he hurt me, so I took it back from him. If that’s what you wanted, why are you so pissed off at me about it?”

Negan almost sneered as he glanced back at her, eyes raging and dark. “Because you nearly fucking didn’t win, Mallory, you got split in half. You didn’t get the agony of hearing what your breathing sounded like, like…. like you were being squeezed until everything was wrung out. You’re as tough a son of a bitch I’ve ever known, and it was still almost not enough to win against one man. I don’t think you get how close I came to…” he stopped and swallowed thickly, looking away. “How the fuck you even walked halfway up the hall, I don’t know. A minute later and I’d have had to shoot you in the fucking skull.”

It was like crawling over broken glass again, the way he was staring, glaring, down at the ground. “I’ve had worse,” she mumbled bitterly, exhaustion seeping into her very bones. “Jesus, what am I gonna have to do to prove to you that I can take care of myself? Cut through every man here? Because I will.”

A cold smirk splayed slowly across his face as he kept his gaze toward the goddamn ground, not even daring to look in her fucking eyes like the coward he was. Negan was still scared when it came to her, she knew. He was breaking apart and being rebuilt from scratch at her feet.

“Yeah that’s just the fucking thing, right?” he clipped, his leg starting to shake up and down. “Here’s this girl, thin and pale with broken bones and she already fights better, fights harder and dirtier than
half of the jackasses I got at my disposal. As much as I got my name, my reputation, out there, your name’s getting out there too and that shit was before all this even happened…”

Mallory frowned in confusion, wondering what the fuck he was talking about. “My name?”

“And your name,” he echoed quietly, unsettled, jittering. “You were alone, stuck in a solid cage with a man you trusted. You were weak and in pain, and you walked out of it,” his eyes were wild as he looked at her, half-scared and half-excited. “Now I gotta wonder what would happen if you could see the enemy coming at you from a hundred yards, if you were stronger, if you were angrier, had a real weapon back in your hands and people to protect. They’re all starting to wonder what you can really do, Mallory. Everyone underestimated you; I did and I fucking…” he swallowed again, the words shoved back down his throat. “I need you.”

Hot tears pricked at her eyes. Wading into another war, that was what he meant, the words he wasn’t saying outright in case she said yes. He wanted her to clear up the mess around him and find the pieces worth saving. Nobody ever saw her coming, she knew that. Not even Peter, who had seen the look of blood on her teeth, knew what she was willing to do to win. Negan wanted her to be the Queen with a knife in her fist.

Mal was quiet for a moment, her drained mind and body trying to play catch up with everything he’d put on a table and fill in the blanks. “You really don’t know how to pick your moments…” she muttered quietly with a soft, weak smile. “So… I’m your Saviour, that’s what you want from me?”

“Saviours aren’t mine. They don’t protect me, they protect what this place is, they protect the people, Mallory, because people are a fucking asset,” he was begging with his strained voice, his whole body taut. Did he want her to refuse him, to go back to being safe, even if it meant he might lose at the end? “You wanna say no, you say no, but you and me… we both know it’s what you miss. Feeling that chase.”

“I don’t miss killing people, Negan,” Mal warned wearily.

He rolled his eyes. “Not talking about the violence. You miss having purpose, a fucking reason to ream me out day after goddamn day. Don’t tell me I’m wrong.”

A sigh escaped her dry lips as she remained silent. He was there, by her side, still streaked with her blood, asking for help with a war he knew he wasn’t going to win. Maybe he just wanted to go down fighting instead, make her watch him die. Who the fuck knew what Negan wanted anymore.

Her fingers groped idly for his jacket in her lap, slipping inside every pocket until she found what she was looking for; the sonogram. It was still exactly where he’d last put it for safe keeping, as close to his chest as he could. They were both experts at secrets, skilled at gutting people with words, with knives, with power, but the life they’d never had made them weak. At least, it made her feel weak.

“Must have looked at this thing a thousand times,” she mumbled, unfolding it. “Every day, every night, missing something I never had.”

Negan sighed too, glancing between her and the picture. “You don’t have to do this again, Mallory.”

“No, I mean, maybe I need to stop missing it? Maybe I need to stop trying to see my Mom’s face, hear my Dad’s voice…” Mal said softly. “I can’t have that baby back, I can’t have that life back. I think that means I can’t have you back either, not like we were,” she swallowed thickly, scared of the after. “If you want me to fight for them, to die for them, okay, I can do that, gladly; but I can’t be the same Mallory, I can’t be yours. Because you know it makes us both vulnerable, the baby makes us vulnerable. Everyone here is at risk if we’re more… and if you really, really give a shit about the
people here, about keeping them safe, then you’ll let the past go. And I’ll fight for you, for them.”

They both looked at each other, his jaw ticking and clenching as if he was about to explode. “That an ultimatum, Mallory?”

“No, Negan, it’s not an ultimatum, it’s just what needs to happen,” she affirmed, folding the picture back up and slipping it into his hand. “I guess you’re regretting scooping me up off the floor now, huh?” she chuckled idly, trying to break the tension.

“That wasn’t me,” he mumbled casually, putting the sonogram back into the pocket. “Simon was the one who found you out cold, trail of blood up the wall. Goddamn ran with you in his arms up here.”

Her stomach dropped suddenly, the silence piercing. Negan was back to staring at the ground, his mind occupied while her own tried in vain to remember the face of the man who saved her, what he felt like, what he sounded like. But it was Simon. He was Simon. It was Simon who said please, Simon who had tightened his grip, curled her up in his arms. Simon who begged her to stay. Maybe she’d imagined it all, projected what she wanted from Negan into the arms of another man. But her stomach still felt heavy, remembering what his heart sounded like, pounding next to her ear.

“I must have been way out of it, then,” she said quietly, shaking her head just a little, though she wasn’t entirely convinced that her dying brain hadn’t conjured the straining voice that had pleaded with her to stay alive. Whatever had happened didn’t matter now, did it? “Look, I’m not asking you to make the choice for me, Negan, but I’d still always rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven.”

He chuckled dryly, nodding just once. “I know, Mallory. But it really is fucking Heaven, isn’t it? Can’t give you up without a goddamn fight if I have to. There has to be a goddamn solution that doesn’t mean us being fucking miserable apart.”

They had a bond, she knew that. Some unspoken connection that drew them to each other, broken and raw but healing and surviving in tandem. There was a reason they had both lived this long, she thought, both stubborn jackasses with nothing left to lose and everything to gain by force. Mallory craved his strength and stubbornness sometimes, had done even when she hated him. It was more than a need for sex, for love or lust, it was the part of herself she clung to when he was with her. As if she was meant for more. Every time he denied her, it shattered something irreparable.

“We can’t get everything we want in life, maybe we shouldn’t,” she said, thinking of the family she’d lost and the family she’d never get. “Can’t love you like I want, have you to myself, can’t make you love me back. I need to know who I am outside of this, what I can do.”

“It used to be playing that fucking piano, every damn night, for hours…” he said quietly, a small smile poking at the corners of his eyes. “Couldn’t drag you away from it.”

“I loved that thing,” she agreed, letting out another rattling breath. “But I think we need to let dreams die sometimes so they don’t drown us. There’s a reason I don’t dream of playing music anymore, there’s just…” her chest tightened again. “Just nothing.”

“Take it easy, shhh,” Negan said, immediately concerned as her chest wheezed in search of breath. “You shouldn’t even be talking right now. Fuck’s wrong with me?”

“How long was I out?” she asked suddenly, having realised the pain in her chest had edged away to a throb as they’d been figuring shit out between them. Her arm didn’t even hurt anymore, though she felt like the sheet around her was weighted, dragging her back under. “My head feels… weird.”

“Yeah, that’ll be the drugs, Mallory,” Negan admitted, sitting up soberly. “You’ve been out maybe
eight, ten hours,” he said, looking at the watch on his wrist. “Gotta say, you’re still faring better than your boyfriend next door, I tell you that. Asshole’s not getting any painkillers from me.”

Mallory’s jaw dropped open slightly, panic rising. “I… Peter’s alive?” she stuttered. “But he wasn’t moving? I thought, fuck, I thought he was dead.” Her world spun out of control and she groped aimlessly for Negan’s hand. “I stabbed the thing in his fucking back, how can he be alive still?”

“Twisted it too, right?” he said, gripping her hand right back, tight as a vice. “He’s stubborn as you are, spitting blood in my fucking face. Don’t worry about him, he’s not going anywhere near you, not ever again. I got men watching him like he’s fucking Houdini in a straightjacket, okay? He’s gonna get what’s coming to him tomorrow, in front of everyone. I promise.”

“You’re still executing him?” she asked, shamed at the relief that flooded her. It wasn’t meant to be like that, it was meant to be her begging, pleading for Negan to spare his life but all Mallory wanted was the choice gone and out of her hands. She wanted it to be done, for Peter to be gone out of her life. She thought he was already. “I have to see. I have to be there.”

Negan grunted as if he was annoyed. “No fucking way, you nearly died a few hours ago. You’re not moving from this bed for at least a week, fuck the fucking pencil-dick doctor. Peter’s not worth you hurting yourself again, Mallory.”

It didn’t matter. Her broken ribs didn’t matter, her rattling breath was inconsequential. She had to be there; for herself, for Peter, for Aimee. It was a path she had to walk down, even if he’d never understand that line of thinking.

“You’re the one who said my name’s out there now. If I don’t even show my face, how’s that gonna fucking look, especially when you’re the one swinging the axe? They’re not gonna be afraid of me if they think I’m too scared to show my face,” she muttered, slipping her hand out of his as she realised how tightly she was gripping him. “I just need to stand there with my head up, don’t I? I don’t have to kill him, I just need to show everyone I’m not a pussy.”

He seemed to chew it over, looking her up and down tentatively. “Three days, then I’m caving his fucking skull in whether you can stand up or not. There’s only so much shit I can take, and he hurt you, he nearly killed you. Three days is the limit on Lucille and her appetite, and mine too. He’s gonna piss his pants when he sees you standing there.”

Mallory reached up and wiped her fingertips over her dry eyes, drained. “Thank you,” she muttered shallowly, his hand cupping her tender face again, his lips pressing a soft kiss to her clammy forehead. Letting go completely would be nearly impossible. “Thank you.”

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The acrid, bitter scent of death hung everywhere in the Sanctuary; it was deep in the walls, somehow, mixed into the cement and the breeze blocks until nothing could scrub it out. It didn’t seem to burn in her nose like it used to and now was barely there. Nothing about the place had really changed in any noticeable way – not the building, not the people or the fear in their eyes or the pity, too. They all kneeled, all washed out in loss, looking to the only thing keeping them alive and safe from the Biters as if he were a God. Negan wasn’t broken, no; he wasn’t like the others, small and scared. He stood before them, above them, turning vengeance into power and respect. Blood into gold.

If there was a change in anything, it was in her. Mallory was no longer kneeling in front of him, weak and dissolved, scared for her life and washed out like the rest of them. Instead, she stood alongside him and his Saviours, toe-to-toe with the most trusted of his army as if she were one of
them, as if she was important not just to him, but to all of them kneeling at their feet. He’d told her to stand, to hold her head up and keep her eyes straight and strong, to be like the others he trusted.

It was easy to see how intoxicating he was, standing on the other side. Big, bad Negan. The man they whispered about in secret like an urban myth. He loved it. He loved that they were whispering about her, too; they would be after today. She wasn’t going to swing the bat, but she was directing the man behind it.

She was as cold and pale as a damn ghost when Negan sauntered into the room, Lucille on his shoulder. Every eye in the room strayed onto her body, none of them in any doubt about who she was. Their glances, their mutters and whispers. She wasn’t his property, his wife, someone to be even more pitied than the free people. Fuck, she cringed at the thought of her being his trophy. Negan made those poor women kneel in front of him too, their eyes searing into her bruised skin deeper than any of the others because she stood where none of them had ever stood. He was free to screw all his fucking wives, every night, all night in every depraved way he wanted until they screamed and begged – it didn’t matter. Mallory knew they’d all give an arm and an eye to have the miniscule part of his trust she kept hidden in her pocket. That was power, that was control – and she had it over everyone.

The devil himself turned on his heel and winked at her, Lucille swinging from his shoulder and bouncing readily in his hand as they all waited for him to begin the show. She felt her own heart in her throat as she watched, waiting for the predator to make a move, to bite the throat out of his prey. “Wanna get this party started?” he grinned again, curling his fingers in a gesture to someone else.

And they brought out her failure, beaten and broken.

Her stomach churned at the sight of Peter, barely able to walk on his own legs, as Simon dragged him into the cavernous room by his bound arms. Sweat was beading on his forehead, skin mottled with aging bruises and pale spots. Even she could tell he had barely been patched up from their fight three days ago. Yes, her chest and her ribs still burned, and her breath was still weakened, but everything Peter had done to her was easy to hide, easy to cover up so she looked invincible. He couldn’t hide the fact he was dying, he couldn’t hide anything.

“And they brought out her failure, beaten and broken.”

Simon glanced up at Mallory before he came to stand in his rightful place, her cold skin prickling as he slid in next to her. Her eyes remained rooted on Peter, his arms duct-taped together behind his back since one of his hands was missing still.

This is it, she told herself, willing herself to not look away. This is where it begins.

Negan tutted loudly in the back of his throat, bumping the blunt end of Lucille up against the back of Peter’s head. The man at his feet crouched low, face down, forced to kneel with his eyes bent towards the floor. Negan was trying to shield her from looking at his face.

“Ladies and gentlemen, roll up and see the spectacle on sight today!” he bellowed, standing tall and straight. “I want every single one of you out there…” he shouted out to the kneeling masses. “Every single goddamn prick to know something about me. I was a kind man! I used to have some motherfucking mercy! I was just the same as every other cunt here, dragging my nuts through the dirt, listening to all of your pathetic stories and pleas. Every man out there on his knees today begged on me to take them in and bless my soft Virginia soul, I was merciful!” A chuckle escaped from his lips as he pressed Lucille harder into Peter’s head, breaking the delicate skin. “But I am gonna make this very fucking clear today: there is no such thing as mercy anymore! There is no line left to cross because I am scrubbing it the fuck out! You either suck on my goddamn dick and make me happy, or you die choking on it. Today’s the day when this fuckless wonder, this, this… piece of greasy shit
on the bottom of my goddamn shoe here, chokes on my fucking enormous dick.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Peter grunted out, his bent legs shaking underneath him, the side of his head turning just slightly so she could see his ice-cold eyes. Sweat ran in droplets over his brow, mixing with the blood and the dirt, weeks of it caked onto his once beautiful face. Everyone could see the defiance, the anger, the hatred that rolled over him. Negan wanted them to see it. “And screw your little whore too.”

The sick, sadistic smirk bloomed slowly and brightly across Negan’s face. The blunt end of Lucille travelled lower and jabbed into the stab wound lurking under Peter’s dirt-ridden shirt. The man screamed in pain, flesh mincing to a pus-ridden pulp beneath the fabric as Lucille worked her magic on ready-torn muscle. Mallory forced herself not to wince.

“Yeah that’s what I thought,” Negan spat quietly, crouching down and getting right into Peter’s face. “I was gonna make it quick but I kinda love it when you scream, not gonna lie there. Makes me tingly all over. Piece of goddamn shit… you’ll wish she killed you in that cell.”

Mallory’s breath caught in her gut as she watched a waterfall of blood and pus and gunk flow from Peter’s back, soaking into his shirt. The arms that were once wrapped her own midsection had fallen by her side. She couldn’t look away, her eyes widen as his screams of agony bounced around the room. The audience in front of her paled and averted their eyes, some shaking as he just screamed and screamed. She was rooted to the spot.

“Don’t,” Simon muttered lowly next to her as she nearly waivered from the sight of Peter. “Don’t look away. No mercy, that’s the deal from us too.”

Peter continued to scream until Negan pulled the bat away, the end of her coated in blood and glistening brightly in the morning sun. “This weak, pathetic son of a bitch in front of you don’t belong here,” Negan roared, stepping backwards. “Maybe you are asking yourselves ‘what did this motherfucker do that was so bad?’ but I am here to tell you he did nothing. He’s just pissed me off too many times.”

Suddenly Negan swung the bat up in an arc high above his head. Mallory felt a quick, vice-strong grip tugging on her own elbow, roughened hands holding her steady, forcing her to watch what was about to happen.

Can’t turn away. Don’t.

Her breath caught in her throat, choking, singing, as Negan swung hard and fast, cutting through the air. Lucille cracked Peter’s skull from ear-to-ear, his head splitting and bursting instantly. His body slumped forward and twitched as he fought to the end, his face a river of blood in front of her. Peter looked blankly, alive and dead at the same time.

There was another crack and another and another, wild and vicious all over his body. The sight of it would stay with her forever, how Peter’s brain stuck into the barbs of the wire, how his hair, matted with bone and blood, looked so black, like tar. His corpse, mangled and torn from head to waist, jumped and curled into a loose ball on the concrete before stilling.

It was finally quiet. There was silence and the nothingness.

He was gone, and she could finally breathe. Simon’s fingers uncurled from around her elbow quickly. It was over and all there was that remained was silence. No screams, no whispers, no rumours or doubt. Mallory decided in that moment that Negan wasn’t going to win the war; he was the war. Brutal, merciless, violent, unending. Untouchable.
All he had to do was wave a hand and every living person kneeling in front of him practically ran from his path, pushed out by most of his Saviours, all of them rightfully terrified of the devil in black. She wasn’t sure how long she stood there, staring at Peter’s lifeless, mangled carcass before it was dragged back, away from her sight forever. Her eyes looked up from the mess left on the floor, the streaks of nothing, and back up to the monster she loved.

Negan breathed evenly, spattered head to toe with blood and brain, Lucille hanging by his side, loyal and diligent as any man there. He licked his lips as he caught her eye, burning deep holes into her soul. Her heart skipped, his gaze travelling down her body as it always did. It was all Mallory could do not to touch him, to not cup her skinny, shaking hands around his face and breathe calm into his storm-filled eyes, to yield to what he craved. He terrified her too.

“Negan?” she muttered as he came towards, scared that she would be the one to break. It was a weakness still, a vulnerability.

He looked away from her and to his side, unclipping a holster around his leg, unthreading worn leather from his belt and thigh. “This is yours,” he grunted gutturally, shoving it into her hand. “Was always yours. You’re gonna need it.”

Mallory tore her eyes from his and pulled out a familiar handle from the holster; her bowie knife. It glistened in the sun from the windows as she pulled it from the warmed leather. “I don’t—”

“That’s you now,” he snapped, wiping Peter’s blood from his face with the back of his hand. “Training begins in a week, since you wanna be my soldier, Mallory. That’s what you wanted.” He turned to glance at Simon next to her. “Make sure she gets back to her room.”

There was barely a heartbeat before Negan ripped himself away from her side, barking orders with the sway of his shoulders and the trail of blood leaving an imprint on her memory. Mal swallowed thickly, exhausted and strong all at once, slipping the knife back into her holster. She let out a steadying breath, feeling truly alone.

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There was a stillness in the wind, punctuated only by the gentle hum of sunshine on her bare skin, glowing new and golden in unexpected humidity. The skies stretched boundless for miles above them, undisturbed, alive, but quiet and still. Her body ached but it was strong again, she was strong again. The heat of the sun bore down on her as Simon drilled self-defence moves into her for the thousandth time. Her mind was clear and clean, focussed on cloudless sky for the brief moment she got between attacks.

“Ain’t gonna find a Biter up there, Red,” Simon called over to her, sounding winded as she stretched out her back from the last attack he’d sprung on her. “You’ve only been through six weeks of this, you’ve got a fucker of a job to catch up to the rest of us. We’ve been here years.”

Mallory wiped off the sheen of her forehead with the back of her hand, striding over to him. “Think you’re forgetting how long I survived out there alone and with idiots. I wasn’t sitting on my fat ass, getting lazy from standing in the boss’s shadow,” she smirked. “You’re still pulling your punches on me, Simon, don’t be a little bitch now.”

“Wouldn’t be doing to mess up that pretty face,” he replied, grabbing her arm and spinning her as he feigned another close-quarters attack. Drawing her elbow back, she sunk the joint into Simon’s ribs, knocking the wind out of him harder this round than she had before, though he stepped back before she had a chance to stomp down on his foot. “Motherfucker!”
She grinned to herself as he swung out at her face, dodging the punch easy and kicking out at his ankles instead. He crashed hard to the ground, grabbing her leg and pulling her with him. Mallory wrestled Simon into the dirt, tumbling in the dry earth until she had his wrists pinned next to his head. He bucked his hips, trying to swing her off him. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, pumping her heart harder.

The stinging burn that had lingered in her chest for weeks was gone, her wounds healed, and the only bruises were ones she’d earned as fucking trophies. Simon was going to earn his own trophies today. She pressed her shin across his throat and bore down, beaming wildly.

“Say it, sweetheart.”

“No fucking way,” he gasped out, still attempting to throw her off his body, getting angrier the more she refused.

It only made her bear down on him harder. “Say the words, Simon, and I’ll let you come up for air. I know you got a good view but you’re gonna black out in a minute.”

“You’re a mean bitch,” he spat, eyes sparking at her as she looked down at him pointedly. “Fine, Jesus fuck, I submit to the goddamn Queen!”

In an instant, Mallory was off him and standing above his body on the ground, victorious. “Fuck yeah you do,” she sniffed and wiped off the dust from her jeans. “You’re letting me out in the field tomorrow. No more lame excuses.”

Simon sat up, looking slightly impressed and dumbfounded, shaking his head slightly as he rubbed out his bruised throat. “How’d the fuck you get your centre of gravity so damn high, Red? I should’ve been able to throw you off in a second. I think you crushed my goddamn larynx, do I sound fucked up? I think I sound fucked up.”

Biting back a laugh, Mal held out her hand for him to haul himself up with, turning and walking back to the truck parked near them, its back open and full of weapons. “I wasn’t touching you beyond my hands on your wrists, not before I got on your throat. Keep the spine straight and locked, push down and even a little girl can avoid the counter-move. And I did.”

Whether or not he looked impressed, she wasn’t sure. Negan chose his closest allies carefully, of that much she was sure, and that meant they all played everything close to their chests, her included. Simon had trained her hard, got to work on her weak aim and strengthen up her upper body back to where it had been before Negan took her in. She worked her ass off and it was showing, in more ways than she expected.

“Solar plexus, though?” he questioned, watching as she strapped her holster back to her thigh. “Not bad but your arm’s still weak. Instep goes first next time, drive down until you hear the bones break.”

Her brow arched at him, sliding her bowie knife back into the leather. “It’s like you want me to hurt you.”

“Maybe next time. I think you broke one of my fucking ribs too,” he whined comically.

Mallory laughed softly, her mind brought back to the day three of hers had snapped. “You don’t want that, trust me. They heal quick, but you’ll feel like you’re dying while they do.”

Simon hummed deep in his throat as he reached past her to grab some water, downing half the bottle in one as he rubbed his side. “That was a special case, you were actually dying, Red, I know the sound of a fucking death rattle when I hear one.”
Her eyes shot to the ground for a second, looking anywhere but at Simon. Her memories of him finding her and carrying her got mixed up with other images. “I never thanked you for that,” she muttered almost reluctantly, taking the water bottle as he offered it. “For finding me.”

“No, you didn’t,” he said plainly, leaning up against the truck to watch as she drained the bottle. “Didn’t need to. It’s my job.”

She shot him another confused look, throwing the empty plastic away into the truck. “Your job to what? Save my life?”

Simon looked at her, jaw squaring. “I didn’t save your life, Red, I got you where you needed to go. That’s my job. Point A, point B. Simple as shit and half as hard.” His eyes bore deep into hers and she was still unsure of whether there was something else behind it, another meaning she wasn’t seeing. “Look at what it got me. Cunning, wise-ass, brutal little Freshman who likes it when she makes people submit to her. Negan might be in front of us, leading the charge, but I want people like you at my side. That’s what keeps you alive.”

“People like me?” she muttered under her breath.

“People who are gonna live…” Simon said simply.

***

It took eight weeks, three days and a handful of hours before she snapped.

True to her demands, Simon had put her out in the field and let her take a flank while out on a recon for a couple days. It had yielded little in the way of supplies, though she figured something was better than nothing, even if it was just more canned foods and some seed packs. But she’d taken out countless Biters and was ready to be done. Her old injuries were starting to gripe at her, her ribs aching, her scar on her thigh refusing to let the muscle underneath stretch any further until it was rested. Sweat and dirt and old blood flecked across her skin and clothes until she could think of nothing but steaming hot water and soap, willing herself onward step by step until she got it.

Mallory clanked her weapons back into the armoury, checking them off with the guy at the door. Fucked if she knew what his name was, she just called him Ass Guy since he always wolf whistled at her when Negan wasn’t around. Kid would clam up when the Big Bad Boss Man walked by – funny how that worked. The cockiness of youth, thinking she’d just put up with that shit day after day. Everyone had a breaking point.

It was early morning, just after sunrise, the cool of the night giving way to the spring heat and humidity that Mallory was desperate to escape from already. Her arm burned in pain as she lifted off a holster from her shoulder, the stab wound on her upper arm having proved a tricky one to heal. It was taunting her, that wound. The question on her lips never answered because the one man who would tell her the truth had his head caved in and his body broken in six places.

Because it had to be impossible. It was impossible for a one-handed man, chained to a metal bed, to make a shank from some random piece of wood. It rattled her more because it hadn’t rattled Negan. Someone had to have handed it to him. Someone must have placed it in his palm and told him to try. Either he didn’t care, or he hadn’t realised it himself, but the question hung over her still. It made her arm ache more, the anger burn brighter. She took it out on Biters but the Biters weren’t there in the Sanctuary.

It was eight weeks, three days and a handful of hours when she snapped. Mallory was bent over the tent outside the armoury, checking off her loaned weapons to get cleaned when Ass Guy wolf
whistled inches from her face and she was done.

Without hesitation, Mal slipped the bowie knife from her holster, turning on her heel to catch his throat, pressing the blade threateningly against the tender, thin skin. Her eyes were wild and bright, vibrant and piercing, body thrumming with the need to take out her anger again. “You wanna fucking repeat that to my fucking face, shit stain?”

He held his hands up in surrender, looking at her, terrified. Beads of blood were dripping down his neck already. “Shit, shit, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he pleaded, stammering. “Please don’t kill me!”

“Whistle like that at me ever again and I’ll shove my big knife so far up your ass that you’ll taste metal for a week. You got that?” Mallory seethed quietly, her breath catching up to her. When the kid didn’t answer, she grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked. “You got that?”

“Yes, ma’am, yes, I got it,” he choked.

Gritting her teeth, Mallory threw him off her as if he’d burned her. The kid scurried away, the other men and women in the armoury looking at her like she was a bomb about to go off. Her blood was thrumming with pure, unspent, righteous anger.

It was only a moment later, her knife re-holstered, that she saw Negan, Lucille on his shoulder, looking like someone had put dirt in his coffee.

“Mallory!” he thundered, pointing Lucille up towards the Sanctuary, to one of the highest corners. “Wipe off your fucking face and get your ass up to my office. Now.”

“Fucker…” she whispered under her breath, frowning lightly as she trekked up the familiar aptth towards his office.

The bastard kept her waiting in there for what felt like hours, her leg jittering as she sat in one of the chairs opposite his desk. Mal had to settle on a quick wipe over with a washcloth on her face and arms to get rid of the grime.

Unease became an old friend, sitting in his office, waiting for whatever was coming her way. He hadn’t so much as looked at her in nearly eight weeks since she’d been training, even though she knew he was there. Maybe he’d had enough of it, enough of waiting and watching, hoping she’d realise some bullshit lesson and come running back. She wasn’t gonna bend first.

Negan strode into the room without a word, not looking at her. It was like waiting for a punch that never came, just the lingering threat waiting in mid-air. “Looks like you scared Donny half to death. Congratulations,” he rumbled eventually, laying Lucille on the desk. “I had you down for a week from now.”

“He’s a punk,” she retorted, spitting out the word. “I’m surprised you didn’t think it’d happen sooner, frankly. I fucking hate little shits like that, catcalling, whistling, pinching my ass. I’m not apologising to him.”

“Wasn’t gonna ask you to,” he said, standing behind his desk, leaning on the surface. “You think I give a fuck about Donny?”

“No,” she said on a tense laugh, trying to stop her leg from bouncing. “No, I don’t.” Mallory looked up at him, eyes flickering over him from head to toe in a sweep. “Begs the question, why am I here?”

He shot her a look. “Because I don’t give a fuck about Donny, I give all the fucks about you. What’s going on? You don’t usually hold the knife to their throats, you just talk a big game to shits like
Rolling her eyes, Mal stood up, pissed off at the interruption. “What’s going on is that I want a shower and to sleep, Negan, I was out on the road clearing warehouses for you for three fucking days. I’m wired and I’m filthy and hungry, okay?”

“Yeah, you’re lying to me, Princess,” he shot back, chewing on her nickname. “I got the field report. You took down twice as many Biters as the next guy, ‘like a one-woman berserker’ was the phrase Simon used. I see stuff like that, I get interested.”

“Interested?” Mallory scoffed, rubbing the ache from her arm. “I did the job asked of me, better than expected. I’m failing to see the problem or why you’re so concerned now.”

Negan faltered for a moment; it was there and gone as fast as she could blink but it was there. “What the fuck does that mean? ‘Now’?” he demanded quietly.

Mal hung her head for a moment, contemplating letting it lie. She wanted to be able to let her brain rest, let her body rest but she couldn’t, not when someone had tried to kill her, and he hadn’t even realised. It had played on her mind in the quiet times, trying to figure out which asshole fighting beside her had helped Peter try and kill her.

“Means I been thinking. See, my arm’s not healing right, it’s starting to really piss me off that I still can’t punch like I used to. Peter stuck a shiv in my goddamn arm, Negan, and it’s not sitting well with me.”

“And what you want me to do about that?” he challenged, trying to feel her out.

“I want to know who put the thing in his fucking hand because as far as I can tell, he sure as shit didn’t make it himself,” she said on a rush of a breath, letting it out into the open. “It’s not possible. Someone else gave it to him, made it look crude on purpose. Maybe someone I have to fight with now, someone I’m supposed to trust not to let me get ripped apart.”

Negan was quiet, the implication louder than anything. He simple stared at her, pulling off his lone glove. “You think Arat gave him a shiv to stab you with.”

She shook her head slightly. “No, I think she gave him a shiv to kill me.”

He chuckled almost bitterly, jaw clenched. They’d walked down this road before with Arat, the crack from her boot setting off Mal’s brush with death. “Princess…”

“Don’t ‘Princess’ me, you know I’m right!” she said, her hand shaking. “You know I’m fucking right. Peter didn’t make a fucking shiv, he could barely drive the damn thing deep enough to hit bone.”

“Shut up,” he gritted out. Stepping around the desk, Negan took a breath, seeming to hesitate, caught up in her ranting. “Just stop.”

“I’m not gonna stop, never, not until I get some fucking answers!” she seethed as he stood directly in front of her, her anger consuming her. “Nobody’s gonna help me, nobody gives a shit, so I’ll find out myself.”

He snatched up her body to his in a sudden, bruising hug she struggled against. He gripped the back of her head with one palm, fingers sliding into her hair and Mal froze around him, still half-angry and half-scared at the tingling.
“Stop,” he muttered into her crown.

Mallory screwed her face into his chest, stuttered on the feeling of her breath getting stuck in her lungs again. Of her arm burning in pain. She had too long to think about it. It was different, training with Simon, fighting the battles, that was purpose. Her mind was occupied. It was in the quiet and the dark when the idea festered, that she was a sitting duck waiting to be slaughtered by friendly fire. They’d warned her long ago.

“Negan…” she breathed, forcing her hands to loosen around his sides.

“Shhh…’” he said, holding her tighter and pressing a kiss to her crown without hesitation, both slipping backwards into the trust in each other like they’d never left. Her fingers groped at the leather of his jacket, shocked as she felt the sonogram still folded in his pocket. “I know, Mallory. You nearly died, you nearly died, but you didn’t. Don’t you believe for a goddamn second I was gonna let you go when my hand was nearly forced. I kept waiting for you to realise.”

Shudders wracked her slim frame, the relief spreading in an instant as she curled around the only man she could ever truly trust with her life. He wouldn’t lie to her, wouldn’t hurt her. “We’re not over, are we?”

“Never,” he affirmed. “Let me see that arm, Princess.”

Reluctantly, Mallory peeled herself from the comfort of his chest, turning and letting him tug up the sleeve of her t-shirt until it was there. The skin was twisted and rough, still raw and trying to knit back together even eight weeks after the fact. His thumb traced over her scar, jaw ticking as she winced over a more tender spot.

“I gotta lot more,” Mal said as he soothed the anger and fear away from her with a sweet touch. “Broken ribs, buckshot in the gut, stab wound in my thigh…” she muttered, her voice distant as she remembered them. “The butt of Simon’s gun on my head,” she chuckled, reaching up herself to touch the indent through her bright red hair. “Lot of goddamn scars.”

Negan watched the soft rise and fall of her chest as he leant down and kissed the scar on her arm, warmth spreading through her, his lips almost hesitant. She understood why he hesitated when it came to her, as if she was going to shatter if he went to hard. Their bond was a circle of sex and happiness before both realised it was never going to work for one bullshit reason or the next. And still they gravitated back, ineffable, astounding, hungry for each other.

“Got a lot, too, Mallory,” he said, cupping his palm over her cheek like he’d done eight weeks ago when she’d been fighting for breath. “I think you’re one of them.”

It took eight weeks, three days and a handful of hours but Mallory melted.

Wanting nothing more than to find the comfort and freedom in the trust he gave her, she rose up and forwards, claiming his lips back in an agonising, passionate kiss that stole another part of her. It was clumsy and desperate, her demanding hands shoving at his jacket just to feel the warmth underneath, teeth clashing and noses bumping together as they kissed. He had ripped her open and climbed inside a long time ago.

Peeling back for sweetly stolen breath, she smiled almost bitterly into his lips. “Don’t make me hide this,” she asked, her heart thumping against her ribcage. “I can’t do it again.”

“I love you,” he said suddenly, breathless and guttural. “How the fuck could I not love you?”

Shock filtered through her brain and stuck on the word, the one that messed up all of it. It was a
manipulation, another way of controlling her, of making her his forever. “Please I can’t hear that if you don’t—”

“I don’t give a fuck if you can’t hear it right now,” Negan seethed, claiming her lips again, groping for her body to press flush to his. “I bleed, Mallory, I bleed and if it’s for anyone, it’s for you now. Fuck, I missed you, more than before. Shit, I fucking love you.”

They stumbled as he gripped her ass, making her groan deep in her chest as he kissed her, trying desperately to touch each other, to pretend that it was going to work. The world was too painful on her own, Mallory decided; she needed him more than she’d ever needed him. Fighting wasn’t enough, being alive wasn’t enough because there was no point to either without his trust. It terrified her, it spurred her.

Mal wanted more of him, to believe he could – and would – love her like she craved. It was a schoolgirl idea, to bring a man that powerful to his knees, but when his tongue lathed down her bare breasts, she believed it was possible. She sat on his desk, shirt off and bra shoved down angrily just so he could get at her tits, sucking and biting the tender flesh until Mallory keened and clutched at his head, wanting more, craving more.

“I need you,” she muttered breathily, his tongue and teeth scraping over the puckered indents of her scars as he went down her stomach. Her cunt ached, empty, soaked, throbbing with the demand only he could fulfil. “Please, please, don’t you fucking stop.”

Breath hot against her skin, he yanked and tugged on her filthy jeans, pulling them down her aching legs and off along with her boots just so he could sink his whole goddamn face into her clothed cunt, stubble scraping her tender thighs until the skin was pink and raw. He would always do this, devour her from the outside in until she was begging. Mallory clutched at the desk, Lucille rolling off the surface as he pushed her ass into the wood.

Negan growled into her underwear, turning to her abandoned jeans to find her bowie knife, slicing through the worn fabric of her cotton panties as if they were butter. The knife clattered to the floor, forgotten, in favour of the meal in front of him. His tongue sunk straight to her core, lapping up all he could. She didn’t care that she hadn’t showered in days and neither did he.

“Sweet peaches, still,” he said, licking and sucking desperately, letting her work her hips over his mouth. Negan sucked his lips around her clit, tugging and licking before pulling away, working her up and down until tremors shook her legs.

His broad, rough hands kept her thighs apart, fingers ignoring the scar on the top of the left. Mallory rocked her hips over his face, grunting in frustration as he pulled back just before she came. He grinned cockily into her soaked cunt, messy and teasing her with a finger crooked inside her.

“You gonna fuck me?” she asked, watching as he licked his lips, getting needier. “Or just gonna make me do it myself?”

“Next time,” he replied, voice dripping with his own desire. “I’m enjoying this moment since I wasted too many of them already. Eight weeks without tasting this sweet pussy makes a man crazy.”

Mallory laid back flat on his desk, the floor littered with the junk he kept on the top of it. She watched as he pulled his thick cock from his pants, hard and stiff and leaking already. She licked her own lips, wanting the feel of him inside her, of him fucking the life back into her.

Negan pulled her towards him with a sharp tug, palms wrapped around her hips. They leant towards each other as he eased his hard cock inside her wet cunt slowly, her body clenching desperately at
him as he did, not wanting to let go. Mal canted up, stretched as the pleasure shot off inside her like goddamn fireworks. He went too slow, too fast, not enough and too much all at once.

“Yes,” she gasped as he pulled out and surged back, ankles locked behind his back. The moan was ripped from her mouth as he kissed her, stealing her breath again. “Yes, yes, yes…”

“Mallory,” he groaned, snapping his hips into her harder and faster, the sound messy and filthy, filling the echoing room as his cock drove into her. “I love you, I love you. So fucking beautiful. My girl. Fucking tight little cunt, Jesus…” he rambled, sinking his face into her neck. “Mine.”

Her breasts jiggled at the force of his hips, the desk scraping the floor. Mal hooked her legs higher around him, eyes popping as he hit deeper and she screamed his name for all the building to hear, nails scraping his bare back raw and red, making her own scars, her own mess. Only she got this; his fucking heart, she owned it in the palm of her hand like he owned hers.

“Negan…” she gritted out as he fucked up into her, jarring and forceful and her hips matching his.

His teeth clamped down on her neck as he fucked her harder, deeper, sinking inside her like she’d dreamed. Mallory came hard, her body arching off the desk as her pussy clamped tight around his cock, milking him for everything he had as he came too. His hips jerked and stuttered, filling her, completing her.

Negan reached up and pressed another kiss to her lips, sweeping her hair away from her face and Mallory knew, she knew the one goddamn thing she could be sure of, what she’d always thought was the impossible, out of reach. It was in her grasp so tight, wound securely around her.

“I will find who put the weapon in his hand,” he panted into her ear, voice seething with lust and vengeance. “And you’re going to kill them yourself.”

Mallory’s heart skipped gleefully at the taste of blood on her tongue; they were monsters but monsters together.

She was home.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to, come and scream at me on my Tumblr page if you want. I'm gonna try my hardest to get chapter 23 out before the new year.

Random thoughts for the month: I am super-madly-fucking-in-love with The Punisher. And I wish that TWD would just do an all-Negan season. Just his backstory, how he came to be the man he is... I think that'd save the show, right?? RIGHT?!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

It's the end of something, the beginning of everything else. She's loved a monster for so long that Mallory can't tell who she is anymore and Negan will do anything it takes to keep it that way.

Chapter Notes

And here we are, way over a year later at the end of this story. Thank you all for reading, for commenting and leaving kudos, bookmarking, asking me questions on Tumblr and all that shit. I loved it, I stressed out over it, it was an insane ride. For everyone who wanted a Negan POV chapter, this is it. I hope I did the man some justice within the context of this story. He's a fucking bastard to get right.

This is not just for everyone commenting last chapter but all of you who ever have; you keep writers breathing day to day and I can't thank you enough for that.

Here goes nothing...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Negan didn’t give two shits about the apocalypse.

To him, it was just another stumbling point through the whole of human history. The pain and loss he’d endured weren’t goddamn unprecedented; his broken wreck of a life meant no more or less than the next man’s or the one after that or the one after that. There was always a next man and every one of them had suffered the deaths of strangers, friends, old family, new family. They’d all gone to crazy-town and turned it into a city. If someone had released this fucked-up infection – toxin – whatever – into the world to wipe it clean of people, then they’d done a shitty job. Humanity had survived, even thrived, in some shape or form and he knew they always would. They were just different now; more animal, hungrier, more violent. More prone to piss him the fuck off.

He knew how to break people even before, he had always torn the kids he coached into grit and moulded them into what he needed to win. Nothing had changed; the strongest sons of bitches gave him their loss, their rage and grief, and he turned it into fire with his hands. The world was a playground with little army men at his disposal, willing to do anything to survive because it was all they knew. Quiet was always too quiet; he craved the next battle as much as any other good soldier, and he made some fucking good soldiers.

There was one thing that terrified the shit out of Negan. They were starting to learn they didn’t need him anymore. They almost didn’t need his moulding, they didn’t need his special brand of help. Grief and pain were old friends to all of them, yes – they could lose three, four, five of their nearest and dearest and shake it off after a fucking week. He had seen it in Rick, in all of the so-called
leaders before him too, ones he’d stacked on the dirt like pancakes for breakfast. Negan swung out, hit them hard, and they kept getting back up. Still, nobody had a capacity for inflicting all kinds of pain like his Princess. The ace up his sleeve waiting to be played. No. Rick wasn’t worthy to stand in the shadow of Mallory fucking Keenan: she scared them all shitless now, cutting swathes through the dead like grass. Negan thought she’d never met a man who scared her more than she scared herself when it came down to a wire.

His Mallory didn’t just tolerate pain through gritted teeth to do what had to be done; she sought it out, she craved the rush, took action before the call. More and more every day, Negan watched as Simon re-trained her into a lithe little weapon, just like the rest of them, and she slipped right into it like she’d never left the open field. Watching her like that, full-pelt, armed, dangerous… he’d never seen her pull a punch once, never heard of her leaving a fucking man behind, never accepting that there was no way out. She wasn’t a leader, not yet, too rough and soft at the same time, but she was his ace to play and that was all that mattered. Or maybe he was hers, Negan wasn’t sure anymore. He didn’t give a fuck.

God, though, he was fucking burned up in love with her. He couldn’t remember how he’d even felt about her before, whether this was all brand new or whether there had been something lingering inside him for years, building up since the moment he saw her. It was still another betrayal, another failure to his real wife, to their short life together, as imperfect as it had been. Negan had always let her down, deceived her about what Mallory meant to him. In the end, he couldn’t give her what she deserved or protect her when she needed it most. Mallory… she didn’t need his protection, didn’t need him to give her a life: she took her own. It was easy to love her for all she had been and was now. Fucked-up how it came about, but he loved her nonetheless.

When she came back after Simon’s missions, he would study every new bruise, every scrape and scratch, each one making her more beautiful, as if she were being patched together with gold instead of dirt. Together, they washed the filth away in privacy, together.

“You’re doing it again,” Mallory muttered in front of him, her voice hoarse. “Stop thinking so fucking loud, I got a contact-headache.”

Negan swept over her wet skin with a washcloth, having gotten lost in thought at the sight of her pale-gold skin. When they needed it most, they’d share a bath after her longer missions, having been starved of that intimacy. A few more weeks since they’d started having an affair again and he still couldn’t get enough of her. She had cocaine dreams in her blue eyes and he was an addict.

“What, you’re fucking psychic now?” he smirked in reply, pressing his lips to the juncture between her neck and shoulder. “Go on, gypsy lady, tell me what I’m thinking about.”

“Don’t need to be psychic to know what you’re thinking about,” Mallory chuckled, the water swirling around her as she moved to rest against his back. “I can feel it against my ass, pervert.”

“Come on, I got a hot, wet, naked woman in front of me. My favourite one at that,” he grumbled, wrapping his arms loosely around her stomach, his chin on her shoulder. “You were away too long.”

She turned slightly to look up at him, one brow arched. “Technically that was your call, so it’s also your fault. If we go any further north again, we’re gonna hit Baltimore.”

It had been his call. Supplies everywhere were running low while Rick was still testing the limits of Negan’s wrath. The winter would be hitting them hard after such a hot summer, so they had to make hay while the sun shone. He didn’t want people to starve and neither did Mal.

“Then I’m a fucking moron for letting you go that far without me,” he said, trailing his thumb along
her wet skin. “Should’ve come with you.”

Mallory shrugged a little, her head lazing backwards. “You had shit to do, you can’t always come on
the longer trips. Simon and I figured it out, and it went pretty well, we got a load of stuff for storage.
Everyone wins this time.”

The logic annoyed him. Negan craved selfishness and wanted her to be selfish too. Playing little
mind games with Ranger Rick was fun but Negan longed to spend days with his cock buried in Mal,
his tongue tasting her over and over. It was a good utopian ideal to work towards.

“Such a bullshit thing, everyone wins,” he complained sullenly. “You and Simon are like a dream
team now. Mallory, Queen of the Dead.”

She snorted derisively. “Kings and Queens don’t do the dirty work,” Mal muttered in a lyrical tone,
slipping her hands over his. “They sit on their thrones, fuck their concubines and order around their
generals by playing army.”

Her little dig at him didn’t go over his head. The subject of his wives was one they hadn’t discussed,
and he didn’t really want to either. The topic was unspoken – he didn’t talk about them and she
never asked even though he knew she wanted to rip him to pieces for it. How could she not fucking
know how much he only wanted her? None of those girls could stand their ground against her in his
heart.

Negan slipped one hand down beneath the surface of the bathwater, cupping her between her legs
swiftly. Mal whimpered a little and canted into him, both starved of each other over the past few
weeks. This was a rare treat, a bath together as the sun was going down, the Sanctuary guarded and
at peace for as long as possible. He wouldn’t let a fight get the best of them.

He watched as she bit her lip, gripping his arm. “So, you think that’s what I am?” he shot back,
almost insulted. “A lazy-ass son of a bitch? King Negan, taking the spoils and doing none of the
work? Really, Mallory?” He slipped his bare fingertips over her cunt, delighting as her breath caught.

“Says the guy with the only bathtub in the whole place,” he saw her close her eyes, his fingers
teasing, her body trapped against his. “Why d’you think I’m fucking you? For your sparkling
personality?”

“Offence taken, thank you very fucking much. My personality shines brighter than the north star,”
Negan laughed, grazing her clit delicately. He licked his lips when she bit back a moan, having
missed the sound. “Bet I can make you scream my name. Then they’ll all be sure what our secret
meetings are about.”

Mal barked in laughter, Negan grinning against her skin too. “Fucking Hell, if they don’t know then
they’re morons. Nobody cares about it.”

He hummed in agreement. Their not-so-sneaky affair was no secret to anyone, though he thought it
was more than them not caring about it. “I think more because they’re scared to death of you,
Mallory, probably more than they are of me.”

“Then why are we sneaking around and lying?” she questioned. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just be
honest, so we could just fuck in peace?”

Negan scoffed. She was sweet in pretending to be naïve, but… really. “Because it’s more fun this
way. You get your space, your precious freedom… and the anticipation makes it hotter. You were
away for nearly a month, Mallory, and absence does make the dick grow fonder.”
“I think you mean harder,” she muttered, pressing her ass back up against him, a cheap shot of pleasure going through him as she did. “There he is.”

Groaning in frustration, Negan tightened his arm around her stomach. “Just proves my point. You’re doing tactical training with Simon, basically leading the whole fucking charge now as his pet project, and we still get to do this. It works for both of us, even if the situation’s not perfect.”

Two of his fingers pressed slowly into her cunt under the water, Negan revelling in how she tightened and relaxed as he stretched her. He fucking missed those noises, how she said his name when she was frustrated, when she was too sensitive. They’d fuck each other into oblivion later but now they had time to take it slow, enjoy the burn, be together. Training could wait.

“Fuck…” Mal whispered, her hips trying to move on his fingers. She was still so young at heart, eager and enthusiastic to just get off quick when he had to teach her the value of being patient. “Shit. Fuck… Negan, come on!”

“You have to learn when to hold off for the bigger reward, Mallory. Quick fucks are fun, right? But don’t the slow ones feel so much better?” he growled into her neck, scraping his thumb over her clit and taking pleasure in how she jerked. “That’s my girl. Simon’s co-opted all your attention for weeks, it’s my fucking turn now.”

The scrape of her nails stung as they dug into his arm, water sloshing everywhere, all over the bathroom tiles. They were going to make a bigger mess and he didn’t give two flying fucks about it, just wanted his pay-off. Mallory let him own her in those snatched moments where she had her guard down and how he fucking loved to make them last. Fuck. Training.

“Don’t be jealous of Simon,” Mal muttered teasingly, her eyes closing in rapture.

Negan let his hand drift from her stomach up to her throat, pulling her head to the side so he could lick the droplets of water on her neck. She was a spitfire of a girl, just the kind to turn a dangerous man’s head and it wasn’t like there was a shortage of those.

Voice grumbling in warning into her neck, he gripped her throat, knowing that she was just winding him up to get him to snap. “Long as he keeps to his own goddamn place…”

“Shut the fuck up, Negan,” Mallory said brusquely, the caution around his possessive behaviour evident. “I wanna come already…”

“Trust me, Princess, I know you do,” he said, lifting her slightly out of the water, fingers slipping out of her cunt. She reached between them in her haste, wrapping her palm around his hard dick. Negan grunted in pleasure as he slid slowly into her, head exploding at how hungry her pussy was for him. “I swear to God himself, you are sitting on my face all fucking day tomorrow until I drown in your pussy.”

He felt her body tremble on top of him, the angle tight and pushing him deep into her. She was pulsing around his cock already, waiting to light from a tiny spark. Negan needed her, his Mallory, his beautiful, rabid monster.

“Harder.”

Negan grasped at the side of the bath and pistoned his hips, struggling to keep himself under control, wanting the fuck her raw and wide. She was warm and velvety, tightening and relaxing open for him...

Her body went almost rigid a few moments later, Mallory screaming his name for all the building to hear. Negan’s vision swam as he felt her, and he fucked up into her harder, wanting to make it last, needing to empty himself inside her. It was the only true claim he had, the only way she was his and the only way she’d let him take her. He could spend hours watching his come drip out of her cunt, knowing she’d only ever let him do that to her. They owned each other. Sweat dripped down his forehead as he came deep inside her, grunting like he was on his last life. He didn’t give a fuck about the rest of them when he got to fuck the woman he loved at the end of the world.

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There was no doubt in Negan’s mind that his age was creeping up and up, stalking him slowly until he exhausted himself trying to outrun it. She called him old man teasingly, he fucking hoped, but there was more than a grain of truth to it. Old age – becoming decrepit, wheeled around as an invalid – probably wouldn’t be an option, but she’d outlive him. There was no doubt about that. It was almost freeing, watching how she moved without groaning about her aches like he did, the vibrancy still in her face, even if it wasn’t always there in her eyes. Those moments, when he felt the most like a run-down, perverted old bastard, seeing her clean and young, were fucking spectacular. Jesus, she was so fucking young.

“You wanna update me about the Alexandria situation?” Mallory asked, towelling off her hair, sat on his bed in her jeans. Fuck. Training. “Simon and I have been out of contact range for a couple weeks and I—”

He eyed her carefully, not wanting to let her go back out there. “I’d rather hear about what you got up to way up north, Mallory. Barely said a word about it.”

“Not much to tell that you don’t know,” she replied, tone measured. “What are you gonna do about Alexandria, Negan?”

“I really fucking don’t wanna talk about Alexandria,” he said curtly. Negan could tell she was forcing herself to be casual, though he knew her better than to expect her to drop the fucking subject when asked. He didn’t want to know what she’d been planning in her head while on the mission she’d just come back from. There was plenty of time for that later; now was for spending time together. “There’s a meeting in a couple days when the scouts are back, you can wait until then. Nothing to report much anyway. Guy’s still a giant, gaping asshole.”

“Takes an asshole to know one,” she sighed, more than a touch of exasperation in her voice. Her hair was insanely curled up as she gave up on towelling it, the thick red waves wild and free.

"At least I know I am one," he argued, slipping his own jeans back on. "We all are, one way or another. Nice guys went extinct a long fucking time ago."

Mallory paused as she tugged on a shirt, peering out of his bedroom window as she did. "Don't need to tell me that. Before, they were just either gay or taken, or both, and now you gotta add in a ‘dead’ category too."

Negan watched her carefully as she stared out the window to the scene below, obviously still annoyed at how he wouldn’t give her special privilege. He didn’t know what she was thinking, but there was a coldness to her he wasn’t used to; inherited from his own gaping assholery, no doubt.

"Y’know, once, way before here..." he said, slicking back his own damp hair. "We were on the road
out, came across this young kid – sixteen, seventeen – family dead, friends all dead, surviving on his own by some sheer fit of dumbass luck. Scrappy son of a bitch too, had more balls than all of us put together, had these booby-traps around his land like a giant ‘fuck you’ sign. My guys got him, though. He was kicking and spitting and screaming all the goddamn day, but we got him...

"There a point to this story?" Mal asked, her eyes still trained outside as if the view were more important, her fingers trying to gather all the damp curls into a hairband and failing spectacularly.

Ignoring her as she ignored him, Negan pressed on, striding up to the window too, just to see what was so interesting. "Yeah, there’s a fucking point if her highness deigned me with her attention enough to listen," he grumbled before continuing. "Like I said, this kid... I don't know what he'd gone through, but he was half fucking gone already, and-

Now she turned to him, her brow furrowed. "What d'you mean, half gone?"

“Gone, Mallory, gone in the head. Told you; no lone, scrappy son of a bitch ever survived out there with nobody as back-up and yet he’d done it for months, from what we could tell. Took for-fucking-ever but I broke him down enough in the end, got him to fight for us instead of against us. Sharp-shooter, took a punch or five, never cracked, never fucking missed a shot. Couldn’t even have a decent game of pitch-and-putt against the kid,” he said, leaning against the wall next to her to focus her attention. “Guess what?”

“The scrappy son of a bitch was you the whole time?” Mal muttered distractedly, her eyes once again caught on the sight of her new team re-forming at the front gates for a debrief. He knew she wanted to throw herself back into a firing line, prove her worth, and it was annoying the shit out of him. “That’s usually how your stories go.”

“No, he got a major case of the ‘dead as a fucking hobo in the middle of Alaskan winter’,” Negan replied casually, delighting as her attention finally switched fully back to him. “That’s my whole fucking point, which I’m still trying to drill into your skull, Mallory. Doesn’t matter if you’re the best shot or if you can take a punch or dodge it. If you can’t trust them out there, the people you’re so eager to join, and if they can’t trust you, it’ll only take one bullet in the right place and you’re another name carved on crossed sticks in my front yard. I’m not gonna give you intel before the rest of your team because then they don’t trust either of us not to keep secrets. Fucking in secret is one thing, making battle plans without them is another.”

“I can watch my own back, thanks,” she muttered almost bitterly, walking away from him. “And Simon does trust me. You know I wouldn’t be out there if he didn’t.”

“It’s not just him out there with you, though, is it?” Negan pointed out, snatching her boots out of her hand as she went to put them on. It was evident she wanted to spill her guts out on the table for him to wade through. It might be literal one day, if she kept this cagey. “You really wanna say something about Alexandria, I’m all ears, but intel gets shared at the meetings, too. Anything you have to say about it here, you say to them, too.” He leant towards her, his own body tense. She was forcing his hand, making him slip back into asshole boss mode. “Right now, I want to hear about the north mission. I wanna hear from you what you got up to out there.”

Mallory glared dangerously up at him for a split second before her face fell softly. “…he told you.”

“In here, gets shared. Works both ways.” Negan didn’t want to have to force it out of her, but she’d left him no choice. “Don’t you ever do something so fucking stupid again.”

There were tears shining in her eyes, but he had to scare her, to make her see how stupid she’d been. He didn’t care. “I did what I thought was best and nothing bad happened, so what’s your fucking
“Mallory, you went into a no-man’s-land, at night, on your own goddamn order, and got nothing. Which, ironically, is the best thing you could have got.” His voice was cold, threatening, almost shaking with rage and fear. “If you can’t even discuss plans with the team before you run headfirst into danger, how in the ever-loving shit am I meant to trust you out there? One wrong bullet, no back-up, and you’re coming back in a garbage bag.”

She looked down for a second before she snatched the boots back from his loose grip. His chest heaved as he thought about it; he knew about threats, about the Biters and Rick and the Claimers, he could plan for that, but none of it fucking mattered if she threw it all away for half a can of butane and a rotten toy doll.

“I should get back to work…” she muttered, lacing up the boots as he simply stared at her, imagining all the ways she’d fuck herself over out there. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Whatever plan you have in your head about Alexandria… you can’t do it alone. We’re a team.”

“We will talk about it later, Negan,” Mal said simply. “I’ll be back after training.”

The bedroom door snapped shut behind her, the sound resonating in his ears. Fuck. Training.

Mallory kept to her word, which was better than he’d ever done in all fairness. They didn’t say a word to each other as she crawled back in sometime around midnight, looking exhausted, dusty and ragged, covered in thin scratches. Apologies didn’t need to be spoken aloud by either one; both were right, both were wrong and that was it. Holding her in his arms as she slept, where she fucking belonged, was apology enough for him. His temper was a twisting, venomous snake that forged in his chest and attacked when he was scared. The power she held over him… Negan wasn’t a pussy who denied that he had emotions and would gladly fucking rip his heart out to prove they dominated every part of him. Love became obsession, anger turned to rage and spite to malice. It was better that way, to have it out in the open for all to fucking see, his heart bleeding into the dirt and swallowing his enemies whole.

Temperament took a vicious hold of him the more he let himself love her. Even just watching her sleep while he couldn’t make him wonder how far he could push her before she snapped and left again, maybe for good. For all his brain told him it was a matter of time before she gave out, it wasn’t like he couldn’t blame her for having hated him as much as she’d loved him – Negan had done a royally fucked-up thing for the love of another, thinking it’d work out in the end when really there was no way of winning. Betray a dying wife or betray an apparently pregnant mistress. Either way, he had been fucked beyond belief. Lucille over Mallory. But life, just being fucking alive, was so different now. Different rules, different hands at stake, politics and leadership, plus all the psychopathic bullshit that went along with it. He’d burn the fucking world to the ground for another minute with Mal in his arms, peaceful and together.

The whole room around them was dark and hollow, sinister in its silence. She was warm, smelling deeply of earth and salt that crept into his brain. The only bright thing was her hair, as auburn red as he remembered, wavy and rough from the humidity, in need of a cut, but it was uniquely her. He had to anchor this moment of silence, lock it up as something the world gave him as a peace offering in exchange for the shittier aspects of his existence. Rick would kill him soon, Mallory would retaliate and win with the whole place by her side. He just had to make sure he put that future off for as long as possible.
There was just one last step to take. She’d rage at him for their fights, argue until she was blue in the face and would come back to him. But if she found out what he’d known all along, she’d cut his throat and bathe in his blood happily.

Negan extricated himself carefully away from Mallory, fearful of waking her, even though she was deep in an exhausted sleep. She only ever slept like this the first night back in a real bed after being away. There was still a reluctance in him, to do what he had to do, having been obsessed for so long with that fucking letter she’d written him all those years ago now. Drawing the covers up over her, he smiled at the sight of her face on his pillow, calm and content. She’d never know he was even gone. She’d never know anything.

His steps barely made a sound as he strode from the bedroom into his office, shutting the door softly behind him. The chair creaked as he slumped down into it, running a rough palm over his face. It was quiet, dead, dark. Only Negan and the rats three storeys below for company. He unlocked the drawer at his desk, pulling it open and rifling through the papers. It was difficult, even now, to burn that fucking letter. Sifting through to the bottom of the wooden drawer, Negan pulled a folded, worn and yellowing piece of paper, another remnant of the last life he’d been unable to part with. Nobody knew of its existence. Mallory had no idea that he’d known she had been pregnant with his baby and had grieved its loss for months after he’d found her, alone.

For all the bullshit performances he’d made, for all the lies he’d had to tell, he’d mourned through it all. Months, years spent hoping that his child had been born, that its mother had survived too, only for it to be snatched away when he found her. The letter she’d written him, what had been a crumpled mess when he’d come across it by sheer fucking chance, was the only thing he’d had to cling to from his former life. How many times had he read those words? Words meant to hurt him only fuelled his fire to find her, to keep searching for an answer to a question he hadn’t asked. Was their baby ever born? He’d wanted so desperately to know and now he would do anything to go back to ignorance.

He’d memorised all that fucking letter had to say, words that haunted him with hope and promise unfulfilled: ‘...I’m pregnant with your baby. I’m pregnant and I had no idea what I was going to do at first. It kills me that the father of my child would be you, that I’ll have to look into my new-born’s face and wonder how much it’ll grow up to look like you. But it’s not that baby’s fault, is it? It’s yours. The baby deserves better than either of us as parents...’

Negan smiled, taking a deep breath as he reached into the drawer again, pulling out his lighter. He knew she’d been pregnant the whole time, ever since he’d clapped eyes on her again. And he was going to make sure she’d never find out.

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Fucking Biters. They were swarming the place, encroaching everything with their rotten smell and pissy attitude. He fucking hated the older ones, skin just starting to collapse into soup, teeth exposed, yet still rabid, still snarling with a hunger no living person could ever feel. Unsated, unsatisfied, constant. They were nothing to him now; target practice, baited traps, weapons, cannon-fodder. Months into the apocalypse and he’d become just like them – unsated, unsatisfied until he got what he wanted. Negan had been weak, had been scared and too much of a fucking human to come back, scared of what he might find. Of what he didn’t want to find: Mallory Keenan.

Ten Biters, half-deformed, and a couple fresher specimens, too, had loomed after him and Simon, lurching towards an easy meal but Lucille took no prisoners. A few swift hits with his bad girl and they were put out of their goddamn misery, left to rest like they should be. No way he was wasting ammo on any less than a dozen of the fuckers.
“This the place?” Simon asked, flicking the dead blood off his machete. “Deep down in suburbia. I always wanted a white picket fence…”

Simon’s voice was carried away, pushed out of Negan’s mind as he finally stood in front of the last place he’d wanted to come. Whatever it was that told him now was the time to check her old home, he knew she was either dead in there or he would never know. It wasn’t like he had family to check on, no friends, nothing left but Mallory. She was all he had, the last shot for him to not be truly alone in the world. If she was dead in there, rotting like the rest of them, he was done.

“It’s the right place. You stay, keep the perimeter clear while I check inside. This won’t take long…”

“Take your time.” Simon muttered in reply, stepping back down the lawn. “See if you can’t rustle up a bottle of something in there.”

Negan could feel the man’s eyes still trained warily on his back as he stepped in through the porch door. The whole thing was splintered and hanging on one hinge as if someone had used it as a barricade, brown-red blood smeared across the glass. The stench inside was too familiar and his stomach churned. It was a bad idea, intellectually speaking. What did he have to gain here, but pain? Ignorance would have been better, ignoring her old childhood home would have been better. No. If a trail to Mallory – dead or alive – started anywhere, it was going to be in this house.

He used Lucille to push open the remnants of the door and stepped inside, tapping her shaft on the wall to lure out any snappy little Biters who might want a taste of him. He tapped again, harder and harder, waiting patiently, hoping that the sight of Mallory as a Biter wouldn’t come. He could maybe handle the sight of her being dead, but dead-alive? His heart beat steadily in his chest as he climbed the stairs and stopped, memories of her flooding him as he stared at a framed photo of her on the wall. Fingers itched around Lucille, grip slipping, wanting to touch the photo and remember when he’d last felt the comfort of not being truly fucking alone. That girl... whatever she’d done to him... the feeling hadn’t changed. It was a tightness behind his eyes, an anger, fury that he’d let her down too. He should have tried harder.

“Fuck, Princess,” Negan muttered to himself, stopping himself from taking the picture off the wall. He hadn’t even taken a picture of the real Lucille with him on the road; the woman she’d been long been lost to cancer and her treatments. Pictures weren’t people, just moments in time frozen for posterity. It was a lie. “Fucking fuck.”

Forcing himself to move up the stairs, he tapped again on the handrail, more insistent, wanting them to make themselves heard before he got jumped. Biters weren’t known for their subtlety, thank God. Not a single goddamn creak or snarl came from any direction, all of the house silent still. The rooms upstairs were ransacked for supplies already, more photos trampled on, trophies and ornaments smashed as if they had fuck-all value, windows open for someone who wanted to make a quick escape across the roof tiles. Could be Mallory. Could have been anyone living. Might have even be him if he was gonna get royally fucked over.
Negan braced himself as he slowly opened up the door to her bedroom. He waited for the jump, for the snarling and snapping of undead, milky-blue eyes and grey skin instead of pale-gold but it was empty, as empty as all the others and he finally took a breath.

Clothes were gone, or at least most of them were. Stolen. He bent down and picked up her bed sheets, the edge torn hastily in a mostly straight line, bloodied finger prints dried all down the sides. Tourniquet. Someone had been in deep shit.

Empty, then. No Mallory, no real fucking clues. Just… emptiness.

Whatever he was expecting to feel, it wasn’t there. Looking at the wreck she’d had to wade through, to fight through, it didn’t give him any hope that she was alive. What did it matter. Even now, the chances of her surviving this battered asshole world were slim to fucking none. He was barely surviving, compromising his goddamn soul a little more day by day. What were morals now?

His back ached, mind exhausted. Mallory and Lucille, he’d let them both down. Negan turned the bat over and over in his hand as he leant back against the wall, just staring down at the mess. And there it was. A crumpled, flattened piece of paper on the floor by the door he’d walked through, his name just visible in the corner, calling out to him. Snatching it up, his heart thudded in his chest, not hesitating as he carefully unfolded the paper. It was a letter, a fucking letter, his name all over the thing. Oh fuck. She’d fucking…

‘I should never have loved you, Negan,’ he read, rooted to the spot. ‘I wish I could wipe out everything that happened between us, but I can’t, no more than you can. However much I hate you now, I know deep inside that you hate yourself even more. Deep down, you hate yourself far more than I can ever hate you. Lucille was the one good thing you had in your life, wasn’t she? You’re still trying to protect what you and her have left together and I was the mistake you didn’t count on. Was I not enough for you? I tried so hard to stop loving you. Was there any part of you that thought maybe I was worth something more? I guess not.

All your promises, all your rules and the games and obsession over controlling my life and still I was nothing to you. It takes a man dead on the inside to do that and that’s all you are, dead and rotten. You don’t even know what you’ve done. Do you remember the promise I made you, when I was begging for your help and you told me no? The joke is on me after all because a week ago, I found out that I’m pregnant with your baby. I’m pregnant and I had no idea what I was going to do at first. It kills me that the father of my child would be you, that I’ll have to look into my new-born’s face and wonder how much it’ll grow up to look like you. But it’s not that baby’s fault, is it? It’s yours. The baby deserves better than either of us as parents.

I know one thing for certain – there’s no way you will ever be a father to this child, Negan. I hope that that rots at whatever’s left of your humanity. I hope it wakes you up in the middle of the night for the rest of your life, wondering if you have a son or a daughter somewhere, being raised in a good family, being given a shot at a good life. I might be a thief, or a whore or naive but at least I get to do one good thing – I can give this baby a chance with a family fit to raise it. I hope you keep hating yourself because I damn sure hate you too.

M.’

Pregnant.

Negan read it over, a million times over, the word floating to the top of her anger, her hatred, her rage. It was splotchy and smeared but the message was clear as fucking day. Mallory was pregnant. Shit. Fuck. What the fuck had he fucking done?
Limp legs staggered back a couple paces, brain going a million miles an hour. She’d been… was… having his baby. Maybe already had. The pain of it coursed through him, all the emptiness he felt replaced by nothing but dread. Negan sifted the ground for more letters, more clues, a picture, something, anything to give him a motherfucking answer but came up empty. There was no date, nothing to tell him when she’d written this, if she’d even known before the infection had started spreading.

Shit. His fucking Princess. Full of hatred, parents probably dead, goddamn pregnant… something told him she wouldn’t go down without a fight. Probably kill Bitters with her bare hands if she had to, how obsessive she got with a goddamn cause to fight for. A kid… maybe that was something they could both fight for. Mentally, he knew there was about a one percent chance of finding both of them alive, but one percent was better than zero. It was something to fucking cling to with all he had, just the idea of having that, keeping it safe, a reason to survive. If it took him all his life or killed him dead, he’d find out what had happened to her and their baby.

Wiping the sweat and tears from his face, Negan suddenly pocketed the letter, unwilling to let go of the only thing he had. He zipped it up on the inside of his jacket for himself, stowed away for nobody but himself. It was a one percent chance, but it was better than zero and that had to be worth all the pain in the world. His baby. His family.

His only chance.

Like a goddamn good soldier, Simon was waiting patiently outside the back entrance, having diced up another couple of Bitters on the back lawn, whistling to himself as he waited. He was the only asshole Negan could trust because they were too fucking similar; assholes at heart, sick of the weakness, searching for something to build, to protect. Negan had found his in a place he’d never knew existed.

“All wrapped up in Mr Rogers’ Neighbourhood, then?” Simon asked as Negan crawled back through the broken rear door. “You get what you need?”

Lucille firmly ensconced in his grip, Negan hummed deep in his throat and set off back for the truck. “More besides,” he muttered, mostly to himself as they jumped back up into the rusting pick-up. “No fucking whiskey. Molotov cocktails, probably.”

Simon climbed in next to him in the driver’s seat, glancing at Negan before starting up the engine. “Fucking waste of good liquor if you ask me,” he said, starting off down the road. “Where’s next?”

Negan laughed suddenly, looking into the distance at the white picket fences as he replied, wanting to burst with laughter, “…fuck knows.”

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He’d lied.

Negan had hidden from her, wondering how she’d been able to survive with that kind of a loss and nobody to share it with. He felt it still and some days, when she was gone, it crushed him into oblivion. But Negan hadn’t been the pregnant one, he hadn’t been betrayed or abandoned, and somehow Mallory was fucking alive. There was a capacity for stubbornness in her that rivalled his own. Jesus, though… it was impossible to cope with. The letter had been the only hope he’d had in the world, a tiny sliver of light that dimmed each day before they found Mallory and it had all changed. Instead, the world gave and took away in a moment.

God, he’d been so stupid to hope that he’d get both of them, that he’d get to be a selfish prick when
everyone had lost their own wives, their kids, brothers, and sisters. Nobody was that lucky. But he had her, didn’t he? Burning her letter was a fucking penitent plea on his knees to the universe for forgiveness. The letter was the only evidence he’d known about her pregnancy the whole time. No fucking way was he even risking her discovering the truth and leaving him – or killing him. The whole office was cold, his skin chilling as he leant back in his chair just to hear it creak, to break the silence.

Fuck. It hadn’t been a goddamn plan to lie about it, but she hadn’t said a damn word, not even to taunt him. She had more fucking class in her pinky than the assholes around her had altogether. He’d hoped there was someone back in their hide-out with a baby in their arms, but all he got were some fucking books and his heart shattered like glass. So, he waited for her to trust him, for her to tell him the truth, until Peter fucked it all up in front of everyone. Rage burned inside him with that kid, selling Mallory out in seconds to save his own skin. Not a single part of him regretted killing him, regretted torturing him. The look on her face when Peter’s head caved into itself only made him wish he’d made the pain last longer. Negan really fucking wasn’t the forgiving type, but Jesus did he love revenge.

But she’d told him. Confessed about the baby and he discovered the sonogram, hidden in her bedroom. Keeping her there was the only way to keep her safe, protected from his enemies both inside and outside his own compound. And still, she’d found a way to keep a secret from him too. That sonogram… his heart had stopped seeing it. Her pain felt like his grief was swallowing him whole. For too long she’d been deprived of that, a shoulder to carry the burden along with her and so had he. Their baby was gone but they had each other. He didn’t need the letter anymore to hold onto hope. He had to destroy it, to make fucking sure she’d never know.

The flame from his lighter flickered as he struck it, waving it delicately over the corner of the letter until it caught light. Paper, ink, tears, and anger all curled into black ash, burning up as he watched it disappear. For months, for years, he’d held onto the hope of finding Mallory, of finding she had a little boy or little girl, healthy and happy in her arms. Even if she wanted nothing to do with him, even if she wished him dead, Negan would have let her and died a happy man at her hand, just clinging to hope. Neither of them needed to dream anymore.

Dropping the burning letter into his ashtray, he watched and waited as all of it turned to dust and the flames died, leaving only the faintest trail of smoke in the darkness.

And suddenly, it was over. The lie burned into ash and gone, no goddamn fear of losing her over it. A lesser man would have felt guilt for what had happened, but he couldn’t bring himself to it. That was love, he guessed – doing whatever it took to keep them, saying screw the world and surviving through a storm just by holding each other’s hand.

A smirk played at the corners of his mouth as the last of the embers died.

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Now he was getting a fucking headache again.

“It’s better to flank and hit them from all corners, you take out the strong ones first and the weak fighters are gonna fall at your feet,” Arat said determinedly, her face blank but eyes stormy. “It’s worked every goddamn time and there’s no reason it’s not gonna work now.”

Mal scoffed slightly, shaking her head. “A winning strategy isn’t one size fits all, we need to adapt, invade and infiltrate, that’s your best goddamn motive.”

“Maybe we should leave the strategy talk to people who’ve actually met this guy?” Simon replied,
sounding bored. “He’s gonna spot a plant in second, and he has more strong fighters than we can count.”

Fucking idiots. Fuck. He wanted to roll his eyes but held himself back, clearing his throat instead and remaining calm. They could all be morons when they felt backed against the wall, saying the first idea they had. “Does anyone have any more – I don’t know – useful suggestions they wanna have shot down by base logic they didn’t think about beforehand? I’m all ears.”

He looked around the table; Mallory and Arat were sat next to each other on one side, Simon and Gavin on the other and Negan at one end, carving up the pieces of their bullshit ideas and serving them for dinner. He’d had to thin the herd until he had only the people he could trust. Fuck knew some of them couldn’t be around each other for more than ten minutes, but they all had a loyalty to him that he could lay down on.

“Maybe it’s not about strength or infiltrating their ranks,” Gavin said softly, calmly. Negan could always count on Gavin to diffuse a heated situation, to show respect to an enemy that other people would dismiss. “Rick’s not about to welcome anyone new, and they’re just as strong as we are. All you have left is leverage.”

“He’s got kids,” Simon pointed out in agreement. Negan saw him glance at Mallory as she was about to open her mouth. “We’re not killing them, Red, we don’t do that here-”

“Anymore…” Arat added, muttering under her breath. She sounded almost wistful.

Simon ignored her, turning to Negan. “His boy?”

“Tough nut to crack,” Negan said, hating the idea to his very core – what option did they have? There were kids here too, ones he wanted to help live another day. “Son of a bitch shot his own mother in the head when she was dying. Not many pre-teens can do that. Might be too smart for his own good. Just takes a lapse in judgement and we’re all dead.”

“He did hold you up with a machine gun,” Gavin agreed.

Negan chuckled, smiling at the memory. “Fuck, man, he did. Little bastard scared the shit outta me,” he rolled Lucille idly on the table top, the noise scraping and rattling. “Rick must have been so proud.”

“What about the baby? His daughter?” Arat suggested. “Easy to kidnap, not gonna get into any shit-”

“No, no fucking way,” Mal snapped immediately. Negan swore all the colour had rushed out of her face. “That’s not just a kid, it’s a kid who doesn’t know anything other than this world and you wanna rip her out of her home?”

“I’m just trying to keep from getting killed here,” Arat replied, calmer than she ever used to be. “If we need to do it, if there’s no other option, what choice is there? Swap the baby for the guns, let them know what they think we’re willing to do.”

“You can’t,” Mallory said to him, turning her head to look at Negan. “You just fucking can’t.”

They both knew why he couldn’t – why he wouldn’t – put a father through that. Carl had been different, he’d come to Negan and threatened him, almost put the bullet in his head and still Negan had just returned him to Rick, unharmed. His gut burned at the idea of taking the baby, though his face remained placid, almost stoic.
“We’re not taking the baby,” he agreed after a moment, looking down.

He rolled Lucille over the table top as bickering immediately broke out between the four of them. Their voices were just white noise, chaos reigning around while he was the eye of the hurricane. For weeks Negan had contemplated the only plan he thought stood a remote chance at working, though he knew it was gonna cost him big if it failed. He’d be dead. All of them would be. It all hinged on how well he thought he knew Ranger Rick and his friends, if they wanted what he wanted.

Mal’s voice snapped him out of his quiet reverie, her hand snatching at his wrist to stop the bat from moving. “You need to make a choice, Negan.”

It was all down to him, in the end. No amount of fucking four-star generals, no high-command, nobody to answer to but himself. He wasn’t some prick in a uniform, sending soldiers out to die while he smoked cigars and drank whiskey in an office. There was blood and dirt caked in the crevices of his hands, the stench of Biter flesh ingrained in his weapon of choice.

“Gregory was a shit-stained coward,” he said, everyone around him going quiet. “Ezekiel’s the peacemaker. Rick… he’s us. That’s the long and the fucking short of it, kids. He is equipped, trained, ruthless. He’s got a reputation and fucking rightly so. He’s smart, played the line, hidden away when we thought he was broken. He protects his people and screw the rest. Shit, I goddamn murdered two of his friends and he was up and mobile in days. When has that shit ever happened to us?” He glanced at Simon, who tilted his head in turn. “I know who he is because he’s me. Probably having the same meeting as we are right now, looking for leverage.”

“So, what do we do?” Simon said, his jaw clenching imperceptibly.

Negan was quiet for a moment, the burn in his gut travelling up to his chest. “We’re recruiting him.”

Arat chuckled, shaking her head. “What makes you think you can recruit someone who wants to kill you? We murdered his friends, his family, there’s no way it’s possible.”

Palm clenching around Lucille, Negan fought against the urge to rage in anger. “We have had our heads too far up our own asses for a long fucking time. I know I can recruit someone who wants me dead because I’ve just fucking done it. And now look at her,” he smirked over at Mallory. “Wanting to infiltrate enemy lines so we don’t get bombed to shit, giving orders, protecting us all. If I can do that, fuck, man… I can do anything.”

There was nothing but dead silence. Mallory was still glaring wildly at him, but it wasn’t dick to him. He was right, and she knew it; if he could get her to tolerate the idea of protecting people here instead of killing him, he could do it with Rick.

“Bold strategy,” Simon piped up eventually. “Plan B, too?”

“Hell yeah, I’m not a total fucking idiot,” Negan replied, chuckling. “Mind if we skip ahead, Simon? I got shit to do.”

“By all means,” he replied, jumping out of his seat and heading to the door. “Back in a tic.”

The rest of them began to rise from their seats too before Negan cleared his throat. “We’re not done just yet. There’s still Any Other Business to cover…” he leaned into Mallory as he sat back down, muttering under his breath. “You’ll like this one, Princess.”

“What one?” she whispered back, her eyes wide and warning. “Negan…”

He was about to tell her to trust him when the office door opened again, and Simon returned,
Caroline trailing behind him in a black dress. Oh, how he hadn’t fucking missed her, not one goddamn bit. She looked as if someone had sucked the happiness out of her ass with a straw.

“There she is! Come on in, honey, you miss me?” Negan said, his smile broad. “What’s with the face? Don’t you wanna come give your loving husband a nice kiss?”

“Rather not,” the woman said. Caroline shifted uncomfortably on her feet, looking out of place in her pearls and dress next to their scruffy combat clothes. “If it’s all the same to you.”

He’d not talked to her for days, probably weeks, not wanting to come near any of his wives now that he had Mallory. No matter what she thought, he could never bring himself to actually screw around with any of his loving, sweet, beautiful trophy wives.

“Can’t say I’m not disappointed,” Negan grumbled, drawing out her agony. “Still, not as disappointed when I realised what a bad, bad girl you’ve been.”

Caroline blanched white and stood stoically. It was almost comical that she thought he wouldn’t find out, that she thought he was that stupid to not hunt down every last living being to protect Mallory.

“I don’t know what you’re…” she said quietly.

“Sweetheart, don’t you know it’s rude to lie? Especially to your husband, my fucking God!” he was still grinning at her discomfort, licking his lips at how delicious it tasted. “Is it because she’s here?” he said, gesturing to Mallory. “Not sure why you’d feel uncomfortable, having Mallory look right at you since you tried to have Peter kill her. Even gave him a shiv instead of a knife, to make it look like he could have done it on his own. I gotta applaud you for that one. Almost smart.”

Everyone’s eyes snapped to him, though Simon quickly looked down and hid his own sick smile, Negan having no doubt in his mind that the man was enjoying this immensely.

“You’re crazy,” Caroline dismissed. “I didn’t-”

“Did you really, really think I wouldn’t find out?” Negan said, rising from his seat, Lucille in his hand threateningly as he walked slowly around the table. “Did you really think that I wouldn’t hunt down every poor son of a bitch in the kitchen to find out which of them brought food to Peter? Come on, sweetheart, I want a little honesty in our marriage. It’s just a breakdown in communication, you trying to murder someone.”

“Negan, please…” Caroline muttered.

“Just fucking kill her already so I can go eat,” Arat said disinterestedly. “Blondie, if he knows you did it, you’re fucked anyway. Just get it over with and confess.”

“Put it in the minutes that I second the motion brought forth,” Simon interjected, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. “She is so beyond screwed.”

Negan crooked his finger, beckoning Caroline to come closer, though she stayed as if rooted to the spot. “Say your piece, honey. It’s your one and only chance. Win me over and maybe I won’t let you out to our hungry little friends outside. Or maybe I will anyway, I like feeding the starved masses.”

The silence was almost deafening in how it permeated. Negan could practically feel the hurt and anger radiating off Mallory next to him as he stood over her, protecting her, hoping that she’d keep him back from killing Caroline. There was still mercy in his Princess, after all.

“I… oh, fuck it…” Caroline said, swallowing visibly before she met his eyes. “You made me look
after her in the beginning. I watched over her in her sleep, heard the nightmares she had, and I pitied her. Gave her clothes from my own back. You don’t see how she’s going to get us all killed, but I do. You _love_ her, Negan, and I thought that maybe if she was dead, we’d get you back. You’d protect us instead of her. It’s always been about her.”

“I have a name,” Mallory said through gritted teeth, her chest heaving as he glanced down at her. Her hands were clenched into twisted fists. “You asked me to teach you how to play the fucking piano, you asked me about my family, and it was you who gave Peter that fucking shiv?”

He reached down and placed a broad hand on Mallory’s shoulder, squeezing ever-so-slightly. “Fair rebuttal from the injured party. Anything else to say, dear, dear wife of mine?”

“You know that I’m right,” Caroline said to Mallory, her tone even. “It’ll all come crashing down around us because of you. We’re all dead anyway.”

Negan sighed deeply, moving to step forwards with Lucille raised. “I don’t suppose I have any choice-”

It happened in a blur of limbs and raging anger.

Mallory reached her hand out, snatching the gun strapped to his hip before any of them even noticed her move. The smell of gunpowder and blood was suddenly everywhere, and Caroline was flat on her back, bleeding into his office carpet with a gaping hole in her forehead. Mallory’s arm was straight out and steady before she lowered the gun back down, staring up at Negan as if she was daring him to punish her for the rash action.

The silence seemed to stretch forever. Negan picked up his pistol from Mal’s hand and shoved it back into the holster, leaning over to see the permanent look of shock now forever carved into Caroline’s face.

“Jesus…” Arat whispered as she looked too, sounding impressed. “Nice shot.”

“Well I guess that’s all business taken care of,” Negan said, in slight shock himself. Flecks of blood and brain splattered the walls and all of their clothes. “You could have waited and not wasted the bullet, Mallory.”

“I’m not a weakness,” she muttered flippantly, storming out of the room without a glance at the dead body on the floor.

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Rumour spread quicker and quicker around the Sanctuary, how one of his wives had been shot point blank in the head. Some people, apparently, were saying that it was him, others that it was Mallory, that it was planned. All of them knew the reason for Caroline’s death. They didn’t fuck with Mal any more than they dared to with him. As much as she claimed to hate her own growing reputation for violent anger, he would catch her smiling as they bowed a head in her direction. His fucking Queen.

But only Negan got to see the real Mallory, still, got to hold her during her darkest nights and kiss her in the mornings. Still the good times never lasted long; a few weeks, a few days, a few hours, all snatched selfishly. Three more days of fucking since she’d come back and that was all they had. Every second mattered.

“How’d you know for sure it was her?” Mal muttered into his chest, her red hair splayed across his chest like wildfire. “The porter could have lied.”
He almost laughed, his fingers touching the soft skin at her lower back. “When they’re truly scared of you, they don’t lie. Took half a day to get to the right guy but I found him. Caroline threatened him, said she was going to tell me that he was stealing if he didn’t let her have the key to Peter’s cell. Still don’t fucking know how she made a shiv but that’s a mystery never to be solved. Y’know, now that she’s kind of dead.”

Mallory’s laughter was lighter than it had been in the past couple days; though she told him she didn’t regret killing Caroline, he knew she’d felt betrayed all over again. Caroline had looked after her, had helped her way in the beginning.

“I miss the music sometimes,” Mal said suddenly. “I haven’t even looked at the piano downstairs for… God, it must be months now. I didn’t even think about it until she reminded me and now it’s… it’s like there’s something missing.”

“You want me to haul it back up here?” he asked half-jokingly, jumping as she scratched his chest.

“No, let the kids have it. They’re happier having it than I would be. I’ll just listen to them play.”

Unconvinced, he nevertheless dropped the subject as she leant up and kissed his lips suddenly, chastely. “Don’t get all sad on me now, Princess. You won’t be gone long.”

“I know,” Mal muttered in reply, still looking up at him. “Except I don’t know. Leading my own team, going that far out of range… it’s huge.”

“You will come back in one fucking piece,” Negan said, the hand at her back reaching up to cup her chin. “You’ll come back, and we’ll fuck and we’ll laugh and say screw them all. You are everything in the fucking world to me, Mallory. And if you don’t come back, I’ll go looking for you. Every damn time. We’re wading through all their bullshit together, right? You and me?”

She nodded and turned her head to kiss his palm with tenderness that made him ache for the old times. “Yeah, we’ll do it together, we’ll make it all safe.”

“And then?” he asked almost warily, glancing down at her flat stomach. They had an unspoken agreement, something still too raw for them both, still too far away.

“One day,” she muttered. “We’ll be a family.”

Negan kissed her again, gripping her tight. “We already are.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna leave it there with hope. I have a small plan formulating in my head as a sequel/spin off if anyone would be interested in such a thing. All the love goes to Jamie and Mayboo13 for relentlessly supporting this work across all aspects. They are saints to put up with my craziness.

I'd love if you could leave me one more comment below, just mash the keyboard if you want, it's just awesome to see people liking what I've done here.

And there we were. So long, and thanks for all the fish.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!