The River

by QuietDarkness

Summary

Former soldier Daryl Dixon had been a Deputy Sheriff of Clarke County Georgia for five years, ever since his best friend, Sheriff Rick Grimes, had taken a chance on him that no one else dared to do. With a brother perpetually in prison and a past that was still haunting him, it hadn't seemed like the smartest thing to do. But Daryl proved himself not only trustworthy and hard working, but possibly the best Deputy Sheriff the county had ever seen.

Despite his brother's continuous run ins with the law and most of his nights filled with the horror of his time overseas, life was good. Daryl had made a real home for himself, was liked and respected despite his gruff and quiet demeanor. And Rick often teased him that all he needed now was a wife and a couple of kids. But despite how far he'd come, Daryl couldn't entirely escape his past and could never bring himself to have a real relationship with anyone. That is, until, Rick's sister comes back to the small town of Athens and turns his life upside down. Can a broken man like him open his heart up long enough to realize it can still be fixed? Or will his past come crashing in on them, tearing down everyone and everything in its way?

Notes

(This is an AU story featuring Daryl Dixon and an Original Character, as well as a few faces you may know. I hope you enjoy this!)
He was sweating again.

Summer in the backwoods of Georgia was like the armpit of hell. Stinky, sticky, sweaty, shitty. The four S's. A person only had to sneeze and they'd be covered in their own stiff grit. But Daryl would never say he hated it. He'd seen real hell. And it wasn't a place like this.

Here, there were trees. Here, there was a river he went to nearly every day that wasn't riddled with trash and sewage. And here, home was a place he'd built for himself. Literally and figuratively. The house he lived in he'd built from the ground up. A cabin with two stories, running water, stone fireplace, open concept. It had taken three years and every penny he could spare. But he'd done it. And the pride he'd felt when he was finally sure he was finished was beyond anything he'd ever known. It wasn't a place he was renting, or a motel room on a dirt road. It was his, well and truly his. And he'd earned every bit of it.

It sat far off from the road that led into Athens, a picturesque small town in the heart of Georgia where the Clarke County Sheriff's Office worked out of. Where he worked out of. If someone had come up to him years before and said, 'Hey, wanna be a Sheriff's Deputy?' he'd probably have given them the finger and said something along the lines of 'Fuck the police.' But his older brother's criminal antics landed Daryl behind bars. A judge ordered him into the Army. The Army sent him to Afghanistan, twice. Six years and a shrapnel riddled body later, he'd been honorably discharged. And Rick Grimes jumped on him the moment he stepped foot in town.

At first, he'd thought the guy was nuts. It wasn't like he was notorious or anything, but everyone knew who Merle was. And Daryl hadn't been any better before getting his life straight. He figured if Rick was dumb enough to ask him to be a Sheriff's Deputy, he should be dumb enough to say yes. Five years went by and he never looked back. Life was... good. Or as good as it was going to get for someone who struggled with a form of PTSD.

He was dealing with it. That's what he always said. That's what he told himself and anyone else he trusted enough to know what his issues were. There were days and nights, however, where the ghosts were too persistent, when the nightmares were far too real and the world around him just seemed far too chaotic. But he fought it tooth and nail. Saw a shrink. Took his meds like a good boy. And he dealt with it, doing his best to make the world believe he was doing just fine.

Last night, however, had not been a 'just fine' night.

He'd barely slept, barely ate, stared down a full bottle of Jack and used every inch of his will power not to touch a single drop. Then he'd gotten dressed before the sun even rose, walking himself down to the river, sitting on the log by the small dip that caused a sort of U shaped waterfall. And he breathed. He listened. He let the sound of the rushing water and the stillness of the trees around him swallow him whole, erase everything in his head, and remind him how to breathe like a normal person again.

This was his safe haven, this strip of nowhere woods where the river rumbled by and the trees stood tall and towering above his head, coming together in a canopy that barely let pin pricks of sunlight through. It was the only place in the world he felt wasn't trying to cave in on him. And the only place in the world where no one would find him, unless he wanted them to.

He heard a soft ding in the pocket of his dark blue jeans then, a vibration following to tell him he got a text. He let out a sigh and stood, reaching into his pocket, pulling out his cell phone to see a
message from Rick. ‘Draper's out sick. Again. Need you to come in early.’ Daryl couldn't help it, he rolled his eyes and tilted his head back, staring up at the canopy and letting out the deepest breath he could manage. Draper was a waste of resources, as far as Daryl was concerned. A middle aged, tummy tumbling, paper pushing jackass who only still had a job because he was the Governor's brother, or some such shit.

When he finally let his head fall back down, he hastily typed a response, letting Rick know he was on his way, before shoving his phone back into his pocket and heading back toward the cabin and his jeep. It was a good thing he'd already dressed, wearing his short sleeved deputy's shirt. He wasn't much for the whole brown pants thing. And Rick let him get away with it because he was professional otherwise. Except for, of course, the hair. Which Rick was still desperately trying to get him to cut. Wasn't gonna happen, but still funny to see his friend come up with new arguments to make the point.

After grabbing his 9mm off the counter and locking the door, he hopped in the black and brown Sheriff's Department Jeep Cherokee, heading for town. But his mind was still with the river. The flowing water smoothing over rocks rounded by time and the never ending softness of the clear liquid still visible when he closed his eyes. Those were images he could hold on to, images he would cling to when things got bad. And if last night was any indication, he was going to need that river today, everywhere he went...

* * *

Coming home was easier than Samantha had thought it would be. Their parents had died nearly ten years ago, but still she feared their disapproval so much that it took her soon-to-be ex husband beating her within an inch of her life for her to leave New York City and come running back to the sweltering backwoods of Georgia. Her big brother, Rick, had nearly choked on whatever he'd been eating when she'd called, explaining everything that had happened and eventually getting him calm enough to where he didn't want to hunt Liam down and kill him. Not that he'd find Liam anywhere. When he realized he'd nearly killed her, landing her in the hospital with broken ribs, a busted wrist and a severe concussion, he'd split. There were warrants out for his arrest. And she left the moment she was able, not wanting to be around if he ever reared his bastard head again.

She thought coming back would feel awful. But the moment she stepped off the bus and her brother had wrapped her in one of his bear hugs, it really was like coming home. A real home. Despite how their parents had raised them, she and Rick had both managed to turn out pretty normal and good. Their dad had been a bible thumper, and not the good kind, either. If there even was a good kind. Their mother had been happy to just let their father run and ruin all of their lives. Dreaming about leaving home was the only way she and Rick had managed to survive.

She was sitting in Rick's office now, staring at the awards and documents on the wall behind his desk. He was as successful as a small town boy could dream of being without ever leaving Georgia. To say she was proud of him would have been a severe understatement. He was a respected, honest and good man who was married with two beautiful kids. Okay, remarried. Lori had died after giving birth to Judith. And it had really run Rick through the ringer for awhile. Samantha never made it back home to be there for him. It had been one of her greatest regrets. She'd been so under Liam's thumb at the time, she didn't know she'd had the choice. The parallels between herself and her own mother made her sick. It wasn't till Liam nearly killed her that she realized how messed up her situation was. And she vowed never to go back to that. Ever.

If anything, she would love to have a relationship like Rick and Michonne had. With the help of his best friend, who Sam still hadn't met, and Michonne, owner of the only real mechanic shop for miles as well as the Sunset Diner, Rick managed to get through one of the worst times of his life.
Eventually, he and Michonne had fallen in love. And they were married two years back. Another thing she couldn't forgive herself for missing. She had so much to make up for. So much wrong to make right, with Rick more than anyone. But being who he was, he just took it all in stride, welcomed her home with open arms and set her up in the spare room of his house until she could get on her feet. That had been two weeks ago. And she couldn't remember feeling more out of place, and yet exactly where she supposed to be at the same time, ever.

"Sam." She heard him say as he peaked his head in the door. "Sorry, I know I said ten minutes like forty minutes ago. Got two deputies at seminars and had a man call in sick. Left a mess to deal with." She turned, her dark brown eyes catching him, offering him her usual practiced rose pink smile.

"Oh, I'm just... thoroughly pissed." She joked, tilting her head a bit like a cat, her chocolate brown hair tumbling to the side in waves.

"Funny." He said, shaking his head, and turning a little when he heard the door chime. "That's probably Daryl. Just hang in there." He said, stepping away from the door and back around the front counter of the mostly open concept of the building. Daryl... That was the best friend he spoke about all the time, right? She stood up then, wanting to see for herself this man that Rick thought of as a brother. Which, knowing Rick, was high praise. What she saw was not at all what she expected.

She stayed tucked against the door frame, shyly watching the two men speak, her mouth slightly open. The man she saw chatting with her brother was not at all the type of man she would ever picture her brother being acquainted with, let alone best friends with. He had 'bad boy' written all over him, despite the deputy's shirt. His hair was longer than probably what should have been allowed, falling slightly disheveled around his face and yet still managing to look... well, fantastic. To her anyway. And he was strong, she could see the muscles in his arms work as he crossed them, hands flat against his ribs. His face was stern, a soft trail of stubble on his chin and cheeks. But his eyes... the bluest damn eyes to ever blue. Those were what had her staring at him the longest. This was Daryl Dixon? This was her brother's best friend?

She saw him glance at her, catching her stare with a softly furrowed brow. She gasped, tucking herself away back into Rick's office. Her heart just about ran up her throat and back down again. She could only imagine what she looked like to him. Silly woman staring at him like she was a kid in high school. Way to make a first impression, Sammy, she thought to herself, literally face palming just in time for him to see as Daryl and her brother stepped into the office. Aaaaand cue embarrassment. She flattened herself impossibly more against the wall, clearing her throat a little and smiling against the nervous blush in her cheeks.

"Daryl Dixon, this is my baby sister, Samantha. Sammy, this is the man I told you about." Rick said, smiling as Daryl extended a hand. She blinked at him, then slipped her hand into his, shaking slightly firmly. His hand was rough, but not uncomfortably so. Like he worked with tools a lot.

"Sam, Rick's told me a lot about you." Daryl said. She was surprised at the raspiness in his voice. It was delicious. And she inwardly chastised herself for even thinking it. She did not, DID NOT, want to be attracted to anyone. Not now. Maybe not ever. Liam had pretty much ruined the idea of love for her. Even lust, at this point.

"All terrible things, don't worry." Rick said, moving past her toward his desk and she narrowed her eyes at him, letting Daryl's hand go, instantly feeling the loss of his warm touch.

"Jackass." She said to Rick who just chuckled. She looked back at Daryl, smiling a little sheepishly. "Rick's told me a lot about you, too."

"Not much to tell." He replied, glancing at Rick who just shrugged at him before going back on the
hunt for his keys. "Rick says you're a singer?" He asked then, instantly changing the subject away from himself before they'd even really broached on it, slipping his hands into his pockets, his holstered gun hidden behind his arm then. She clasped her hands in front of her, stepping aside slowly, moving away from the wall she'd plastered herself to.

"Um, voice teacher. Yeah." She said, unable to stop the feeling of nervousness and heat flooding her cheeks. Part of it was being in a room with a strange man, despite the fact that her brother was there. Most men -okay all men except Rick at this point, made her nervous. Wary. Sometimes she felt like a dog who'd been kicked too many times and just didn't know which boots to trust. Daryl didn't seem to even flinch at the fact she was putting space between them. She could feel Rick's eyes on her, knowing full well the issues she was having. "I teach kids, mostly. Hoping to maybe start up a course or two, maybe some private lessons in town. Eventually open my own little place for group lessons. We found a storefront just a block from here. Needs some renovations but it's going to be perfect." She said, unable to stop herself from beaming at the idea.

Rick had been the one to help her put things in motion with it. Her big brother, always looking out for her, if she let him, that is. She glanced from her brother back to Daryl who had a soft smile spread across his lips, his bluer than blue eyes holding on to her form. "Sounds great. If you need any help, lemme know." He said, relaxing back against a file cabinet, completely at home in his own skin anywhere he was. Or at least that's how it seemed. Lucky guy. She wished she could feel that safe.

"Daryl's a real jack of all trades. Built his own place from scratch. Best mechanic I know, besides Michonne." Rick said, grabbing a short stack of folders off the desk and finally finding the set of keys underneath. He came back around, handing them all to Daryl who just took them like he knew exactly what needed doing without anyone saying. "Should really take him up on the offer. Guy's magic." Rick said to Sam, squeezing Daryl's shoulder lightly before he looked back at his friend. "I'm going to drive up to the quarter so Sammy can pick up her business license. Shouldn't take more than a few hours. Sorry to leave you with the short end of the stick, man."

Daryl just shrugged, straightening up and moving for the doorway. "No big deal. I got Landry in the drunk tank and some calls to make. I'll finish these." He said, touching the files with a jingle of keys. "Unless someone goes batshit crazy while yer gone, shouldn't be a problem." Rick chuckled lightly, a hand resting between Sam's shoulders as he led her out of the office. "Drive safe." Daryl said, moving to the other end of the broad room, plopping down at a desk that was surprisingly neat and tidy. Sammy waived idly at him, catching his attention. And he raised a brow, but gave a short wave just before she and Rick went out the door.

"Might want to close your mouth, froggy. Going to catch flies." He joked as he opened the side door of his truck for her. She furrowed her brows at him. And he smirked. "You were staring at Daryl. A lot." He said. And she swallowed, rubbing her palms nervously down the side of her capri jeans.

"Shut up and drive. Jerk." She said, plopping her rear down on the passenger seat. Rick chuckled and closed the door. When he got in and started the truck, she glanced at him.

"He's nothing like you said he was. He's..." She struggled to find the right word, then decided to settle on the first one that had popped into her head. "Gruff." Rick gave her a sideways look, then shook his head with a smile, putting the truck in gear.

"He's been called worse, believe me." And with that, he pulled out into traffic, leaving Sammy to wonder silently about the strange man that Rick called 'best friend' and brother...
The Sunset Diner was quiet. He liked it that way. Probably why he came so damn early on Sunday mornings. When everyone else was off at church, his ass was planted at his usual booth on the far end with his back to the wall and a full view of the entire restaurant. It was force of habit, sitting that way. He could see both exits, every window, and had a straight view into the kitchen and behind the counter. His hyper-vigilance was not nearly as bad as it used to be, though.

There was a time where every stranger was a possible enemy, every loud sound was a bomb or gunshot, every dark corner was hiding something. But that was years ago. He'd come so far since he'd returned to Georgia. And he owed a lot of that to Rick. The man was his brother, even if they weren't related by blood.

"More coffee, Daryl?" Carol asked him, stepping up beside his booth with a steaming fresh pot of coffee. Carol Peletier was easily one of his favorite people in this town. She only lived a few minutes from him, not to mention let him keep his horse at her place for pretty much free. A ridiculously black stallion with a hell of an attitude and a strange bond with Daryl, who he'd affectionately named Vagrant.

It was interesting, how they'd met Daryl'd killed her husband after Earl had beat the living day lights out of her. Guy was a rich bastard who thought he could buy his way out of just about anything. Including anything he did to his wife and daughter. He just didn't count on Deputy Dixon shooting him when he tried to choke Sophia right in front of him. Judge Morgan Jones decided it was a good shoot pretty much on the spot. And to be honest, Daryl had been perfectly fine with that.

While Carol was getting back on her feet, Daryl had helped out quite a bit with her little girl, Sophia. And eventually, that little lady and Carol had become like family to him. It was an interesting relationship, to say the least. Nothing romantic, but interesting just the same. "Yeah, thanks." Daryl said, pushing his white ceramic mug toward the edge of the table. She just kept on smiling, filling his cup up.

"Usual this mornin?" She asked, setting the pot on the table and sliding into the booth seat opposite him. Carol didn't actually have to work. She could live comfortably without working a day in her life thanks to her now deceased husband. But she liked keeping busy. And Sophia was usually up in Lincoln visiting her cousins and Aunt for the summers, which Carol said was good for her but usually left Carol feeling lonely as all shit. "Or do you wanna try some of that crab benedict Bob came up with?" Bob Stookey owned the music store in town, and was one of the cooks at the diner. Could've been a chef but decided he liked the small town life a whole lot better than working in a fancy restaurant in some city. Daryl curled his lip a little. He didn't mind seafood, but not for breakfast.

"Naw, usual's fine." He said, pulling his cup toward him and turning it in his hand. He was off duty today so he wasn't in any hurry to do anything. He was wearing a short sleeve, very dark blue button up, his angel-wing vest over that, a pair of black faded blue jeans that were slightly loose around his frame and held up by a worn out leather belt, and his old work boots. Looking at him, if someone didn't know him, he'd look far from being a Sheriff's Deputy. But he didn't really care. He was comfortable. "You goin to the fair later?" He asked then, lifting the cup to his lips and blowing softly before he took a short sip. Carol just shrugged, relaxing back in the booth.

"I think I'll go on Tuesday. I'm going to head to the quarter when I get out of here, see if I can't pick up a few dresses for Sophia from that shop she likes." She said, watching him lower his cup. She wasn't a spendy lady. She knew how to budget her money, and pretty much only ever bought what
she needed. But she did love her little girl to pieces, and doted on her when she felt the need.

The yearly fair, dubbed the Athens Shakedown, was a pretty big deal in the summer, lasting a week and a half. Rides, food, vendors, usual stuff. But there were also horse riding tournaments, livestock auctions, contests of different sorts, nightly dinners and dances, fireworks when the weather held out. Pretty much just a crap load of frivolity that Daryl normally would avoid. But he’d promised Maggie and Glenn Rhee he’d help with their produce booth. Maggie and Glenn were two other people Daryl considered family. Maggie's dad, Doctor Hershel Greene, had been the one to save Vagrant's life and give the horse to Daryl in the first place after Vagrant's mother had run off her property and been hit by a tractor trailer just by Daryl's dirt drive.

It had been pretty hard to avoid the Rhee's after that, the young couple making it their life's mission to include him in just about everything. Not that he minded now. But it had taken time for them to work their way into his life. Strange, how they'd won out. “You know they're doing fireworks tonight, right?” She asked him, drawing his steely gaze to her eyes. She never flinched.

“I'll be fine.” He said flatly. Carol knew all about his issues. There had been times earlier on that fireworks and Daryl? Bad, very bad, extremely bad combination. But now he could deal with it. Now he could trick his mind into realizing that it wasn't a series of bombs going off over his head. She smirked at him, reaching forward and grabbing the coffee pot.

“Can't blame me for worrying.” She said, sliding out of the booth just as the jingle bells went off on the door.

“Ain't gotta worry bout me, woman.” He said gruffly. She just chuckled.

“Aw, too bad pookie.” She said humorously, turning to see who had come in. “Sit anywhere ya'd like, sweety. I'll be with ya in one minute.” She said, stepping back toward the counter and giving Daryl a full view of... Rick's sister.

Samantha Grimes was standing there in jeans, dark blue sneakers, and the fanciest damn looking button up dark purple shirt he'd ever seen. Her dark curly hair was pulled up in a ponytail. She had soft pink lipstick on, again. He'd noticed that the first time he'd met her. He'd also noticed a million other things. Like how amazingly beautiful she was. How she blushed when she was shy or nervous. How her eyes lit up when she talked about teaching. How she smelled like honest to goodness roses. And how she'd done just about everything she could to keep her distance from him in Rick's office. Yeah, Daryl was an observant one.

He also knew what had happened to her. Rick had told him. Maybe not all the gritty details but enough for Daryl to know he'd happily help Rick kill Liam, consequences be damned. It was why he couldn't quite blame her for putting space in between them. He didn't exactly give off a super friendly vibe. He was an acquired taste. It took time for anyone to like him.

He watched her brown eyes turn toward him, a look of recognition passing over her features, a shy smile spreading with a pink hue flushing her cheeks. Hot damn. He felt himself blink, relaxing back in his booth a bit. She waved one hand very quickly at him, a short wave. A lot like she had in the office. He furrowed his brows softly, but lifted his free hand and gave a quick wave back. She looked away from him then, scanning the whole empty diner around her before shuffling on her feet like she was completely unsure where she should sit. Then she looked back at him. She seemed to be having an inward debate because her expression kept going back and forth between worry and resolve. Then finally she wrung her hands around the little black leather backpack she was carrying and moved toward him. Before he knew it, she was standing beside his booth, holding his gaze like she was magnetic and he was useless to fight against it. “May I sit with you?” She asked so softly he wasn't sure he'd even heard her right. “I mean... if... if you don't mind...” she stuttered a little,
suddenly looking severely unsure.

“Naw.” He said then, pulling his feet beneath his booth seat. “I don't mind at all.” She seemed honestly surprised, the emotion dancing over her face as she smiled warmly. Goddamn, she was beautiful when she smiled. And he watched her toss her bag on the opposite booth seat, sliding in with one foot tucked beneath her. And for a moment he was absolutely confused.

Why sit with him? She had the whole diner to choose from. And she didn't really know him beyond what Rick had told her. But as if she'd read his mind, she spoke up. “I was actually looking for you, Mr. Dixon. And Michonne said you'd probably be here.” He narrowed his gaze a little at her words. He just remained quiet, not even flinching when Carol reappeared.

“Morning, sweety.” She said to Sam, giving Daryl a look that he wanted to tell her to stuff into her apron. But she looked back at Samantha quickly, humor on her features as she pulled out a pen and her notepad. “What can I get for ya?”

Well, at least Carol would have something new to rib him about. Goody, goody. Now he just had to wait and see what it was Samantha Grimes wanted from him.
"As if you needed an excuse..."

Again, he surprised her.

If he'd looked like a bad boy in a deputy shirt, he sure as hell gave off that vibe now. It still stunned her a little, the fact that Rick was so close with this guy. Daryl looked like he could kill someone just by frowning. And yet his eyes stood out. There was something about them, kind and calm, perpetually hiding what he was thinking. It was the eyes that finally made her swallow down her nervousness and ask to sit with him. And so far, that had been a great idea.

She could smell him.

It was aftershave and fresh earth, mingled together. And it was clean smelling and intoxicating. After the really nice woman with the short gray hair took her order, she sat there, hands shoved into her lap in a ball as she watched Daryl very slowly turn his coffee mug on the table over and over again with just the pads of his fingers. She could feel those eyes on him. Those damn endless blues. Ugh. Gorgeous. She frowned a little, then quickly swallowed the frown away. No being attracted, remember? She inwardly chastised herself. He was quiet, didn't say a word after he said she could sit. He was just patiently waiting. She sort of admired that about him. She was always busy, always on the go to keep her mind off how totally screwed up she actually was. Finally, she lifted her gaze to his, trying her damndest to stifle the little blush she felt creeping up.

"I remember Rick telling me you were handy... I mean, that you build and fix things." She stammered out, desperately just wanting to get it all out there. "I was wondering... I mean, if you're not busy, if you'd come look at the store front with me today. I mean, I can pay you if you want. I have money." She started reaching instinctively for her bag. "Not a lot. I was going to hire that Abraham guy from Wrecker's Home Construction. But I just couldn't afford it and-"

She felt his hand suddenly on her arm. A very quick touch forcing her to look up as he sat back, hand going back with him. "Don't want your money, Sam." He said, his voice filling the space between them and making the little hairs on her exposed skin stand up. She was sure he'd notice, shutting her mouth quickly and pushing her bag back onto the seat very slowly. "I'll see what needs doin. After breakfast." He commented, then lifted his cup to his mouth and took a sip without taking his eyes off her. She couldn't help but feel all kinds of things under that unique gaze, but happy was the one she chose to dwell on.

"Really?" She almost blurted out, then clasped her hands together on the table top. "Thank you so much, Mr. Dixon." She grinned, unable to help it. No one knew how much this place meant to her. Being able to use her talents and teach? And in a place all of her own? It was a dream come true. Even in a small Georgia town in the middle of nowhere.

"It's jus Daryl." He said, looking past her as Carol came over, setting down his plate.

"Yours will be a few more minutes." She said, setting a cup of coffee in front of Sam and smiling before heading back behind the counter. Daryl, who didn't seem to stand on any ceremony, simply grabbed his fork and stabbed his over easy eggs with it, the yolk spreading. He stabbed his fork into some homefries then, dipping them in the yolk before popping them into his mouth and chewing quietly. Sam decided she shouldn't just sit there like a log, watching him eat. So she grabbed the sugar and started pouring. Three heaping teaspoons worth. Then dumped some of the little cream packs in. Four. Sweet and creamy. Just how she liked it. When she went to take a sip, he had a brow raised at her, fork paused over his plate.
"Ain't you worried yer gonna melt?" He asked, soft humor in his eyes. She glanced from him to her cup. Then smiled very small.

"I, uh.. guess I have a sweet tooth." She said with a soft laugh. He smiled then. And it wasn't a fake, professional smile, either. It was the lifting of lips on one side, a crooked stretch and just enough lifting of the stubble on his cheek to make her stare. If a little smile could make him look like that, she could only imagine what his really big happy smile looked like. Daryl went back to eating in silence. He was quiet. The exact opposite of her. She was chatty. Always had been. But something about the silence he instilled in the air around her made her mind calm and still. Like she was safe in his quiet. It was an interesting feeling.

After they'd both eaten, literally saying nothing at all throughout their meals, Daryl insisted on paying the bill for them both, of course just making her blush all over again. Hadn't she come to him looking for help? Why was he paying for her? Then Carol gave him a sideways hug before both he and Sam went outside.

It was sunny, but for a change not stiflingly suffocating and humid. Yet, anyway. No way to know if the afternoon would smother them all. She motioned to the little yellow VW Beetle Car. "I can drive us if you'd like. I mean... it's not far, just up the street that way." She said motioning down the road toward the little cinema's marquee. He gave her car one look, then blinked like there was no way he was getting in her cute little bug of a car.

"I know where it is." He said from beside her, "Don't waste the gas." And he simply started walking down the road, giving her a full view of the back of his faded angel-wing vest. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some keys, stopping at a motorcycle and unlocking one of the compartments at the back, pulling out a dusty gray satchel, and then locking it again. Of course he had a motorcycle. Why wouldn't he? Just look at him! Then he started walking again without even motioning to her. Her jaw dropped a little and she had to jog to catch up with him.

"You... you know where it is?" She stammered, finally catching up to his side but keeping a slight distance between their shoulders. He glanced at her a little sideways from beneath those bangs of his. "Small town." He said, like that should tell her all she needed to know. Which, really, it kinda did. She nodded with a small 'oh', and simply looked ahead. To say Daryl Dixon confused her more than a little, well... understatement of the century. The town itself was pretty damn quiet. Lots of church going folks, apparently. That and most of the businesses didn't seem to open before nine on Sundays. Not to mention the fair was in town. She'd gone the night before. It had been pretty fun. A little crowded, and overwhelming at times. But she'd stuck to her brother and his family like glue, managing to have fun anyway.

"Have you been to the fair yet?" She blurted out then, refusing to look at his face afterward. He's not a talker, remember? She said to herself. But damn if she didn't want to talk to him, to hear that soft raspiness that laid beneath his gruff tone. That and she just didn't like being quiet for long periods of time unless she really had to.

"Not yet. Goin tonight." He said, stepping around a man walking a corgi. The man smiled at Daryl warmly, "Morning, Deputy." He said, the corgi wagging its whole butt as Daryl reached down and scritched its head.

"Morning, Mr. Holt." Daryl replied, standing up straight and nodding at him before they all moved on. Daryl couldn't look or seem less friendly if he tried, and yet people still seemed to know who he was and respect him. What a friggen wonderful mystery this guy was turning out to be...
"Really? I'm going with Michonne again. I mean, I've already been. But she's showing off her antique truck at the car show. She thinks I need to get out more, so... yeah. Going again." She rattled on, smiling a little sheepishly. "Are you going with anyone?" He looked both ways before beginning to cross the street to the other side toward the cinema, answering her when they were half way across.

"Workin the Rhee's Produce." He replied, stepping up onto the sidewalk a moment later and going around a telephone pole. He really wasn't a man of many words, but always got his point across. When they finally made it to her store front, which was covered in white sheets of paper with a 'Grimes' Music and Voice Lessons, Opening Soon' sign hanging from the door, she grinned. She couldn't help it. Grinned every time she saw it.

"Isn't it great?" She beamed, turning to look at him and almost instantly sobering at the way he was looking at her. She couldn't read it, that expression, but it sent her heart to fluttering and she had to look away. She began searching for her keys in her bag. "It's got real potential, wait till you see the inside." She said, then unlocked the door and pulled it open. He grabbed it from the side, letting her step in, and giving her a very big whiff of that amazing smell of his. Then she led the way in, hearing his boots hit the tile floor in the cool, mostly empty space beyond. She heard the door close, turning around to look at him as he reached to the wall and turned on the set of light switches, making the whole place gleam despite the buckets of paint and all the drop cloths.

"It's... pink." He finally said, letting his hand fall from the wall, a spark of amusement in his eyes. "Right?" She laughed a little, stepping in and turning around, watching him as she walked backward a minute. "Spent two days painting all this. Found four different pinks I loved and couldn't choose between them so... I just used them all. You like it?" She asked, turning again and dropping her bag on top of a step ladder before she put her hands on her hips and turned slowly, admiring her work.

"It sure is somethin." He said with a fair amount of humor in his tone, moving slowly toward her. She had to stop and watch him. He practically moved like a predator. There was nothing but strength and surety about him. And for a moment, it made her nervous. She couldn't help it. The idea of being alone with a man who could probably snap her in two without trying suddenly filled her with a momentary suffocating fear and she had to turn away, putting distance between them. To his credit, he seemed to pick up on it instantly, and he headed his slow way toward the back area where three different, small rooms sat, checking them out on his own.

"I... I figure I'll use one of those for an office." She said, taking a few steps toward the rooms and then stopping. "One for private lessons, and the other for storage and whatnot." She watched him nod quietly before turning to look at her.

"Alright, Sam." He said then, moving to the stepping stool and setting the gray bag down with a soft clank before peeling off his vest. His muscles working... dear lord, her heart. She cleared her throat a little, forcing her eyes back to his face. "Show me what you want done, and I'll take some measurements." He said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a large tape measure, then he just stared at her, waiting. Slowly, she smiled, then nodded. Get it together, girl. He just wants to help. She told herself. And then she started walking around, telling him all her ideas, slowly becoming so comfortable with him, that by the time he left with all her plans in hand, she instantly missed the feel of his presence.

That was when she noticed he'd forgotten his vest.

It was sitting there, folded haphazardly on the stepping stool. She picked it up, holding it gently. "As if you needed an excuse..." she said out loud, but then found herself lifting the material to her face, taking in a deep breath just to get one more smell of him. "What're you doing, Sammy?" She said
then, blinking. "Having a serious crush, that's what." She replied. Then lowered her hands, shaking her head. "And losing your mind, talking to yourself."

She chuckled a little, then set the vest back down before going around and picking up all the drop cloths, all the while thinking about going to the fair again, and bringing Daryl Dixon his vest. She was in trouble, she knew it, now. She had to force herself to be professional. To just keep it business with Daryl, despite the fact that she wasn't paying him for anything he'd offered to do. But when she left the store front that afternoon to head back to the house, his vest tucked in her arm as she went to her car, she couldn't help but wonder if that was even possible...
"I blame Daryl. Makin all those little old ladies swoon."

"That's the last of em." Daryl said, sliding the remaining apple crate onto the back end of the truck before closing the tail gate, then wiping his hands on his shirt. Glenn turned and leaned his rear against the bumper, smiling lightly.

"Did well. Think we sold over half, at least." He said, watching as Maggie finished folding the last table cloth in their stand, walking over to the two men as she stuffed it into a large cloth sack. When she reached them, she tossed it in the truck, leaning her hip against Daryl who draped his arm around her shoulders lazily. Glenn reached over and touched Maggie's nice, pregnant and round belly. "How you feeling? Tired yet?" He asked her. Maggie put her hand over his, relaxing into Daryl.

"Surprisingly, no." She said, looking at Glenn who just beamed at his pregnant wife. The Korean man had come a long way since Daryl had met the two lovebirds. He'd started out seeming so innocent and kind of meek. But Daryl knew now how capable and strong he was. Maggie had herself one hell of a good guy. "I want to go to the open mic thing over by the track. Michonne told me she convinced Rick's sister to sing!" She exclaimed a little excitedly, stepping away from the two men who just glanced at each other. "And you two are comin with me." She said, turning around and grabbing both of them by the hands.

"No, Maggie. I should get back..." Daryl began to stammer, feeling himself pulled forward. Then she glared at him. A single hard look. And he cringed a little. "Right. Don't say no to the preggy lady." He said, and Glenn chuckled as Maggie turned from glaring to grinning.

"You learn fast." Glenn said, clapping Daryl's shoulder softly. Then they all walked together through the crowd, Maggie's arms hooked to both of their arms, weeding their way through the carnival games. It was full on night, and the air was far less humid and stifling than it had been. Party lights and string lights lit everything in a very rustic but bright feel. The whole of Farmer's Junction was filled with people going about their night in happy wonder and excitement, playing games, drinking and eating, having a good backwoods Georgia time. Daryl had always felt more than a little out of place at these things. But he didn't mind indulging his friends. Hell, they were more like family. And he was going to be the god-father of that little bun in Maggie's oven. So he wasn't about to tell her no.

The track was a large, round circular dirt path that was usually used for dirt biking and horse racing when the fair wasn't in town. Now it was being used for the car show, several areas set up with picnic tables for people to sit and eat and a dance floor set up near an elevated stage, surrounded by colored lights and streamers. At the moment, there was a string band playing some country song that Daryl hadn't heard before, couples dancing fast and happy on the dance floor. "Guys, over here!" He heard Rick call, all three of them moving toward where the Sheriff was motioning from.

Sitting at a larger table was Rick, Michonne, Carl, Judith and Samantha. "Uncle Daryl!" Judith squealed, jumping out of her big brother's lap and running her little four year old self right up to him.
He scooped her up easily, hoisting her high just to hear her laugh. Then he put her on his shoulders, holding her legs to keep her steady. She plastered her fingers into his hair. He couldn't care less. They all greeted each other, Maggie and Glenn sitting and Daryl standing near the end of the table where Samantha and Michonne were, still holding his favorite 'little asskicker' on his shoulders.

"Glad you guys could finish up in time." Michonne said to Maggie, who smiled brightly at the chocolate skinned woman. It had been quite the 'scandal' when Rick married her. After all, this was Georgia and there will still pretty closed minded people around. Daryl had been one of them, another lifetime ago. But that had mostly been his brother's influence. After his time in the service, Daryl didn't care what a person looked like, where they came from, who they were in the past. He only cared now about what a person said, what they did, and who they wanted to be. And Michonne? Well, she was as good as they came.

"Wasn't sure we were going to. Had a steady flow of customers for awhile." Glenn said, folding his hands on the checkered tablecloth.

"I blame Daryl. Makin all those little old ladies swoon." Maggie said, grinning over at him. He just narrowed his eyes on her.

"Stop." He said in amusement, lifting Judith up off his shoulders and lowering her to the ground. She scooted back onto the bench next to Rick, who just hooked an arm safely around her.

"Uncle Daryl, did you know? Auntie Sammy is gonna sing!" She said, drawing everyone's attention to her adorable little face. Daryl glanced at Sam, who was blushing a little and trying to hide her face in her hands.

"I heard." He replied, watching as Carl scooted over and motioned to the space next to him so Daryl could sit. Which he did. It wasn't till then he noticed what Sam was wearing. A pastel green t-shirt that said 'Can't Live Without Music', and... of all things... his vest. So that's where that went. He thought to himself, watching as she let her hands fall and instantly caught his gaze, her blush growing even more. "Can't wait." He added then, and watched as a light little smile played on her pink lipstick painted lips.

"It's... I'm not... oh sheesh." She said all flustered, and Rick reached over and petted the top of her head like she was a cat.

"What she's trying to do is be humble. But she's amazing." He said for her. She just reached up and brushed his hand away with an amused swat.

"She really is. No lie." Michonne added. "She's far too modest. You'll see." Michonne said, glancing at Daryl before looking at Rick and smiling brightly at him. That was about the time when the music stopped and people clapped, going back to their seats. Father Gabriel Stokes moved to the microphone then. The Father wasn't someone Daryl had much liked when they first met each other. But he'd become a real pillar to the community, an accepting and generous guy who went out of his way to help anyone any way that he could. Tonight, he was wearing suit pants and a short sleeve blue button up. No need for the collar during the fair, but everyone knew who he was.

"One more hand for Dicky and the Gents!" He said, motioning to the string band exiting the stage with short waves. Another round of applause went out, and Gabriel turned back to the microphone. "Everyone knows our good Sheriff, Rick Grimes." He said pointing to the group, and Rick. There was some cheering, a few good-natured jibes from the crowd. "Well, tonight, we get an awfully special treat. Thankfully, that has nothing to do with Rick singing." A little laughter. "Tonight, his sister, Samantha Grimes, is going to sing here for the very first time in promotion of her new voice and music school opening up on Main in just a few weeks. Let's get a big round of applause for the
lovely Miss Grimes! Samantha, come on up here!" And more applause.

Daryl watched as she turned twenty shades of red, but stood without hesitation, pulling a guitar case out from under the table and bringing it with her as she speedily headed up onto the stage, shaking hands with Gabriel. A man sat at the drum set, another picked up a base, and one more grabbed a violin. Daryl recognized all three from the church. They worked in the choir. She grabbed a stool, sitting down after she'd pulled out her guitar and adjusted the mics. She looked like a completely different person up there, as though this was her element, her real solace. This was who she really was, not some shy and awkward woman who got scared around men.

"Evenin, everyone. This song is called the River, and I'm dedicating it to all of you fine people for being so kind to me." And just like that, Daryl went still. Just the name of the song, it made him think of his river. The one place in the world where he felt truly calm and at peace. That was, at least, until the music started and she began to sing.

I walk to the river, waiting to hear the water sing.  
I sit down beside her, trying to hear the quiet ring.  
The leaves break the falling of the sunlight that covers these banks.  
I've seen the water running, I've seen the color wash away.

I come to the river, heavy and tired to the bone.  
I lay down beside her, grave as a slowly sinking stone.  
I see clear to the bottom, I watch how the shadows play.  
I've seen the water falling, I've seen the colors bleed away.

The light turns silver, draining the hours from the day.  
The weight of the water pulls at the branches along the banks.  
And it tears at the fallen, and it carries the broken on its way.  
I've seen the water rolling, I've seen the colors fade away.

I've seen the water rolling. I've seen the colors fade away...

And as the song ended, the crowd cheered. People stood up and applauded, including everyone at their table. And Daryl? Well... he couldn't take his eyes off her. The way she smiled, the way the light danced on her. How confident and alive she looked. How just brilliantly happy she seemed. And that was the moment he realized... he needed to leave. His hands fell to his side as he stood there, watching as she introduced her next song and simply went into playing and singing. A faster song this time, but just as amazing as the last. And the whole crowd was smiling and into it. He swallowed lightly, glancing over when he felt Michonne's hand on his arm. "Hey." She said, leaning a little closer to him so he could hear her. "You okay?" She asked, concern all over her features. He nodded slowly, meeting her gaze.

"I'll be right back." He said then, moving away from the table without another word, weeding his way through the crowd and toward the unused and dark area of the track, till the music was far behind him and he was hidden in shadows. He stopped, his hands on his hips, staring down at the ground and forcing himself to breathe. In a stupidly short amount of time, this woman had gotten so far under his skin, he hadn't even realized it till she'd opened her mouth to sing. He didn't even know her, for crying out loud. And she sure as hell didn't know him. Plus, she was Rick's sister. He couldn't let himself be attracted to Rick's sister... right?

"Fuckin great, Dixon." He muttered to himself, and then felt a hand grip his shoulder. He was so instantly startled, that he spun around, fist coming up and stopping in mid air when he saw it was Rick. He let out a breath, dropping his hand. "Damn, man. Don't do that." He growled out. Rick had his hands up in mock surrender.
"You okay?" He asked, wasting no time, stepping closer to Daryl and letting his hands go to his hips, completely unfazed by the idea that Daryl could have hit him. "You kinda just ran off." He said, searching his best friend's face. Daryl looked away, back toward the distant crowd and lights.

"Just got a little overwhelmed, is all. Not a big fan of these crowds. Sorry, man." Daryl said, which was technically the truth. Rick knew there were just some times that Daryl was better off leaving the group to itself. He hated dragging anyone down, despite how amazing they all were with his random issues.

"Hey," Rick said, reaching up and gripping Daryl's shoulder again. "Don't worry about it, brother. Take your time. But... if you think you can, come back to the table, okay? Samantha forgot she's wearing it, but I know you saw your vest. She wants to give it back to you."

"What's she wearin it for?" Daryl heard himself ask, then blinked at his own question. Rick smirked at him.

"She didn't want to forget it. Figured if she had it on, she'd remember. And we see how well that worked out." Rick chuckled, and Daryl had to smile a little. "She told me you agreed to help with the shop. Thanks for that, man." Rick said, taking his hand back. Daryl shrugged lightly.

"Happy to help." Daryl responded, slipping one of his hands into his pocket. "I'll head over in a minute. Go on. No point in both of us bein out here." He said then. And Rick nodded.

"Take your time. I mean it." He said, pointing at Daryl before stepping back a bit. Daryl gave him a mock salute.

"Yessir." He said. And Rick chuckled, turning around and making his steady way back to the group just as Sam's song ended, applause ringing out. Daryl looked back at the stage, watching her set the guitar down and stand to sing the next song. She was... amazing. Even from a distance. Standing there in his vest, that green t-shirt, her blue sneakers and a pair of short black shorts that showed she had killer legs. She was beautiful. He could admit it. Far more beautiful than he'd ever imagined she'd be. And she was... sweet, charming in all her shyness. Funny in the way she rambled on and on when she spoke. Enticing with those perpetually pink lips of hers.

It had been so long since Daryl had felt attraction like this, for anyone. He'd kept himself inwardly locked up for so long that he hadn't even been sure he could be attracted to anyone anymore. Turns out, he was dead wrong. But why... why oh fucking why did it have to be Rick's sister?! He growled out low at himself, then slowly began making his way back. "Suck it up, Dixon." He ordered himself lightly. He'd go sit his ass down and listen to her sing and have a good time with everyone. And then he'd go home and pretend like he wasn't having some serious 'crush' thoughts about his best friend's sister. Which, if things kept going in his head like they were at that moment, was going to be far easier said than done...
"Can't fool me, little brother."

Merle watched from the gnarled tree next to a pit off the ass end of the track, far from everyone, hidden in shadows, the only evidence he was even there was the glowing end of the cigarette in his mouth. He frowned as Rick and Daryl talked, watching how chummy they were. It still royally pissed him off how his baby brother had replaced him with Ranger Fucking Rick, the guy who was responsible for more of his arrests than anyone else around this stinking shit ass town. And because of Rick, now Daryl was responsible for a few of Merle's arrests, too.

The last arrest, the one that landed him in prison and cost him his hand during a riot, was Daryl's doing. And try as he might, there was no way in fuck Merle was going to forgive him for that. Who was Daryl fooling, anyway? Hiding behind that shit ass badge and pretending like he was an upstanding citizen. "Can't fool me, little brother." He muttered, letting the cig fall from his lips, squishing it with his boots as he rested the only hand he had left across the butt of the pistol resting in his belt. He had thought long and hard on how to make Daryl pay for his stupidity. And what he'd come up with was gold. He was going to tear his little brother down a few hundred pegs, show this county and this town who it really was they had lookin out for them, and prove to Rick he'd wasted his time on the younger Dixon.

Daryl was nothin. Always would be nothin. And by the time Merle was finished, he'd be more than nothin. He grinned in the dark, spitting down at the ground before turning and heading back up the hill, humming a little tune on the way back to his beat up truck. It was time to get to work.

* * *

She was thoroughly beat and happy all at the same time. Like she could so sleep for days but wanted to stay awake so the happy wouldn't go away. The crowd had thinned out considerably. She'd sang for over an hour, people ending up throwing a ton of requests in her direction. But the fair was closing for the night, and people were heading home. Michonne had already brought the kids back to the house, Glenn and Maggie had left to bring the truck of produce back to the farm. So it was just Rick and Daryl waiting for her when she came back to the table, the two men sitting side by side and talking casually. She didn't think she'd ever seen Daryl talk to anyone as much as he talked to Rick.

"Hey, what'd I say?" Rick said, grinning as he stood. "Told you that you'd be a hit." He came around the table, hugging her with one arm into his side. She smiled sheepishly.

"Everyone was so wonderful. I don't think I could have done it if they hadn't been so into it. And I already have several parents, and a few adults even, who want to sign up for lessons!" Sammy exclaimed, practically hugging her guitar to herself. Rick shook her a little.

"That's great, Sammy!" He said, then let her go, reaching down to the table to grab his coat. "Let's get you home, I have to head back to the office. Still short handed and I picked night duty." He said, and Daryl stood.

"I'll take her home, man. Office is in the other direction and I'm on the way." Daryl said, glancing at Sam. "If that's okay with you." He said then, catching her eyes. She felt her heart hammer in her chest all of a sudden. It was amazing. Put her in front of a hundred people and she was as comfortable as could be. But have Daryl Dixon stare at her, and she was a puddle of nervous goop. She swallowed a little, then shrugged, lowering her guitar case.

"Sure. Okay." She said softly. And Rick actually raised a brow, probably surprised by that, then nodded.
"Alrighty then." He said, then patted Daryl's shoulder as he came around the table. "Thanks man. See ya in the mornin. And," He said looking back at Sam, "Good job, Sammy. Really. I mean it. Proud of you." He kissed her on the forehead and walked off. Both she and Daryl just stood there, watching him walk away. Silence stretched on around them, except for the few people picking up trash and cleaning off tables. Then Daryl took in a deep breath, letting it out.

"Come on." He said, motioning with just his head, and he started walking. She quickly caught up, her guitar swinging in one hand.

"Hey, wait, isn't the parking lot that way?" She asked, glancing to the left as Daryl kept going right. He didn't slow his steps, his boots carrying him easily.

"Yeah, it is." He said, then looked over at her, seeing the confusion on her face. "We're taking Vagrant." He continued, looking away with a light smile. The same one she'd seen before that just about sent her mind into a frenzy.

"What's... a vagrant?" She asked, side stepping a sheep and a teenager who was desperately trying to catch it. Daryl chuckled a little.

"Not 'a vagrant.'" He said, moving up onto the path that led between the auctioneer tent and the long line of vendor stalls. He was heading toward the transient barn. "You'll see." He said, and got the quiet air of his that told her he was done talking. So she shut up, which was totally the opposite of what she'd wanted to do.

The barn was still lit. Several rows of stalls filled with horses, some cows, a goat in one that practically yelped at them as they walked by. "Deputy Dixon!" A lovely, brown skinned woman said, wiping her hands on a rag.

"Sasha." Daryl said, slowing his steps as she came up to them. "I told ya, it's jus Daryl." Sasha smiled softly, then nodded.

"I forget, so sue me." She said humorously, glancing at Sam. "Who's this?" She asked, slipping the rag into her back pocket.

"Uh, this is... Sam Grimes. Rick's sister." He said, motioning with a thumb at Sam who smiled brightly. "Sam, this is Sasha Williams. She runs the stables here and over at Doc Hershel's farm."

The two women shook hands, smiling friendly like at each other.

"Nice to meet you. Rick's said a lot about you." She said, moving off to the side and unhooking a stall door. "Vagrant's ready. He's been itching to go. Just about ate half my stash of apples to get him to stop being naughty." She said, disappearing for a moment and then coming out with Vagrant's reigns in her hands. The pitch black horse shook his head a little, his mane swishing as he walked out toward Daryl, his hooves clomping the ground.

Samantha couldn't help it. Her eyes went wide, she nearly dropped her guitar case. "This... this is Vagrant?" She stammered out, looking from the horse to Daryl as he took the reigns from Sasha, the horse lowering its head to press into Daryl's chest. He smoothed his hand down the animal's neck affectionately, the horse seemingly adoring the crap out of Daryl, who glanced at her and nodded.

"Yup." Was all he said. Oh no. No, no. A horse? She couldn't get on a horse! She'd never even ridden a horse! Just cause she'd grown up in Georgia didn't mean she knew how to ride! As if sensing her hesitation, Daryl stepped back a little and held out his hand for her to take. "Come here. He won't bite." She just blinked, swallowed, and set down her guitar case, taking his hand very lightly and letting him guide her up to the massive creature who towered over her like she was an
ant. Or at least that's how it seemed. "Hold your hand flat, like this." Daryl said, spreading her fingers open and her palm up. Then he gently took her wrist, moving her hand toward Vagrant's face.

The horse lowered his snout, the softness of his lips surprising her. The course hairs tickled her palm and she giggled as he pushed at her hand, shoving it down and making a slight noise. "Think he likes you." Sasha said, picking up Samantha's guitar case and attaching it to the back of the saddle. "Which is saying something. Cause he can be a real dick." She said with a sideways grin, securing the case entirely. "Kind of like his owner."

"Ha." Daryl said deadpan, moving around to the saddle and gently guiding Samantha with him. "Put one foot in the stirrup there, and I'll help you up. Yer gonna swing yer leg right over." He said. It was so awkward, but when she finally managed it, settling into the saddle, she grinned, looking down and feeling ridiculously high up. It wasn't till Daryl hoisted himself up and sat right behind her, reaching around and taking the reins up, that she felt like she'd nearly had a heart attack. "I'm not gonna hurt ya." He said softly, waiting till Sasha moved off. "But if you feel nervous or uncomfortable, lemmie know and we'll stop." She couldn't help it, everything in her head just went POOF. He was so considerate, so gentle and so... dear lord, she didn't even have the words. But the gratefulness she felt? It was nearly palpable.

Once he'd told her to move her feet out of the stirrups and she relaxed a little, they simply began moving, like the horse knew what to do without being told. It was a little nerve-wracking at first, her hands coming up and clinging to Daryl's strong arms until she was sure she wasn't going to roll right out of the saddle. And the more they went, the easier it got. They left the fair grounds much quicker than she'd thought the would. And before long, they were on a dirt road, surrounded by trees with nothing but the horse beneath them and the moon shining down between tree branches. It was... glorious.

Never in a million years did she think she'd do this. Be on a horse with a man she barely knew and yet feel safe. Completely and utterly safe. They rode on in silence for awhile, making good time as the dirt road exited out onto a paved road that she recognized. They'd be at Rick's house in no time if they kept this pace. And she almost regretted thinking it because a part of her wanted to keep riding with him for much, much longer.

"I wanted to thank you... again." She said softly in front of him, feeling an incredibly comfortable warmth from his body despite the chill in the night air. "For, ya know... agreeing to help me." She almost felt Daryl shrug, one hand letting go of the reigns to rest on his thigh while the other held on to the leather straps loosely.

"No big." He said, his voice rumbling through his chest and into her back. She frowned a little, then realized he couldn't see it.

"It is a big. A real big big." She said, and chuckled a little at how stupid that sounded. "I mean, it's a big to me. You don't know what this place means to me, how long I've wanted my own shop. Liam never let-" she froze in place, stopping herself completely. Talking about Liam, what he'd done to her, how he'd controlled her. It hurt. Then she felt Daryl's free hand touch her knee lightly for such a quick, bare breath of a moment.

"You don't owe me no explanation, Sammy." He said, his voice so tender and real, she just about choked on her own breath. "I really am jus... happy to help." He added, then eased Vagrant around the corner down another long strip of road. There were barely any cars out. And the ones that were drove past quietly. She was glad, because she'd completely lost the ability to speak. The quiet swallowed her whole and she welcomed it. Though it didn't last long.
Daryl suddenly used both hands to pull up the reigns, pulling Vagrant to a steady stop as a truck rolled right toward them, stopping shortly away from them, lights glaring at them, making her blink and hold up a hand to block them. "Fuck." She heard Daryl swear behind her. "Don't move, Sam. You hear me?" He practically ordered her. But there was nothing cruel about his order, not like Liam used to do. It was more of a protective tone. She nodded quickly, suddenly feeling tense and very scared. Especially when Daryl slipped out of the saddle from behind her the same time whoever was in the truck opened the door and got out.

She couldn't see who it was, his form just an outline behind the blaring lights. "Get back in the truck, Merle." Daryl ordered, stepping out in front of Vagrant who shifted uneasily on his hooves. She heard laughter then, and watched the outline of a man turn into a bruiser of a man as he stepped out toward the headlights, stopping only a few feet away from Daryl.

"Good to see you, too... little brother." Merle said, resting one hand on his hip. It was then she realized his other hand was gone from just above where the wrist should be. She felt Merle's eyes drag to her, what she could only describe as a sick smile playing on his lips. "Now who's this pretty little thing?" He said, taking another step forward. Daryl instantly put his hand out, pushing Merle back with enough force to make him stagger. Merle just laughed.

"I said... get back in the truck." Daryl said firmly, anger bleeding into his voice that was both calm and terrible. Merle nodded a little, facing Daryl again.

"I heard ya the first time. But you an I? We got some talkin to do, Darylena. Sorry to ruin your plans with your sexy catch there." Merle said. Sammy could see the hard set line of Daryl's shoulders, the way his muscles tensed as though he were prepared to pounce at a moment's notice. This guy... this one handed dick of a man... he was Daryl's brother? She couldn't see it. Couldn't even fathom it. Daryl was the exact opposite in every way. How was it even possible?

"We ain't got nothin to talk about. I told you not to come back." Daryl said, taking a slow step forward. "Now get your ass... back in your piece of shit truck... and leave. Or I'll be happy to arrest you again." Daryl said. And Sam had a feeling he didn't need a gun or handcuffs to arrest Merle. She had a feeling he'd beat the shit out of him, then drag him by a rope behind the horse if it meant he'd get the job done. Merle narrowed his gaze a little, nodding lightly with that creepy ass grin of his.

"Alright." He said, putting up his hand and stump. "I surrender, Deputy Dixon!" He laughed then, dropping his hands. "Just consider this a howdy-do. We're not done. Not hardly. You enjoy fucking your lady long legs over there. And I'll see you soon." Sammy cringed, watching as Merle stepped back, waving a hand idly over his head and getting back into his truck. He honked his horn wildly as he went by, causing Vagrant to step sideways and whinny nervously. Daryl instantly turned around and grabbed the reigns, stepping into Vagrant's space, talking softly to the horse to calm it down. She couldn't see his face in the dark, despite the few street lamps.

A moment later, he got back in the saddle without a word and simply urged Vagrant on. About ten minutes later, they were right out in front of Rick's house. He slowed the horse to a stop, Sammy gripping the front of the saddle for a moment. A silence stretched on around them as she stared up at the front porch. "I'm sorry bout all that. Sorry he scared you." She heard Daryl say from behind her, finally breaking the quiet apart. Then he slipped out of the saddle, and helped her down to the ground before moving to untie her guitar case. She watched him, wringing her hands a little, chewing at her lower lip.

She wanted to say something. To tell him she was the one who was sorry. Sorry he had an asshole of a brother like that. She didn't know what the deal was with them, but she knew what it was like to have family that wasn't exactly anywhere near the spectrum of good. "Daryl..." she found her voice,
stepping closer to him as he slipped the guitar case down, turning to look at her. He met her gaze questioningly, and she reached out to take the case. "Thank you, for the ride. It was... it was fun." She said offering him a smile that was all warmth. He huffed a little laugh.

"Right. Cause a night time ride wouldn't be complete without someone callin you awful names." He responded, reaching up and holding on to the saddle lightly with one hand. She smiled at him, then shrugged.

"Okay, besides all that. It was nice." She said, then stepped backward, still watching him. "So thank you." She nodded. He motioned to her then.

"Think I could have my vest back now?" He asked, amusement dancing in his eyes. She made an 'oh' sound, and then shook her head.

"I'm such a dunce! It was so comfy, I forgot I had it on!" She blurted, laughing at herself. She set her guitar between her legs, pulling the vest off and instantly missing the feel and smell of it. She handed it to him, feeling a little more stupid than she probably should have. He took it from her, his fingers gently brushing her own, then slipped it on over his t-shirt. Damn if it didn't fit him just right. "Okay. Um... g'night, Daryl." She said, turning around and making her way up the walkway.

"Hey Sammy." She heard him say behind her, turning to see him standing by the head of the horse, watching her with those gorgeous eyes of his. "You sing real good." He said firmly. "Really." And he nodded once before moving out of view and then hoisting himself back into the saddle. She was just standing there, grinning like an idiot. He liked her singing? Well, hot damn, if that didn't make her all kinds of happy. Happier than knowing the whole town had liked her singing, actually. "Go on. I'll leave when yer inside." He said, one hand on one of his thighs, the other holding the reigns lazily. She raised her brows, laughed a little nervously.

"Right, right." She muttered, then turned and hurried to the door, opening it and stepping quietly inside. She set down her guitar and turned, waving at him a little. He just nodded, then turned the horse around, the sight of the wings on his vest disappearing in the darkness. She stood there for awhile, until she realized she was getting cold without the warmth of a man at her back and a horse beneath her. She closed the door quietly, locking it, resting her back against the door and putting a hand over her pounding heart.

"Daryl Dixon..." she whispered in the quiet of the house, everyone probably fast asleep. "What are you doing to me?"
"Blood don't make you family."

To say he was on edge was the understatement of the year.

He'd taken Vagrant back to Carol's, got him settled and drove the Jeep back to his place. Pulling up to the cabin, he parked off to the side, headlights still on, watching the darkness like he was waiting for the boogeyman to jump out. And if ever there was a boogeyman, it was Merle. Eventually, he shut off the engine, turning the lights off, listening to the frogs chirp in the little marsh behind his place. Then he got out, shut the door and made a quiet way to his porch.

Jasper, who was a black cat with only one ear and half a tail, was curled up in front of the door. She'd been coming round for about a year and a half. No idea who she'd belonged to before, or why she thought Daryl would have wanted her. But he never told her no when she wanted in. Never made her stay when she wanted out. She took care of herself, and he enjoyed her company when she chose to give it. He unlocked his door, staring down at her lazy ass which had barely budged.

"You goin in or not?" He asked her, his voice a little rougher than he meant. But she just stood up, stretching, meowed once at him, and sauntered in like she owned the place. He let out a sigh and followed her, closing the door and switching on the lamp to his left before moving further in, tossing his keys down on the coffee table. Then he just stood there, listening. He wouldn't put it past Merle to break in. It wouldn't have been the first time. But everything was quiet and untouched. Didn't change the uneasy feeling he had.

There was no way he was going to get any sleep tonight. Again. And he had to call Rick and tell him what had happened. Sam had been with him after all. Merle had scared her. She hadn't said so, but he'd felt it coming off her in waves. Poor woman had been through enough, she didn't need Merle messing her up more. He unlocked his door, staring down at her lazy ass which had barely budged.

"Hey, man. Get Sam home okay?" Rick answered after the third ring. Daryl clenched his jaw momentarily, then cleared his throat.

"Yeah. She's home. But... Merle stopped us on the way." He said cautiously. There was silence on the other end, then the sound of Rick's office chair squeaking a little in the back ground.

"You both alright?" He asked. Daryl lifted a hand and rubbed his forehead a little.

"Yeah, man. He was just being his usual dick ass self. Scared Sam a little, is all. Thought you should know." Daryl said. Silence again, then the sound of Rick letting out a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, brother." He said softly. "You sure you okay? He threaten you?" That was Rick, always worrying. And always right.

"Yes and no. He said we needed to talk. But I don't want nothin to do with that." He replied, watching as Jasper slipped between the legs of the coffee table and rubbed up against his leg a few times. "Ya know... I thought he wasn't eligible for parole for another month. Why's he out so soon?" He wondered out loud.

"I dunno. I'll do some checkin. Meantime, keep an eye out. Keep yourself safe." Rick replied. Daryl didn't think Merle would really do much to try to hurt him. Merle was a bully and a bastard. But they were still brothers, whatever that meant now.

There was a time when Merle could have beaten the ever loving shit out of Daryl. Push him around,
make him do whatever he wanted. But Daryl had 'grown up' in the Army. And he'd learned to do
more than just defend himself. He learned to be his own man. A man that didn't want to be anything
like his big brother Merle. Which was why Merle could no longer get the upper hand on him. He
was no match for Daryl now in a fight, and he knew it. And he also knew Daryl had no problem
arresting him, either, for the stupid ass criminal shit he pulled. The last time he'd seen Merle, it was
while he was arresting him for trying to feel up Maggie in the middle of the diner parking lot. Merle
was lucky all Daryl had done was smash his face into the tar and arrest him for sexual assault.

He was supposed to have stayed in county lockup, but because of over population and him being a
habitual offender, Merle was moved up state. There'd been a riot, the prisoners causing all kinds of
shit. Merle had managed to piss off some big ass black dude bad enough that he literally cut of
Merle's hand during all the melee. Daryl couldn't even feel bad at that point. Everything that
happened to Merle was because of Merle. Another lesson Daryl'd had to learn.

"Thanks for telling me about Sam." Rick said on the other end, snapping Daryl out of his own train
of thought. "And thanks for getting her home safe. I'll see you in the morning."

Rick and Daryl said their goodbyes and Daryl just set his phone on the coffee table, scooping up
Jasper and setting her in his lap with a sigh. "What're you purrin about?" He asked her as she pushed
her head into his side, curling herself into a ball and purring her heart out as he ran his fingers over
her head. He sighed a little. "Wish I could get comfy like that." He muttered. But there would be no
comfort for him tonight.

He sat with Jasper for awhile in the quiet before taking a shower and laying down in the dark. He
was trapped in his own head for hours, staring at the ceiling, eventually and surprisingly dozing off.
But it wasn't a welcome sleep. It was the kind with nightmares and ghosts, things he didn't want to
revisit. Memories he wished he didn't have.

He woke when his alarm went off, sitting up straight, nearly falling out of bed, eyes wide till he
realized where he was. And he sat like that breathing heavily, one hand coming up to wipe over his
face. He was dabbled in light sweat. His whole body was tense. And he had to breathe himself
through it. He finally reached over and shut off the alarm, swinging his bare legs off the bed. He
rested his elbows against his knees and rubbed his face again. Then he felt Jasper rub up against his
bare back. Time to get ready for the day.

He got up and dressed. He was going to need a ridiculous amount of coffee to make it through the
day without falling over. Dark blue jeans, his deputy shirt with name tag, his badge hooked to his
belt and his holster in place, his good boots and watch, and a quick brush of his fingers through is
hair and he was ready. He stopped at the mirror that was on his closet door and stared at himself,
sighing lightly. Not much to look at. But he made it work. It was then he heard a sound that was
definitely not the cat.

The sound of a cabinet door closing down the hall, in his kitchen. The clank of a glass being set on
his table. He turned, one hand instinctively going to his holster, unclipping it. He stepped into the
hall, booted feet as quiet as he could get them on the hardwood floor. When he came around the
corner, what he saw made him pull his gun out slow. But he didn't aim it. He just left it pointed at the
ground.

"What're you doin here?" He demanded coldly, Merle relaxing back and putting a foot up on Daryl's
table next to Daryl's previously unopened bottle of Jack, a glass in Merle’s hand that he swished
lightly before chugging straight down, plopping the glass back to the table.

"What? Can't a guy have a drink with his brother?" He said, grinning like the idiot he was. Daryl
narrowed his gaze.
"It's five thirty in the morning." He said flatly, taking a step closer without holstering his gun. Merle chuckled, shrugging.

"It's Cinco de Mayo somewhere." He said, then glanced at the gun in Daryl's hand for a moment. "Really, Deputy Daryl?" He asked, looking back up at Daryl's face. "Gonna shoot me?" Daryl just stared at him.

"Crossed my mind." He replied, still not holstering his gun. "Answer my question. What're you doin here?" He said, staying right where he was now, watching Merle lower his leg and sit up a bit straighter.

"I told you we needed to talk, little brother. Just bad timin, yer girlfriend bein there last night. Surprised she ain't here with you." He grinned a little, grabbing the Jack and pouring some more into the glass. "She figure out yer as bad a lay as you are a brother?" Daryl couldn't help it, anger rose in his throat and he holstered the gun, stepping closer.

"I'm the bad brother?" He growled out. "You're so full of shit, Merle. The only bad brother I see is you, you selfish prick." Merle raised both brows at Daryl, standing up slowly.

"I'm selfish? Me? You arrested me, threw me in jail! I lost my had because of you!" He yelled, stepping around the table. Daryl met him face to face.

"You lost yer hand cause yer a racist bastard. You got arrested cause you don't know when to stop being an asshole. Ain't got nothin to do with me!" Daryl yelled right back. And Merle, predictable as ever, went to punch Daryl with his good hand. But Daryl side stepped, pushing Merle forward and elbowing him right between the shoulder blades. Merle went down easy, hitting the floor hard and rolling on to his side. Daryl simply stood there after that, staring at him. "You can't stand it that I cleaned up my life and got out from underneath you. I tried to help you do the same, but you just... kept fuckin up." Daryl moved to the table, grabbing the bottle of Jack and the glass and emptying the contents of both down the drain at the sink while Merle pushed himself to his feet.

"What, you think I can jus wear a suit and tie and pretend to be preppy all day long? Man, that ain't me." Merle said, stepping toward Daryl who turned and looked at him with steel in his eyes. "And this?" Merle motioned at Daryl with one sweep of his arm up and down. "This ain't you, neither. I know you, little brother. Yer tryin so hard to fit in, to be one of them, but yer not some pissant cop!"

"Them?" Daryl asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Merle shook his head a little.

"Ranger Rick, that Asian kid, whoever else you been hangin around. All those pretty people you so desperately wanna be like. But they don't give a shit bout you! They usin you, gettin you to do all this stuff for them? I saw you workin that vegetable stand like you was their errand boy. And Ranger Rick? He makes you work like a dog while he sits at home fuckin that pretty Nubian of his. Yer just so caught up in playin officer of the year that you can't see it." Merle stammered out, growing agitated, urgent. Daryl stepped forward then, shaking his head, letting his arms drop to his sides.

"The only one whoever used me was you, Merle. And I ain't lettin that happen anymore. Yer my brother, but we ain't friends. You wanna clean yerself up, make a life, I'll help you. But if you wanna come here and fuck things up jus cause yer jealous?" Daryl shook his head. "Man, I want you gone. Outta my house. Outta my town. Outta my county. And don't come back. Should be easy for you. Yer good at abandoning yer family." Daryl said, and moved toward the kitchen door that led out back. He opened it, pushing the screen door open and waited. Merle stood there for a long quiet moment, nodding slightly.

"Alright. Can't say I didn't try. I'll go. For now." He said, moving toward the door. "But we ain't
through, little brother. We'll never be through. Cause you an I? We got somethin you'll never have with yer adopted menagerie of a family. An that's blood." Daryl met his gaze without flinching.

"Blood don't make you family." He said plainly. Merle seemed to sober ever so slightly at those words, then just nodded again, stepping out and down the steps.

"See you round, little brother." Was the last thing he said before walking around the house. Daryl let the screen door close. A moment later, he heard Merle's truck start up and drive off. Only then did he really let himself breathe, moving over to the kitchen table and pushing the chair back in. For a moment, he glanced at the sink and the now empty bottle of Jack sitting on the counter.

Well, at least he didn't have to worry about that tempting him anymore...
"What's that?"

Two weeks and already the shop was nearly finished. Daryl was a hard worker, that was for sure. And he was such an easy, patient teacher. He also had a sense of humor she hadn't quite expected. It seemed he caught her off guard more often than not. And the more time she spent with him, the less nervous she was. Just being around him was calming, and she couldn't help but feel completely at ease and safe with him. He also didn't seem to mind her overly excitable, chatty nature. He took it in stride, never asked her to shut up, always let her be her. It was a little odd, actually, how well they mixed. He was so naturally quiet and stoic. And she was exactly the opposite.

"What's that?" She asked when he walked through the door with something big, flat and heavy hidden beneath a plain brown blanket. He set it up against the wall, smoothing his hands down his dark blue jeans. It was hotter than a burnt chicken outside. But she'd finally gotten the electrician to fix the central air in the shop, and it was staying relatively cool. Daryl closed the door to keep the heat out, stepping in and around the little counter he'd built where her phone and other things were, like a tiny receptionist area. He even trimmed the edges with pink. She adored it.

He was wearing his deputy shirt, his gun holstered to his hip. A sight she'd gotten quite used to. He seemed to ignore her question, moving further into the main room. There was a set of home-made and severely sturdy, rug covered wooden risers up against one wall. There was a piano, her guitars, a set of sheet stands on another wall. There was a giant LCD screen on the wall opposite the risers, a podium for her to stand on, a row of chairs in front of that, and a set of comfier chairs near the large windows for parents to sit in. In the back was her office, a storage area, and a room Daryl had sound matted for private lessons. All of it was just... perfect. And she couldn't imagine having made it look this good without Daryl's help. Or having it done as cheap. He'd done most of the labor, while she followed around and learned what she could, and all she'd really had to pay for was the materials. It took only about a quarter of her savings, which was amazing. It left her with plenty extra to pick up some more instruments and invest in a new computer.

"You seen my pocket knife?" He asked over his shoulder, moving toward the tiny single bathroom in the far corner which had been the last area he'd worked on. "Never mind." He called, coming back out and slipping the handy tool into his pocket. "You busy?" He asked her then, moving back toward the door. All the while, she was standing there in her paint splattered overalls watching him with amusement.

"Nope." She practically skipped after him, then. Catching up quickly, she watched as he propped the door open with what he called 'the funniest damn rock' he'd ever seen. It was more like a giant paperweight in the shape of a pine cone. But she liked it well enough, and it was heavy enough to keep the door open when she needed it. She watched as he grabbed what he'd brought in with him, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing him curiously.

"Get out here, then." He said, catching her staring. She raised both brows, but smiled lightly and stepped outside. That was when he pulled the cloth off whatever it was he'd been hiding. And what it was? Oh, there were no words. Her hands went right up to her face, a loud 'oh' escaping her lips as she stared at the most beautiful damn sign she'd ever seen.

'Grimes' Music and Voice Lessons' was carved into swirling detail in a large piece of wood that had been painted pink and purple with black lettering on each side, stained, coated, and had reinforced bolts and hooks to hang it with. "Figured you needed a proper sign." Daryl said, glancing down at it. "Better than a poster in the window." He looked back at her, cracking that delicious half smile of his. And before she knew what she was doing, she practically threw herself at him, wrapping her arms
around his neck and hugging for dear life. At first, he didn't move. In fact, he stiffened. She could feel tension flood every one of his well toned muscles. But then he slowly brought a hand up, pressing it to her back lightly, the other hand still steadying the sign.

"Thank you, Daryl." She whispered softly, pulling herself away, wiping quickly at the tears that had escaped her eyes. She was so grateful, more than she could express, more than he knew. She was the kind of girl where the little things meant the most, and the smallest acts of kindness made her happier than if she'd been in a field full of kittens. His deep blue eyes blinked quietly at her, his hand falling away, and he nodded once.

"I have to get to work." He said gently, picking up the sign with both hands and leaning it against the outside wall. "But I'll come by later and hang it for ya." He rolled up the blanket into a ball, watching her quietly for a long moment. They just sort of stared at each other, and she was pretty sure all normal thought disappeared from her head. His stare was like an eraser, made her all kinds of blank. "Glad you like it." He added before stepping past her, heading down the sidewalk in the morning heat toward the other end of Main street where the Sheriff's office was. Like an idiot, she just stood there, watching him.

"Go ask him..." she whispered to herself out loud, glancing down at the sign. Then she just steadied herself, wiped at her cheeks one more time and ran after him. "Daryl, wait!" She called, watching him stop and turn to look at her as she caught up, her ponytail swishing wildly behind her till she got to him. "I know... I mean we've just been working on the shop and all. But, I was wondering, I mean... if you're not busy, after the sign gets hung up, do you think... maybe you'd like to go out with me?" Oh the stuttering and stammering, how stupid did she sound? But at least her words matched the ridiculous beat of her heart.

She watched as his face went from a soft surprise to a quiet blank, the one he got when he forced himself not to say anything, when he was thinking hard on his words before letting them out. She suddenly felt stupid, nervous from head to toe, a strange knotting in her stomach. She'd been thinking about asking him out for a few days. Despite all Liam had done, she couldn't help how attracted to Daryl she was, how much she wanted to get to know him, how much she just wanted to be in his presence. When she couldn't take it anymore, pretty sure he was just going to say no, she blurted out some more.

"To say thank you. For... for all the hard work. Just... dinner. To repay you, ya know?" She grinned at him ridiculously wide, hoping if he thought it was just a friendly meal that he would agree. And a friendly meal? That was probably best, right? After all, he was Rick's best friend. It would be just... awkward if they dated, right? And there was also the fact that a huge part of her wasn't even sure she wanted to date, or would ever be ready to. A friendly meal. That's all it had to be. He nodded slowly, then, tucking the rolled blanket a bit more under his arm.

"Alright. But nothin fancy." He said, cracking a little smile. "I'll be by here round eight." Then he watched her ever so quietly for a long moment just before she nodded hastily.

"Alright. But nothin fancy." He said, cracking a little smile. "I'll be by here round eight." Then he watched her ever so quietly for a long moment just before she nodded hastily.

"Good. Great." She clasped her hands together. "Tonight, then." She stepped backward. "Have a good day, Deputy." She said, pretending to be all formal. He shook his head at her, still smiling a little before he turned around and kept walking on his way. She turned after a moment, heading back to the shop, stopping to stare down at her new sign. It was amazing. Her favorite colors and everything. She knew he didn't like pink much. He'd even said he was starting to have nightmares that the world was turning pink after spending so much time in the pink walled shop. But he indulged her the little things. And that was just... everything.

She went back into the shop, letting the door close, heading straight for her sound system and
cranking some Ruelle before getting back to the little details she had left to finish. She was so happy, so just ridiculously giddy, she didn't even care that anyone could see her dancing around like a complete whack job. For the first time in years, her life was finally coming together. She was home in Georgia, she had her own shop, her big brother and his amazing family, and then there was Daryl. The most unlikely object of her affection that she could even think of. But it was him, nonetheless. Even if they never actually dated, even if all they ever got to be was friends, it still made the idea of her haunted life so much better...
Daryl was driving the Jeep as he and Rick headed out on a call. Josie Franklin had locked her drunk of a husband out again, and he was apparently taking an ax to everything he could in order to get in. Again. The feud between those two was a never ending issue. Neither one wanted a divorce, and both seemed to enjoy the attention. But a domestic dispute was still police worthy, no matter what. They had to drive twenty minutes out of town just to get there. One of the only bad things about being a County Sheriff employee was the responsibility for multiple towns. Not just one.

"Alright. That's it." Rick said from beside him, staring at Daryl who was heading down the highway at a good speed. "What's with you? You've been quiet." Rick said, then blinked and shook his head. "Okay, more quiet than usual." Daryl didn't even look at him. Couldn't.

Ever since earlier that morning when Samantha had asked him to dinner, his head had been everywhere but in the game. At first, he'd thought she meant on a date. And everything in him protested. He liked her, far more than he was supposed to. Which was part of the reason why he would have flat out said no, had she not explained it was just a 'thank you' meal. Dating anyone was a bad idea for him. He couldn't open up to a woman the way he should. His past and the secrets in it would make for a quick and easy end to any relationship. Not to mention, he wasn't even sure he had it in him, being close to a woman like that. And the fact that it was Rick's sister? Shit, that was an even worse idea. Daryl finally shrugged a little.

"Got a lot on my mind, is all." He said, one elbow bent out the window, the other hand on the steering wheel. He could feel Rick watching him. And he hated that. Rick had this way of getting information out of him just by being... well, Rick.

"Is it your brother?" He asked then, shifting a little in his seat. Daryl glanced at him.

"Naw. Haven't seen him since that mornin he broke into the house." Which was true. Merle was gone. For now. Daryl had no doubt he'd be back, causing shit again. But for now, Merle had yet to pop his ugly head out from whatever rock he'd crawled under. "Jus haven't been doin a lot of sleepin." Rick smiled a little at that.

"Well, with as much as you've been helping Sammy out, I'd say not." Rick chuckled a little. Daryl gave him a sideways glare. "What? She says you've been going there in the middle of the night and working when she isn't there." Daryl sighed a little, stopping the Jeep at a red light near a junction.

"Figured might as well do somethin. Better than sitting at home when I can't sleep." He admitted. Rick nodded lightly, but still had that ridiculous smile on his face.

"Sure that's all it is?" Rick asked, meeting Daryl's gaze before Daryl pulled forward at the green light. "Because it seems to me like... you like my sister." Daryl didn't look at him, then. Kept his eyes on the road, clenching his jaw lightly.

"Course I like her. She's sweet." He said genuinely, but didn't dare elaborate. Rick let out a light laugh.
"King of the Workaround, that's what you are." He motioned at Daryl, "I don't mean just like. I mean... like-like." He said and Daryl furrowed his brows at Rick.

"What're you, ten?" He asked, drawing another ridiculous smirk from Rick before looking back out at the road.

"It's okay, man. I want you to know that. If you have... feelings for Sam, I mean. That sound better than 'like-like'?" He asked. "Seriously. There's no one I'd trust more with her. And... honestly, I think you'd be good for each other."

"Stop." Daryl said firmly, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. "Even if I do have feelings for her, ain't nothin becomin of em." He said, clenching his jaw again for a moment. "She's way out of my league, man. She deserves someone better." It didn't even take a minute for Rick to react to that, reaching over and grabbing Daryl's shoulder.

"There is no better than you, Daryl. You hear me, brother?" Daryl couldn't help but meet Rick's gaze at that, his words settling around them. Daryl swallowed a little, tearing his eyes away.

"With all my... issues... you really think I'm what your sister needs? Especially after what her ex did to her?" Daryl asked quietly. Rick's hand slipped off his shoulder and he sighed.

"I think we should leave that up to her. It's not up to us to decide what she needs. But it's up to you to decide whether or not you're willing to give it a shot." Rick responded. Daryl turned the Jeep onto the long stretch of dirt drive that led to the Franklin's rundown farm.

"Yer making it sound like she's got feelings for me." Daryl grumbled out. "No reason she should." He stopped the Jeep just out front of the large farmhouse, shutting off the ignition.

"She asked you to dinner." Rick said, reaching for the door handle and getting out before Daryl had a chance to be surprised. He sure as hell hadn't mentioned that to anyone, which meant she must've told him. He hastily opened the door and got out, closing it behind him and rounding the front of the Jeep to Rick's side.

"She tell you it was jus to say thanks for helpin her with the studio?" He asked, one hand resting lazily on his holster. Rick gave him a humorous grin before clapping him lightly on the back.

"Tell me if that's what you really think after dinner's over." He winked and moved past him, heading for the wrap around porch. Daryl just stared at him a moment before swearing under his breath and moving after him. There was no sign of Martin Franklin yet. But the porch and front door of the house looked like it had seriously seen some better days. There were hatchet marks everywhere from Martin's attempt to ax his way in. Except being drunk didn't really give a guy good aim, or ability to stay on his feet. Daryl stayed at the bottom steps, looking around quietly while Rick went to the door and knocked.

"Josie, it's Sheriff Grimes and Deputy Dixon." He said, and not even a moment later, locks were heard being turned and a deadbolt chain being dropped. The door opened wide, Josie Franklin standing there in a dusty gray tank top, a pair of short shorts and flip flops.

"Bout time you boys got here." She said, crossing her arms over her chest, a lit cigarette between two of her fingers. Her hair was freshly blow dried, makeup on. The woman was in her 40's but still dressed like she was in high school. To each their own. "He's out back. Probably takin a breather from all his whackin." Rick glanced at Daryl and nodded at him. Daryl just took that as his cue to head around the house.
"Wanna tell me exactly what happened?" He heard Rick ask just as he rounded the corner. He heard Josie begin going into detail, same old story they'd probably heard before. The side of the house was littered with old car parts, a busted Chevy with the hood up, and a pile of tires resting up against the cellar doors. No sign of Martin yet. He came around the next corner and saw Martin standing bent over and retching, the small ax still in one hand. Swell. Because the day wouldn't be complete without someone throwing up.

"Mr. Franklin." Daryl spoke up, coming up slowly, one hand cautiously on his gun. Not that he thought Martin was going to do anything stupid. The man was just a hopeless drunk. More dangerous to himself than anyone else. Unless you counted the house, of course. Martin didn't respond to Daryl, just puked again. So Daryl kept his distance for the time being. Finally, the mostly bald man stood up. His white t-shirt was stained with alcohol and some of his own fluids, his work pants no better. Yum. "Martin, it's Deputy Dixon. What say you put that weapon down and we'll get you sobered up." Again. Martin seemed to slowly register that Daryl was there, like he was hearing him for the first time.

"Josie locked me out." He said, his voice slurred. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then, ax still hanging loosely in his other hand.

"Well, that's cause you got your ass drunk again, Marty." Daryl said, taking a slow step forward. "Now I need you to put the ax down before you hurt more than your siding." That was when Martin looked at the ax in his hand, brows furrowing like he was remembering for the first time what he'd been up to.

"Nu uh, I need to get in the house. She's got my wallet an keys, and I... want to go back to the bar." He stammered. That was when Daryl saw his eyes. His pupils were wide as saucers. He wasn't just drunk, he was high on something, too. Great.

"Can't let you back in the house, man. But I'll give you a free ride and a cup of coffee back at the office instead. How's that sound?" He said, raising a hand and snapping his fingers to get Martin's attention again. Martin blinked at him, then his face twisted angrily.

"No you... you jus want Josie all to yerself!" He growled out. "I seen her hangin round with other fellas. An you have the... the nerve... to come to MY house!" His voice got louder and louder as he spoke. Not a damn bit of that made sense to Daryl. He wouldn't look at Josie twice if she was the last woman on earth, mostly because she was a real sour woman. No better than her husband. Suddenly Daryl had the feeling that whatever Martin had used, it was seriously messing with his head. He unclipped his holster, pulling his gun out, aiming it at Martin.

"I'm ordering you to put the ax down and yer hands up, Martin. Right now. I don't want to have to shoot ya, man." Daryl demanded, taking a step back, watching as Martin tried to make sense of the situation. He plastered a hand to his head.

"I... I don't feel so good." He said, letting his hand fall from his sweaty forehead.

"I know, man. We'll take care of ya. Get you some help. But you have to put that thing down." Sure, it was just a small ax. But Daryl knew from experience that a guy who was drunk and high could do a hell of a lot of damage without a weapon, let alone one like that. "Martin, not gonna ask again. Put the ax dow-" And that was when Martin just seemed to snap. His eyes locked on Daryl and he lunged, screaming something Daryl couldn't understand. He instinctively squeezed the trigger, a bullet catching Martin right in the shoulder. But it wasn't quite fast enough. All of Martin's stinky, nasty body piled right into him, plowing him to the ground hard...

* * *
Rick came running around the corner of the house, his Colt Python drawn. He wasn't sure what to expect, but what he saw was an unconscious Martin Franklin pinning Daryl to the ground. "Daryl!" He blurted out, running over. He instantly rolled the other man off, and Daryl pushed himself up on to his elbows. "What the hell happened, man?" He asked, hearing Josie come up behind them before Daryl had a chance to answer.

"You shot him! You shot Marty!" She cried out, falling to her knees at Martin's unconscious side. "You sonofabitch, you shot my husband!" She pulled Martin's head into her lap, putting her hand over the wound on his shoulder. By the time Rick turned around, Daryl was on his feet, kicking the ax away.

"He came at me, Rick. He's on somethin serious. Not just drinkin." He said, then winced, moving his free hand to his side. When he pulled his fingers away, there was blood. "Shit." He mumbled. Rick was instantly at his side, moving Daryl's hand out of the way. "Must've caught me with the ax on the way down." Daryl said like it was no big deal. He lifted his arm while Rick inspected the wound.

"Doesn't look too bad, but I can't really tell. Seems deep. Best case, you're gonna need stitches." Rick said, pulling his radio off his belt. "Dispatch, I need an ambulance at 1173 Parker Grid Road, and send me some troopers, same location." He let his voice get a little calmer, feeling Rick at his back. But there was still seething anger beneath, a controlled rage.

"He's right, Josie. If Marty's on drugs, you need to tell us. Cause if he goes to the hospital and they give him something that messes with what's already in his system, he'll be dead. You understand that?" He demanded, staring Josie down with a much more controlled anger than Daryl's. She blinked at them, clinging to Martin's messy shirt a little tighter.

"I dunno what it is, but... Marty's friends at the 640 called it Spinners. Got it from some new guy they'd never seen before. Swore it was safe, that... that it would give us a clean buzz. It made me feel real bad so I didn't take it anymore. Marty promised he'd get rid of the rest. But I guess..." She swallowed lightly. "I guess he kept takin it."

Spinners. They'd heard of that. There was a whole meeting on it at the State Capital building. A few dozen teens had gotten their hands on it and nearly overdosed after one try during some football party. Stuff was a nasty mix of several different types of drugs. Sure, it gave people the buzz they were looking for. But it also made them seriously violent before making their internal organs shut down. State Troopers had been tasked with local agencies to try to find anyone dealing it. But they'd never actually had any sign of it in Cooke County, till now. Daryl and Rick exchanged looks. Then Rick gently grabbed Daryl's arm, pulling him a few paces away. "When the ambulance gets here,
you go with Martin to the hospital. If he comes to, find out what you can. But get yourself looked at first." Daryl was instantly about to protest, but Rick put up a finger. "It's not up for debate." He said sternly. "I'll hand Josie over to the Troopers, coordinate with them and head over to the 640."

"Fine." Daryl said through gritted teeth. "But pick up Andrews first, shouldn't go to that bar alone." Mason Andrews was another Deputy, good guy. Young, but smart and always on his toes. "And don't mess with my radio stations." He said, digging his keys out of his pocket and handing them over to Rick. He hated when Rick drove his Jeep. Not only did Rick mess with the mirrors, which was a losing battle, but he intentionally put the radio presets on the worst stations he could possibly find just to mess with Daryl. Rick took the keys with a smirk.

"I would never." He said, and Daryl shook his head.

"Ass." He muttered. It looked like he wasn't going to make it to dinner after all. Probably for the best. Or at least that's what he told himself. But once the troopers and ambulance showed up, the paramedics had Martin loaded, and Daryl bandaged, he couldn't help but wish he was going to Samantha's studio to hang her sign. He'd been secretly looking forward to it. Hell, he always looked forward to seeing her and addictive pink smile. Not that he'd ever admit it out loud. He'd have to call her on the way to Lincoln Memorial Hospital. Hopefully, he'd just get the voicemail. It would be a lot easier than hearing disappointment in her voice. And a lot better than her hearing it in his own...
"What's wrong?"

By the time she got out of the shower, her phone was making that cute little bird sound she'd found for her notifications. She hastily wrapped the towel around her dripping body, stepping out of the tub and reaching for her phone on the sink, only to have it slide right out of her fingers and on to the floor. "Crap!" She blurted out, kneeling on the bath rug and grabbing the phone. Luckily, the case with purple flowers she'd bought was pretty damn sturdy. Which was a good thing, considering how clumsy she could be.

There was one new voicemail.

'Hey, Sam... it's me.' She heard Daryl say when she pushed play and held it to her ear. 'Gonna have to cancel for tonight. Had a situation at work, Rick can tell ya bout it if he wants. Sorry I couldn't hang the sign. Promise I'll get to it.' There was a pause, the sound of him exhaling and what she thought were sirens in the background. 'Right. So... night.' And then a beep when the voicemail ended. For a moment, she sat there, staring at the phone in her hands, slightly wet from being up against her face. Then she used the edge of the towel to wipe it dry. To say she was disappointed was a safe bet.

In fact, she was far more disappointed than she should be, right? It was just supposed to be a thank you dinner. Just friends. So why was she so... sad? She put the phone back on the sink, letting out a slight sigh before standing and toweling herself off. She took her time. No need to rush anymore. And she dressed in some lazy clothes, blew dry her hair, didn't bother with any makeup. Not even her lipstick. She opened the bathroom door the same time Michonne was coming up the stairs.

"Hey." Sam said with a smile, tucking her toiletry bag underneath her arm, her bare feet stepping onto the hall rug. That was when she realized Michonne's face looked... worried. "What's wrong?" She asked then, moving toward her sister-in-law. Michonne stopped at the top of the stairs.

"I just got off the phone with Rick. Daryl's in the hospital." Michonne replied. And like that, Samantha's world suddenly fell out from beneath her feet. She blinked, her jaw dropping slightly, brows going up in surprise and shock. Her heart hammered instantly, her hands felt useless and sweaty.

"What?" She finally managed to ask. "Why? Is he okay? What happened?!" She began blurting, the words coming out faster than Michonne could respond to. Finally, Michonne just put a hand on Sam's shoulder.

"He's fine. Well... mostly fine. There was a bit of a rough up at a call. Guess they didn't think it was too serious at first. But Daryl collapsed at the hospital. Apparently the ax he got cut with nicked a vessel. He lost more blood than they realized. But he's going to be fine. They stitched him up, and he's good." Michonne explained, searching Samantha's face. "Rick wanted you to know. Are you... are you okay?"

Samantha swallowed, still trying to process all the information she'd just been given. Daryl had been stabbed? But he'd sounded fine in his voicemail.... "I'm... I'm good. Why wouldn't I be?" She asked softly. "He's going to be okay, right? So... so I'm good." But she didn't quite believe her own words. And the shaken tone of her voice didn't help any. Michonne smiled, a knowing expression on her face that Sam couldn't take her eyes off.

"Well... you are seriously crushing on Daryl. That's why you wouldn't be." She said, letting her hand fall to the railing. Sam's brows shot up, and she suddenly lost the ability to speak properly. She
watched as Michonne's smile spread.

"What, no. I don't... that's not... he's Rick's best friend!" She stammered, a hand coming up to her mouth. Michonne laughed a little. "Is it that obvious?" Sam asked then, feeling the blush in her face.

"Only to me and Rick. Don't worry." She said, taking a step down. "Rick's at the office and won't be back for awhile. But I was going to drop the kids off with Maggie and head over to see Daryl, bring him a go bag. They want to keep him over night. Thought maybe you'd like to come." Michonne said, eyeing her in amusement. "He's going to be alright, Sam. Really. Come on. I'll meet you downstairs when you're ready." And with that, she headed down, leaving Sam just all sorts of messed up.

Daryl was hurt. And Michonne and Rick knew that Samantha was attracted to Daryl. Why wouldn't she be fine? She let out a laugh that was both nervous and just exasperated. "Way to be subtle, Sammy." She said to herself, then turned on her heel and headed for the spare bedroom to grab her sneakers, not even caring that she was wearing loose fitting sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. They headed for the hospital before Sam could change her mind.

And the whole way there, all she could think about was Daryl. His voicemail. Him being hurt. The fact that the people closest to her seemed to know what she refused to admit out loud. Wish I was a ninja, she thought to herself. Because that way, she wouldn't be walking around with her heart on her sleeve like a giant bull's eye for the whole world to see. As they pulled into the ER parking lot, a thought suddenly occurred to her. If Michonne and Rick knew she liked Daryl that way, did that mean Daryl knew, too?! Oh, no. N. O. No.

She sat completely still as the car stopped and Michonne got out, grabbing Daryl's bag from the back seat. How could she face him now? Especially if he knew?! Or maybe he didn't know. Maybe she should just be a big girl and march her ass into the hospital to check on the guy who'd been so kind to her for the last several weeks. "Get outta your own head, Sammy." She said to herself, opening the door and getting out of the car. But she couldn't help the nervousness that flooded her system, feeling like she was trapped between wanting to see him and wanting to run as far away as her lean legs could take her. The more steps she took, the more nervous she felt. She was just one hell of a hot mess. The best she could hope for was not making a fool of herself. Which, knowing her, would be so much easier said than done.
"Let me see if I can guess what you want."

"604 was a goldmine." Rick said, sitting on the edge of Daryl's hospital room bed with a file in his hands. "Found about thirteen different people with Spinners either on them or already having been taken. And all of them said they got it from the same guy." He pulled a security camera image out of the folder and handed it to Daryl, who was still a little groggy from the emergency surgery to patch him up. He really hadn't thought it was all that bad. But apparently the ax did a bit more damage than any of them had originally thought. Which meant now he was stuck in that damn bed overnight, wanting nothing more than to get the hell outta dodge. He hated hospitals. With a passion.

The image Rick handed him gave a corner view of the bar. 604 was not a well-to-do establishment. More like a hole in the wall where people got drunk, hookers were known to frequent and more than a few fights broke out a week. Daryl had never actually been there other than going out on a call or two. The man in the photo was a little blurry, but they could easily see he was about six feet tall, give or take a few inches. He was fit, wearing an army green t-shirt and torn blue jeans, a black back pack on his shoulders and sun glasses partially obstructing his face. His hair was short cropped, neat. He almost stood out. He seemed far cleaner and held together than the other people milling about. And there was something about him... something Daryl recognized but couldn't quite put his finger on. Rick saw the bare recognition on Daryl's face.

"You know him, don't you." He stated more than asked. Daryl met Rick's gaze, handing the photo back.

"Honestly, he looks familiar. But can't say why. Think I'd have to see a better angle of his face. Dunno where I've seen him. Just pretty sure I have." Which was true. Rick took the picture and slipped it back into the file.

"Well, we've put out an APB and the news is going to run his photo at nine. The troopers want the case to themselves, and with everything on our plate, I'd just assume give it to them." Rick said, slipping off the edge of the bed and standing with a hand on his hip. "We're stretched thin as it is. Not sure diving into a drug dealer manhunt is even possible. Plus, troopers have better resources. And they know more about Spinners." Rick seemed to be explaining to himself more than Daryl. He didn't have a great fondness for just letting things go. And he was still pretty ticked about Daryl getting hurt.

"Man, Rick..." Daryl motioned at him, "I'm fine." He said firmly, making Rick meet his eyes. "Soon as I get outta here, we'll tackle this thing together." Rick smiled lightly at that.

"No. No, when you get out of here, you're going to relax. For a week. No arguments. And this?" He raised the file, "Belongs to the troopers now. Nothing I can do about it." He lowered his hand, thinking lightly. "Doesn't mean we can't keep our eyes peeled, though. 604 is still in our county. And so are the Franklins." He said. Daryl couldn't help it, he frowned, straightening himself up a bit, wincing a little as his side pulled.

"Speakin of which... you ain't said word one about Marty. How is he?" Daryl asked lightly, only to see a shadow pass over Rick's features. Rick met his gaze quietly. "Shit." Daryl said, understanding without anything having to be said. "Was it me?" He asked then. "Did the bullet kill him?" Rick shook his head a little, sighing lightly.

"No. By the time we got to him, the drugs had already done a number on him. His organs simply shut down shortly after he collapsed. There wasn't anything they could do for him." Rick replied, stepping closer to the bed and gripping Daryl's shoulder. "Isn't on you, man. Trust me." Daryl
nodded quietly, not about to call Rick a liar. But there was still a seeping regret. Martin and Josie Franklin were both royal pains in the ass. But dying like that? Marty didn't deserve to go out that way. Shit, no one did.

"Special delivery." The two men heard then, Rick stepping aside and turning to see Michonne walking in with Daryl's old and small duffel. And right behind her was Samantha. What the hell is she doin here?! Daryl thought to himself, one hand gripping the blanket a little tighter than he knew. Michonne walked right up to the bed, set his bag on the side table and then slipped her fingers into his hand. "How you feelin?" She asked, smiling warmly at him.

"Pissed." He admitted, then shrugged. "Wanna get outta here. But Rick and that Doctor friend of his are insistin on torturin me." Michonne laughed a little.

"You are just incapable of being a good patient, that's all." She replied. He squeezed her hand a little. "Don't wanna be a patient at all. Break me outta here and I'll love you forever." He joked, smiling lightly. She grinned.

"You'll love me forever anyway." She sat down on the edge of the bed, Rick moving closer to her and putting a hand on her back.

"Alright, you flirts." Rick said, but he was smiling. Daryl let his eyes move to Samantha who was now standing at the foot of his bed with her hands resting on the rail, watching him with flushed cheeks and a bright smile. And no lipstick. Hm.

"Sorry bout dinner, and the sign." He said to her. She blinked, shrugging a little. Then she motioned to him with one hand.

"I'd say this is a pretty legitimate excuse. I mean, how can you get angry at a guy who's been stabbed?" She chewed a little on her lower lip, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. The mere act made his whole body tingle. It took all his control not to outwardly react.

"Want to buy me a cup of coffee before I head back to the office?" Rick asked Michonne then, sliding his hand up to the back of her neck beneath her dread locks. She looked up at him, a warmth emanating from her entire form, before she squeezed Daryl's hand and stood. She leaned over him, kissing his forehead lightly.

"Be a good patient, Dixon." She said, then let go of his hand before grabbing on to Rick's arm. Rick began leading her to the door.

"What she said." Rick commented, winking a little, just before they stepped out, the door closing behind them and leaving Daryl very alone with Samantha. For a moment, he didn't look at her. But she drew his attention when she went to the wall by the window and grabbed a chair, dragging it across the floor to his bedside, making a face as it squeaked on the tiles. Then she plopped down in it, one foot beneath her opposite leg.

"Glad you're okay, Daryl." She said then, watching him with her head slightly tilted. He shrugged, letting his eyes fall to his lap.

"Thanks for comin... to see me." He said, picking at a piece of fuzz on the blanket. "Didn't need to."

"I know." She said, curling her hands into a ball in her lap. "Want to." She grinned then, "Least I could do, I mean, you've practically done the work of a whole crew by yourself in the last few weeks. I owe you." He let his eyes slide to her, watching the way her happiness just played on all her features, like always. It always amazed him how upbeat she was when her fear wasn't in sight.
"You don't owe me nothin, Sam." He replied, "Cept that dinner. Gonna want that when I get outta here. Hospital food is glorified dirt." He cracked a light smile, watching her laugh softly. He loved it when she laughed, when she smiled, shit... even when she frowned, he loved it.

"Let me see if I can guess what you want." She said, scooting a little closer, still smiling. "Steak, probably medium rare. And... mashed potatoes, loaded. Maybe some..." she paused, narrowing her eyes on him, "Mushroom gravy. Collared greens on the side. How's that sound?"

"Damn." He said, shaking his head a little. "Now I'm hungry. See what you did, woman?" He grumped lightly, but not seriously. And she knew it, grinning at him.

"You're welcome." She reached over and smoothed the edge of his blanket, "Give you something to look forward to."

"Don't need food to look forward to bein round you." He said very quietly, and suddenly realized what had just come out of his mouth. He didn't meet her gaze. Couldn't. What the hell was he thinking?

"Daryl..." He heard her say, her tone gentle. Then suddenly, she was holding his hand in both of hers. Her palms were soft, her fingers timid. But she didn't let go. "What if... I mean, instead of a thank you dinner... what if we just, well..." She stammered, and he had to look at her. He loved when she did that. The mix of shyness and confidence that somehow lived harmoniously inside of her always held his attention like she was the brightest point in the sky.

"You askin me out on a date instead?" He finished for her in his own way. She blinked, eyes going a little wide. He couldn't help the stillness that came over him. How stupid could you be, Dixon? Course she wasn't asking that. But then she smiled, a slow motion that made her whole face light up along with the blush in her cheeks.

"Yeah. I guess... I guess I am." She responded, then nodded a little more firmly. Daryl couldn't help but think about the conversation he'd had with Rick. *It's not up to us to decide what she needs. But it's up to you to decide whether or not you're willing to give it a shot.*

Was he?

That was the question. Was he willing to drag this amazing, intelligent, talented, beautiful woman through his shit? Would she be willing to stick around when his nightmares came into play, when his ghosts wouldn't let him be? He watched her expression slowly fade from happy to nervous to slightly sad. Shit. Say somethin.

"Alright." He said, and wasn't even sure he'd said it till he saw her blink and straighten up.

"Really?" She blurted out, practically squeaking. He let out a soft huff of a laugh.

"Yeah. Really. But remember... you promised steak." He responded, and she grinned. Ear to ear, happy as a spring rabbit, grinning at him like he'd just told her he'd named a star after her. Not that he ever would. Stars just couldn't hold a torch to her.

Michonne popped back in at that moment, a cup of tea, most likely, in one hand. "Ready to go?" She asked, leaning her hip against the door frame, watching Daryl and Samantha with a knowing smile.

"Yup." Sam said, pushing her chair back with another squeak, then scooted her way around the edge of the bed, waving once at him. Michonne nodded at him.

"Get some rest. Seriously." She ordered him. He just glared at her and she winked, hooking her arm
into Sam's. And like that, the two women were gone, leaving him in utter silence. And he just sat there for awhile, staring at the empty doorway, watching random nurses and other people pass by every now and then. He could hear the clock ticking on the wall, the random murmur of all the sounds in the hallway and the rooms beyond. And before long, he let his head fall back to the pillows behind him. He closed his eyes. And thought of the river.

The rolling current, the cool, clear water. The way it never stopped moving but was never really in a hurry to get where it wanted to go. He could almost smell the crisp, cleanliness of it, the freshness in the air, the wind in the trees. And for a moment, he could even hear Sammy singing that song of hers, her fingers gliding effortlessly on her guitar as she went. That was what he held on to when he finally let himself drift off to sleep, thinking of what he'd gotten himself into with her... and hoping he had real dreams that night instead of nightmares...
"This isn't fancy, right?"

The next day couldn't come fast enough for Sammy.

She'd barely slept the night before. All she could think about was Daryl and his fabulous smile and blue eyes and ugh... ridiculous. She felt like a little kid with a school-age crush! Well, half of her did. The other half was nervous, scared, terrified, petrified and whatever other synonyms she could come up with. Which were probably a lot. She needed to invest in a dictionary...

She was just plain frightened.

Not because of Daryl, really. He'd proven himself to be... dream worthy. He was kind, generous, funny, gentle hearted. He was strong, brave, so much smarter than he let on. And people loved him. Genuinely loved him. She had seen how everyone was around him, so comfortable and at home in his presence. It was no wonder Sammy had begun to feel the same.

What she was scared of was Liam and all he'd done to her. He was probably half way to Antarctica, but she still had nightmares about him walking through the door and beating her till she agreed to leave with him. She could still feel the tension in her ribs where he'd broken them. She could still feel his hands around her throat, squeezing because she'd burnt the pot roast. She could still feel him forcing himself on her, stripping her bare and forcing himself in and out of her so hard that she'd bleed. Her body may have healed months ago, but her mind? It was still a terrible place to be. She couldn't be happy without being equally afraid.

Men terrified her the most. She masked her wariness in her awkwardness, her shyness a great cover for just wanting no one to touch her, or for not wanting to be alone with anyone except for her brother. Rick was her rock in all this. He and Michonne both were. There'd been more than a few nights they'd been woken by Sam's screaming, holding her after while she cried. She wasn't sure she could be fighting so hard right now for a normal life if it hadn't been for them.

And she was fighting. Every day. With every breath. And by going out with Daryl.

Liam had stolen nearly seven years of her life. Years spent broken and cowering, and yet she still fought against him even then. As much as he'd tried, he couldn't make her lose who she was. She hadn't let him. And she wasn't about to let him now.

Daryl was a good man. The best she'd ever known besides her brother. And she was pretty sure if she didn't give this a try, if she didn't attempt to be happy with someone, she would never truly be out from under Liam's terrible dark shadow. That and... it was Daryl.

He filled her days and thoughts in the best ways possible. The care he'd shown for her right from the spot when they were nothing but strangers had never ceased. And despite his rough exterior and at times harsh nature, she wasn't afraid of him. Not even a little. Which was surprising. Daryl could probably kill her with little to no effort, but she knew without a doubt he would never touch her in any way but with kindness. That was all she needed to know she wanted -needed- to try this.

She was dressed in a spring dress that came to just above her knees. Nothing fancy, but was a pastel blue with pink pastel roses all over it. And it flared a little when she twirled, which she loved to do. She had a pair of flats to go with it, her hair up in a bouncy, wavy ponytail and her little green clutch. 'Nothin fancy, remember that.' He'd said when she'd talked to him on the phone earlier. The doctor's had finally relented and let him out of the hospital around noon as long as he promised to take it easy. She was currently standing in the little bathroom of the studio, smoothing her hands over her dress.
"This isn't fancy, right?" She said to herself, smiling a little, once again wearing her favorite shade of lipstick. "Just pretty." She said with a nod.

"Pretty is right." Daryl said, startling her a little. She squeaked, turning with one hand on her chest to see Daryl standing in the open doorway of the shop. He was watching her, his steely bluer than blue eyes only slightly hidden by his wayward bangs. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a button up, nice looking gray shirt with the sleeves rolled up to just before his elbows, enhancing the look of his strong forearms. There was a black vest, not his angel wings one, buttoned over his shirt, fitting to him snuggly and perfectly. He was wearing the boots he wore to work, and other than his belt there was nothing else. Which was good with her because he looked incredible. She'd never seen him dress like that. Not fancy, and yet... hot damn. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks, then laughed a little nervously.

" Didn't even hear you open the door." She said, shutting off the light in the little bathroom and walking toward him, her clutch held in front of her with both hands. "You clean up really... really, really, really great." She said. Sheesh, Sam. How many times can you say 'really' in one sentence? His reaction was to smile at her, that crooked half smile of his that she just couldn't get enough of.

"I'll get you a bell for the door so it jingles when people open it." He said, still watching her like she was the center of the universe all of a sudden. It only made her want to hide her face again. Sometimes she wished she wasn't so nervous, so shy. "Ready?" He asked, taking a slow step back out on to the sidewalk, one hand out and holding the door. She reached over and shut off the shop lights, letting him close the door as she got outside. She turned to lock it, feeling his presence warm and safe at her back.

"I have a confession to make." She said as she turned the two dead bolts, spinning a little to make her dress flare as she put the keys back in her clutch, meeting his gaze and his raised brow. "I looked everywhere for a place that serves good steak. But everything is either bars or fancy restaurants. And I didn't want to do a bar, and you said nothing fancy so... I have no idea where we should go." She smiled sheepishly. He just tilted his head a little, seemingly thinking, then nodded.

"I got it covered." He stepped up to her, holding his arm out. "Know the perfect place." She hooked her hand into his elbow with a grin. And they started walking. Right past his Jeep and her car.

"We're... we're walking?" She said. The only thing downtown was the Diner and the coffee shop and that little deli that sold killer pastrami sandwiches. She glanced over her shoulder at the vehicles as they simply kept going. He was silent beside her for a long moment till they got to the crosswalk.

"Best place in the county for steak?" He said, pointing up at what looked like an apartment over the hardware store. "Right there." He said, smiling a little and giving her a sideways glance. She looked up at the open windows. The soft sounds of jazz was trickling through, some curtains swaying lightly. "Come on. Trust me." He said, and led her across the cross walk.

And she realized, she did trust him. Fancy that. She found herself smiling just that much brighter.

There was a door to the left of the hardware store, big and wooden and painted cherry red, two hanging plants with bright red blooms on either side. Daryl opened it, and motioned for her to go first up the long stair case that was revealed within. When they got to the only door at the top, Daryl winked at her and then knocked three times, solidly. There was the sound of muffled movement behind the door, the music being turned down slightly, and then it opened wide revealing a portly dark skinned woman with the biggest smile Samantha had ever seen.

"Deputy Daryl! What a wonderful surprise! Come in, sugar!" She said, stepping aside and ushering with one hand, the other wiping at her apron which had spots of grease and powder on it. Samantha
just followed along, stepping in next to Daryl. The apartment was... beautiful. Brightly colored, lit with Christmas lights along the walls, plants blooming and gorgeously green lined the windows and a few walls, brightly colored curtains, old black and white photos on the walls, and flowery furniture added to the ambiance. "And who's this?" She asked, chocolate cheeks dimpled as she smiled at Samantha.

"This here's Rick's sister, Samantha." Daryl said, motioning lightly to her. "Sammy, this is Mama D. She owns the florist shop up the road." He said, introducing them.

"Mama... D?" Samantha asked, reaching out to shake hands only to be pulled into a massive hug. Mama D smelled like cookies and grits. A rather unique but delicious mix.

"D stands for Diane, but everyone round here just calls me Mama D cause I'm basically everyone's mama, ain't that right, Daryl?" She said, grinning, laughing a hearty and healthy laugh at them both. "And look at you! You're Ricky's little sister? Gosh if you aren't beautiful! Look at you!" Mama D said, spreading her arms wide. "You definitely got all the good looks in that family!" She laughed again, stepping past them and heading to a well lit, bright and white kitchen just beyond. "Come on, kids, follow Mama. Tell me what brings you by!"

"Oh, I like her..." Sammy whispered to Daryl, taking his arm and grinning. She couldn't help it. They followed her into the kitchen, met with all sorts of different smells. Everything just smelled delectable. Daryl pulled out a stool at the short counter, motioning for Sammy to sit. Which she did, looking around her in quiet awe. There was so much being done! There was seasonings, dried herbs, dough, sugar, you name it. And it was there. A pie sat cooling on a rack, there were vegetables boiling in a pot, a sheet of several different types of cookies cooling next to the stove. She could feel her stomach protesting, wanting badly just to eat all the yummy around her.

"Well, Sam and I wanted steak, but didn't want nothin fancy, and nothing gritty." He smiled a little, narrowing his gaze on Mama. She put her hands on her hips.

"And you come to Mama?" She said, then laughed again. Sammy loved her laugh. "This one here's a smart one, Miss Sammy. You listen to him, he'll steer you straight. Mama D makes the best steak in four counties." She turned, opening up her fridge. "And it just so happened I got me some nice ribeyes at the market yesterday. Mm, mm." She pulled the meat out, unwrapping it and simply getting to cooking like it was no big deal. It was amazing, watching her. She knew every inch of the kitchen, up and down, back and forth, and moved like she'd been cooking since she was born.

That was how the night progressed, laughing with Mama D, eating her delicious food, and feeling fuller than Sam had felt in ages. "Mama D," Sammy said, gently pushing her now empty plate across the four seater table. "That was amazing. I don't think I've ever tasted anything so good." Mama D chuckled.

"And you never will anywhere else, sugar." She said, pushing her chair back and standing up. Daryl was coming back out from the kitchen to grab the rest of the dishes. He'd already started clearing before anyone even asked him. "Always so polite, Deputy Daryl." Mama D said, patting his shoulder lightly. "Now you let Mama get the rest. I pulled out some wine earlier. Ya'll go have some now and head up to the roof. Enjoy the view! And don't even think bout arguin with me, boy." She said, shooing Daryl away from the table who put his hands up in surrender, smirking ever so quietly.

Then he held a hand out toward Sammy, who wiped her mouth hastily and stood, thanking Mama quickly before being lead to the kitchen. Then, once they each had wine in hand, Daryl helped her out the kitchen window onto the fire escape. They went all the way to the top. And what she saw? Oh, there were no words!
In New York City, there were roof gardens. Some fancy, some not. But she'd never actually seen any of them in person. Only from other rooftops or in pictures. But what she saw there? Nothing held a candle to it. "Oh, Daryl..." She said, stepping away from him, walking down a pebble path. There were flowers, there will little trees, there were beautiful lamp lights and string lights. There was a little gravity fountain in the center and a couple of benches to either side of it. And the sky above? That was what made it perfect. She could see every star stretch on over their heads. "It's so beautiful!" She said, spinning a little, making her dress flow out slightly. Daryl was leaning against the rail of the fire escape, watching her. Quiet. When she caught his gaze, she became completely still. There was something in his eyes.

She'd had men look at her before. A lot more than she'd ever admit to, she just didn't have that kind of ego. And whenever Liam had looked at her, it was always like he was hungry, angry and fed up all at once. Never any real affection. Just possession and cruelty. But this look from Daryl... the way his blue eyes held her, like he could be memorizing every inch of her by sheer will alone... it made her feel things inside she hadn't thought she could feel anymore. And the silence stretched on, and for once she didn't care. He stepped forward then, moving toward her.

"This place is Mama's pet project." He said, thankfully breaking the quiet with something other than her stampeding heart. He stepped past her, moving to one of the benches and sitting down. "Everyone pitches in a little. I helped her with the lights." He said, motioning with the wine glass around them. He settled, propping an ankle on the opposite knee. "In return, she usually feeds us against our will and lets us come up here whenever we want." He said, a fair amount of humor in his voice. He lifted the glass to his lips, taking a slight sip. She smiled warmly at him, and was about to respond when music began to come from Mama's D's windows again. It had switched from fast jazz to La Vie En Rose, one of Sam's all time favorite songs. The melodic sound of acoustics and a breathtaking female voice filtered up. Her eyes went wide and she moved to Daryl so quick, she almost startled him. She set her glass down, grabbing his and setting it next to him.

"Dance with me!" She blurted out, grabbing one of his hands. "Oh, Daryl you have to dance. I love this song!" She grinned at him, thinking maybe he'd protest. And for a moment, he really looked like he would. But then he stood up, and for the first time he looked nervous.

"I don't really... I'm not very good at it." He said softly, letting her lead him to a more open part of the roof. She just shook her head at him, placing his hand on her hip, then grabbing his other hand and holding it in her own.

"It's easy. Just... sway with the music." She said, feeling giddy as she started moving them both, until Daryl had the gist of the idea. It was so easy, so natural, that at first she hadn't realized how out of character grabbing him had been for her. Until she met his eyes. She'd never been this close to his gaze. If she'd thought his eyes were mesmerizing before, up close they were practically hypnotic. The smell of him was engulfing her, she could feel his warmth, the strong muscles of his body as she instinctively stepped closer. "See?" She said quietly, having to tear her eyes away. "You're doing great." Her voice grew impossibly quieter. She felt him pull her hand to his chest and hold it there as they made a slow circle, the music swarming gently around them. And like that, the nervousness bled to comfort. Safety.

They moved as one, following the tempo, quiet. When the song changed, neither one of them let go. Another slow song, Come Away With Me, wrapped itself around them. She found herself resting her head against his shoulder. Before long, she was singing along. She could feel his cheek relaxing against the top of her head. And for the first time since Liam had nearly killed her, she felt... home. Really home. Not just in Georgia or her brother's house. But somewhere else altogether. A place she didn't know could even exist for her. And it was right there... in Daryl's arms.
"Can I come?"

The fact that he'd been pretty much winging it all since he'd picked up Samantha didn't seem to matter anymore. Up there on that roof, dancing, holding her closer to him than he ever thought he would... it was all insanely perfect. And for a time, his ghosts and his issues and his past were farther away than they had been in years. It was like she erased them all, just by letting him hold her.

When the music stopped, switching to something more upbeat, they finally pulled apart. He watched as a strand of wavy hair fell out of her pony tail and he reached up instinctively to brush it aside, his fingertips smoothing over her face lightly. She just blinked at him, smiling that small smile she got when she was nervous. He let his hand fall. "See?" She said softly, "Told you that you could dance."

"Yer a good teacher." He responded. She smirked and moved like she was going to head for the bench, but her foot caught the edge of a large flower pot and she tripped. He caught her almost instantly, strong hands gripping her tight so she wouldn't hit the hard ground. He winced, feeling a sharp pain in his side. And she gasped, straightening herself as quickly as she could.

"Oh... oh, Daryl. Did I hurt you?" She asked, reaching for his side tentatively where he'd laid his hand over the hidden wound. He shook his head at her. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." He put a hand out, touching her arm lightly.

"Wasn't you. Forgot it was there, actually." He said, giving her a small smile to reassure her. She seemed to accept that explanation, stepping back a little. He straightened, and let out a breath, letting his hand fall.

"You sure... you're okay?" She asked, still sounding slightly nervous. He moved toward her, leading her back to the bench.

"Yeah, I'm sure." He said, grabbing up the glasses and holding one out to her. She took it, folding her dress beneath her as she sat beside him. He couldn't get over how amazing she smelled. Better than any of the flowers out there. And how she looked? When he first saw her at the studio, he was pretty sure his brain fizzled away. He'd said nothing fancy. If this wasn't fancy, he was pretty sure he'd die if he saw her in a getup that was. How he'd survived dancing with her was beyond him. Hearing her sing against him, the feel of her lean form in his arms. It was all too much and not nearly enough.

"I have to tell you..." She said, looking around with a slowly growing warmth on her face, "This place, Mama D, you..." She said motioning back at him. "You've really surprised me, Daryl." She said, then took a little sip of her wine before lowering the glass to her lap, holding on to it with both hands. "Can we do something?" She asked then, and Daryl had to raise a brow.

"We've been doin somethin." He replied lightly, and she laughed a little.

"No, I mean..." She turned to face him better. "Something along with all of this." She took another sip, then set her glass on the ground. "Let's play a game." He narrowed his gaze on her.

"A game." He reiterated, stretching one arm over the back of the bench. "What kind of game?"

"Okay, so... maybe not a game, exactly. We ask each other questions, taking turns. I ask one, then you answer. You ask one, then I answer. To get to know each other better." She said, smiling at him before chewing her lower lip in that lovely way of hers. "If you want, I mean."

He was quiet, thinking. Did he really want to do this? Most everyone who knew him only knew
things about him because they'd learned along the way or he'd chosen to tell them. He'd never had anyone just pointedly ask him questions before. But then again, Samantha wasn't like anyone else. Not even close. Finally, he felt himself nodding before he realized he was doing it. "Alright." He agreed quietly. And she grinned, practically bouncing in place.

"Good! Great!" She clasped her hands together. "I'll go first, okay?" He just took another sip of the wine in response. "Okay, so..." she paused, watching him, thoughts passing over her eyes. "Where'd you grow up?"

"All over Georgia." He said. And that was all he said. She tilted her head at him.

"Okay, new rule." She said, "No one-liners. You have to be descriptive." She smirked as though the idea of Daryl being descriptive was funny.

"You asked for answers. Didn't say you had to like em." He said, smiling a little. "And it's my turn now." He motioned to her. "What's with the pink?" He asked. He'd been curious about her rather obvious obsession. As if in immediate response, she raised a few fingers to her lips and then shrugged.

"Um... it's cause of Rick, believe it or not." She chuckled a little, and Daryl raised his brows at that. "When I was little, our parents were... well, they were awful. Sure he's told you." She said, meeting his eyes. He nodded lightly. Daryl knew all about how strict, punishing and cruel they had been, all in the name of religion. It amazed him how well Rick had turned out, and how well Samantha had, now that he knew her. "Well, they didn't like me wearing anything too colorful. Said it would attract too much heathen attention." She continued, crossing one knee over the other. "When I was seven, Rick got me a little princess bow for my birthday. He snuck it to me, told me to keep it hidden. I could never wear it when my parents were around, but I loved it. It was all pink, with tiny glittery frills on the edges and little embroidered crowns." She smiled at the memory. " Prettiest thing I'd ever seen. Took better care of that than I did anything else, that's for sure. A few years later, our Dad found me holding it. I'd fallen asleep with it in my hand. He burned it... right in front of me. But I promised myself that when I could, I'd wear as much pink as I could find. Just to spite him. Turns out," she smiled widely at Daryl, "Now I just wear it cause I love it."

"It suits you." He said then, watching her smile just brighten. "Can't really imagine you without it, actually." He admitted and she chuckled.

"I hope that's a good thing." She said, then reached down and grabbed her wine glass to take another sip. "Okay, my turn." She went back to thinking, staring down at what little was left of the wine in her glass. "Have you ever been married before?" She asked, then furrowed her brows at herself like she wasn't even sure why she'd asked it. He just shrugged.

"Naw, too much of an asshole." He responded, setting his now empty glass down beside the bench. She laughed at him.

"Now that's not true. You're not an asshole. Far from it." She said, nudging him with her elbow. "Seriously, how come?" He paused, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slow, thinking about what he should say. He did that a lot. Thought about what came out of his mouth before it went flying around.

"Growin up with an older brother like Merle and a dad who beat you for fun..." he swallowed a little, meeting her gaze, "You can't help but be an asshole. It's how you survive. Wasn't till I landed in the Army that I got my act together. Became my own person. But overseas... the things I saw, what I had to do..." He let that sentence trail off. He really didn't want to elaborate. "When I got out, well..." He cleared his throat, not really wanting to think about the hell he'd gone through overseas.
"I was pretty messed up, jus in a different way. But Rick gave me a chance to be better than what I'd come from. Doesn't mean I'm anywhere close to bein good for anyone else." He let her see the truth of it in his eyes. He believed it entirely. The things he'd done in his life, the things he'd seen... how screwed up his head was... no woman wanted that. A date or two and they got wise to it real fast. It was why he hadn't dated anyone in years.

Without really missing a beat, Samantha reached over and grabbed his knee, squeezing softly. "You're so much better than you think you are, Daryl. I... I wouldn't be here if you weren't." She said, meeting his steely gaze with one of her own. She seemed so adamant about it. She really believed what she'd just said. He had to breathe in and out deeply, just to shake that idea out of his head. She didn't know him like she thought she did. She'd learn and she'd be done with him. And he wouldn't hold it against her even a little.

"My turn." He muttered, watching her hand slip away from his knee slowly. He just desperately needed to change the subject. The questions between them got a lot lighter after that, till they were both laughing and time got completely away from them. They hadn't even realized that Mama D's music had stopped, or that the older woman had long since got to bed. "Shit." He said, glancing at his watch and standing. "We should go. I gotta pick up Vagrant when the sun comes up." He watched her stand, seeing the slight disappointment on her face before she looked at her own dainty little watch.

"Oh wow, I had no idea it was so late... or early. Would you call this early?" She giggled a little, hooking her arm into his as he led her to the fire escape ladder.

"I'd say four thirteen is late and early." He replied, helping her up and over the edge. He watched her begin to climb down some before he lowered himself onto the ladder.

"What're you doin with Vagrant tom- I mean today?" She asked, landing on the flat platform and stepping aside to let him on. He motioned for her to head down the stairs, following close behind her.

"Takin him for a ride up the river, toward the caves about an hour past my place. Figure if I'm being forced to take a vacation, may as well do some huntin." He said, watching her stop and turn to look at him. The shadows of the dim lights outside danced on her features, making her seem honestly dark and lovely.

"Can I come?" She asked, "I mean, I don't know anything about hunting." She let out a light laugh, stepping down again. "But I'd love to see the river and the caves." When they finally reached the bottom, he opened the little gate at the end of the stairs and helped her hop down before doing the same and closing the gate tight, turning to look at her.

"You sure?" He asked, moving toward the sidewalk and the street. She followed closely beside him, snaking her hand into his arm without him offering.

"Yeah. I like being outside. Just don't get a chance to do it much." She said, practically ecstatic next to him. It still amazed him, how the little things seemed to excite her.

"Alright. You know where I live?" He asked, glancing both ways before leading them across the crosswalk. The street was dead quiet. All the lights were out, all the stores and shops closed. It was strangely eerie and peaceful all at once. Like a little ghost town.

"Um, I know you live on that main strip of road where the apple orchard is. Michonne pointed your driveway out to me. Don't know the number or anything. But yeah, I know where it is." She replied, stepping up onto the sidewalk.
"Alright. Meet me there round... six thirty. Wear somethin cool and comfy, a pair of jeans. Some heavy boots, not them blue sneakers of yours." He said, stepping off the curve by her car. "You're not going to get much rest, ya know. Sure you wouldn't rather sleep in?" She unlocked her car door and gave him a very chastising look. He put up a hand, open in surrender. "Yes ma'am, yer sure, I get it." She grinned at him, then gripped her car door, standing on tip toes and kissing his cheek so quickly, he wasn't even sure it had actually happened.

"See you in a few hours!" She exclaimed, then got in, closing the door and starting her car up, leaving no further room for argument. Daryl stepped backward onto the sidewalk, watching her pull out and drive off. Eventually, he snapped out of his momentary stunned state and got into the Jeep, headed home. His side ached, and he was beat. But he felt... good. He wasn't going to get any sleep. That much he knew. Mostly because he had this happy buzz going he didn't want to waste. The date had gone far better than he'd thought it would, given his track record with these sort of things. And now she wanted to go hunting with him? He hadn't seen that coming, at all.

When he got home, he just got busy readying for the trip. Packing double provisions of water and food. He grabbed his little emergency kit which, most of the time, he didn't even think of bringing. But he also didn't normally have someone tagging along. Once he was changed into beat up and far comfier clothes, it was around six. He walked to Carol's to get Vagrant, just as the sun was blazing the horizon, hidden by the woods everywhere. He rode Vagrant back to the cabin just in time to see Sam's little yellow beetle pull in. Looked like there was no way to back out now. Part of him protested that fact, vehemently, inwardly telling him over and over that this was a bad idea and a girl like her had no place being in the woods with a dick like him. But he snuffed it down, hopping off the horse and tying the reins to the sideview mirror of the Jeep.

"Mornin!" She exclaimed, stepping out of her car and waltzing right up to him with the most beautiful pink lipped smile on her face. She reached out, palm flat like he'd taught her, to say hi to Vagrant, who simply nibbled at her palm, making her giggle. "Still feels so funny." She said. Even with no sleep, she looked and sounded amazing to him. And oddly, she seemed to just be happy to be around him. He could only hope that by the time the day was through, she still felt the same as she did right then.
"I won't let you, or anyone else, hurt Daryl Dixon if I can help it."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: violence, talk of drugs)

The night of Daryl's and Samantha's date, Dusty Hendee was sitting in the back corner booth of probably the worst lit bar he'd ever been in. Not that he cared. It only helped to hide him from view, right along with the hat and sunglasses he wore when he was working. He didn't have a terribly noticeable face, but still. Better not to be recognized at all. Especially after all the news now surrounding Spinners. It wasn't his fault people didn't use them responsibly. He just sold the shit. If they overdosed, that was on them.

He'd heard about Martin Franklin, a repeat customer. Not exactly a stand-up guy to begin with, so Dusty wouldn't have thought twice. Drugees died all the time. Just par for the course. But his death had captured Dusty's interest almost immediately. He had eyes and ears everywhere, thanks to the Old Man, the guy who'd masterminded Spinners and their distribution. And a little birdy had told Dusty what had gone down at the Franklin's farmhouse.

Daryl Dixon, of all people, had shot Martin, getting himself hurt in the process. And all because he was a Sheriff's Deputy. Dusty had almost thought it was a joke. But lo and behold, right on the Cooke County Sheriff's Department website was a picture of all the deputies and the sheriff standing in front of their building, Daryl Dixon last on the left.

It had been years, really, since he'd heard that name. And even more time since he'd seen or heard from Daryl. After their last tour in Afghanistan, Daryl apparently wanted nothing to do with the military, or any of the memories that went with it. Including Dusty. Sure as hell couldn't blame the man.

Dusty still had nightmares about that last mission, the one that had nearly killed both of them. It was supposed to have been a simple extract and escort. A handful of World First doctors got themselves trapped behind enemy lines. Their unit, six of the best soldiers Dusty had ever known, was supposed to get them out of Kandahar, traveling straight through a gutted and long since destroyed neighborhood to a rendezvous point that was supposed to be clear, according to all their intel.

Getting the doctors was easy. Getting them out? Well, someone dropped the ball big time. Their extraction through the neighborhood was blown. Quite literally. War was a terrible, nasty thing that didn't discriminate. Men, women, children... didn't matter. People died. And sometimes, there was just no way around it. Which their entire unit had learned that day in the most terrible way possible.

They got half way down a strip of road in the desolated and supposedly abandoned series of buildings when an explosion rang out, blocking any possible exit behind them as well as killing two of their fellow soldiers and pushing two more back, behind the debris. The doctors, Dixon and Dusty had nowhere else to go but forward, not knowing if any of the buildings around them were rigged as well. The priority was getting those WF docs out of there, and fast. But what came toward them had them just as trapped as the debris wall of stone and concrete behind them.

She couldn't have been older than ten.
Attached to her body was a vest, crudely rigged with enough explosive and bags of nails and metal shards to kill them all at least ten times over. She was crying, tears streaming down her face, her hands shaking uncontrollably, and she was speaking in a language none of them could understand, constantly glancing over her shoulder. They yelled at her to stop, knowing full well there was someone hiding somewhere, watching her with their finger on a button, waiting for her to get close enough to set the bomb off. But the girl kept coming. Daryl ordered the doctors to take shelter, the five of them hiding themselves behind broken slabs of concrete or desolated walls. There was no clear way out.

Dusty remembered the look on Daryl's face. The grief, the anger and the shift in his spirit like he was broken before he even had a chance to recognize it himself. They had their orders. They had innocent civilians to get to safety. It was one young life... for seven. Daryl pushed Dusty down, stepping out into plain view and taking several long, quick strides toward the girl, drawing his sidearm. The sound of that gun going off would never leave Dusty. It settled deep into his bones like a disease that had no cure. Daryl had shot the girl right in the head, far enough away from everyone that when whatever bastard had done that to her to begin with set the bomb off, no one got hurt. Except for Daryl, that is.

He didn't quite make it back to the others in time.

His body had been riddled with shrapnel. Everything happened fast after that. The other two still living soldiers regrouped with them, Dusty shot the asshole with the trigger as he tried to run away, they got the doctors out on a helo, and Daryl was flown to the nearest med unit. Seven surgeries and eight months later, and Daryl was honorably discharged and sent home. Dusty still remembered the last time he'd seen him. His body may have healed, but his spirit... his head... there were just some things that doctors couldn't fix. And shooting that girl to save everyone else had broken something inside Daryl so badly that Dusty didn't think he'd ever recover.

And yet, here he was. A Sheriff's Deputy. Good for you, man. He thought, toasting the empty seat across from him before lifting the whiskey to his lips. He downed the entire glass, letting out a huge sigh and glancing up just as a man slid into the booth across from him. "Seat's taken." Dusty said plainly. The other man just smirked a little, settling in, apparently hard of hearing.

"It is now, friend." He said, resting his hands on the table. Or... one hand, actually. The other was just a stump. Dusty raised a brow at him, narrowing his gaze. "Rumor has it yer the guy to talk to about Spinners." The man added. Dusty just stayed still, turning his empty glass over and moving to slide out of his seat. He didn't say a word, just slapped down a twenty and headed for the door. The one handed man just got up and followed him. "Hey, now! That any way to treat a customer?" He heard him demand from behind him as he stepped out into the mostly empty parking lot. He felt the man grab him by the arm, stopping him. Dusty yanked his arm free, facing up with the other man. "Don't ever touch me." He growled out. The other man backed up, his one hand going up like a white flag.

"Hey, I ain't tryin to start any trouble. I just wanna purchase some of your goods. Sally said you were the one to talk to." He said, acting all calm and innocent. Dusty tilted his head a little. Sally was one of the Old Man's better runners.

"How much?" He asked, standing completely still, studying the man before him. There was something... familiar about him. The man grinned then.

"However much two hundred fifty dollars will get me." The man said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a wad of cash. Dusty just glanced at it.
"What's your name?" He asked then, reaching out and taking the cash, turning for his black Ford pickup. The man followed closely behind.

"What do names matter?" He asked as they both stopped at the back of the truck. Dusty looked at him.

"I don't deal, unless I know who I'm dealing with." It was a rule he had, one that the Old Man stood behind. No sense in getting his ass trapped in situations he couldn't get out of. It was always good to have a little leverage on his customers. The man nodded slowly.

"Merle." He said. And it occurred to Dusty then why the man seemed familiar. He'd seen a picture of him before. Daryl had shown him.

"Merle Dixon." He said flatly. And Merle raised a brow.

"How'd you know that? Have we met before?" He asked. Dusty clenched his jaw and grabbed Merle's hand, putting the money back in it.

"You think I'm an idiot?" He said, letting Merle go quickly before fishing his keys out of his pocket. "Your brother's a deputy." He said, and began to move toward the front of the truck when Merle hastily got in his way.

"Hey, now... I said I didn't want no trouble for you. I swear, I ain't tryin to get you caught. My brother's the one I need the drugs for." He said, and Dusty had to stop at that. Daryl Dixon had been a lot of things, but a drug user was never one of them.

"Why?" He demanded then, pushing Merle back a step out of his personal space. Merle gave a small smile that Dusty did not like.

"Well, my brother's been a bit uppity of late. Went so far as to arrest me, his own brother." He said, then motioned to the truck. "Your product, I hear, makes people act out when taken in too big a dose. I plan on giving my brother a little taste of that medicine, so his friends at the Sheriff's office will see what he's really like. Bring him down a peg or two. Or ten." He grinned, then held the wad of cash back out. "What better way to stick it to the man than to take it out on a pig cop, right?"

Dusty could not help the controlled anger that bubbled up inside him. He remembered the stories that Daryl had told him, about how awful his dad and brother had been to him. How Merle's shit had landed Daryl in jail, which was how he wound up in the Army in the first place. And now Merle wanted to drug him? His own brother?

Dusty reached out and took the cash again. "Alright." He said, moving back toward the bed of the truck and opening the tail gate, dragging forward a strong lock box that was hidden beneath a strapped tarp. He had his back to Merle, popping the lid and reaching in. "But there's somethin you should know about me, Merle." He said, then turned so fast that Merle didn't even have a chance to react.

The blade of the hunting knife drove up and into Merle, just below his ribs. The look of shock on his face was almost priceless to Dusty. "I won't let you, or anyone else, hurt Daryl Dixon if I can help it." Merle blinked, blood foaming a little at the corners of his mouth. Dusty then twisted the knife, driving it straight to the hilt, finding Merle's heart. He didn't pull it out till the light went out of his eyes and he crumbled to the ground, as dead as could be. Dusty wiped his blade on Merle's shirt, then tossed the knife back into the box. He closed the tailgate, then tossed Merle's money down onto his bleeding body. He didn't even give him a second look as he got into the truck and drove away, leaving Merle Dixon to meet his maker in hell...
Riding Vagrant through the woods was oddly relaxing, especially with the familiar presence of Daryl at her back. They were riding like they had the first time, only with Daryl's crossbow and supplies attached to the saddle. She'd asked him about his weapon of choice. It wasn't exactly what she equated with hunting, not that she knew a damn thing about hunting. He'd said it was quieter, more challenging and did less damage to the animal. She wasn't sure how she felt about the whole killing animals thing. But this was Georgia. And people hunted.

He was as quiet as usual behind her, the heat of the day beginning to fill the air with humidity, but in the denseness of the forest they were spared from most of the sun. She was wearing jeans, like he'd said, and a short sleeved gray t-shirt with a large black treble symbol on it. She'd had to borrow some of Michonne's boots, because all of hers were far too girly to be tromping around in the woods with. Luckily, she and her sister-in-law wore the same size shoe.

"Almost there." He said, motioning a little further ahead of them. The sound of trickling water met her ears and the woods got far less dense until finally they came to the river bank. It was... well, amazing. Everything was so green, and the water was so clear, running over the rocks in a steady pace. He hopped off the horse first, then reached up, helping her down with his hands firmly on her hips, setting her on the ground easily. She stepped away from him, carefully making her way around a slick boulder to a downed tree, or more like a log, peering out over the water.

"This is the spot you told me about?" She asked, glancing back at him as he unhooked his crossbow, hoisting it off the back of the saddle. He then grabbed his dark green back pack, slipping it on over his shoulders. He was wearing an army green, sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of brown, beat up pants. If she didn't know how delicious he could actually look, she would have wondered if he had any taste at all in clothes. She smiled lightly at him as he wrapped the reins very loosely around the pommel of the saddle, so that Vagrant could graze of his own volition.

"Yeah." He said, finally, moving to her side. "Most peaceful place I know." She watched his eyes roam the river, a calm coming over him. She slipped her hands around his bicep, leaning lightly into him, loving the look on his face.

"It's beautiful here, really." She said, his eyes moving to her face. "Thank you for showing me." He nodded, then stepped down the bank.

"Come on. We'll step across here." He said, stepping onto a large and somewhat slippery looking stone about a foot into the river.

"But..." she paused, reaching for his hand cautiously, "What about Vagrant?" She asked, letting him help her step to the next rock.

"Don't worry bout him. He'll come when he's good an ready." Daryl replied, leading the way once she was sure she wasn't going to fall in. Not that the water was deep at this point, but that would be a hell of a way to start their day. Once on the other side, he helped her up the sloping bank. "Show you the caves next." He said, leading the way, moving around trees and rocks and logs like he'd walked that particular route a million times. He was as at home out in the woods as he was in town. She loved his confidence, the way he just seemed to thrive no matter where he was. He kept his crossbow low as he went, eyes studying everything around them like he was looking for signs of something.

"Are you tracking?" She asked quietly, following as close as she dared without tripping them both.
He nodded, wordlessly.

"Deer like to stick close to the water if they can. All these tracks are old, though." He said, and she looked down. She couldn't see any tracks. "We'll double back after, go up the other end of the river. But first..." He reached back for her and drew her forward to stand next to him. Then he put a finger to his lips in a shushing motion before pointing up a slight incline. A fox was peaking its head out of a burrow, ears and nose twitching as it caught their scent. "That's Lady." He said very softly. "Jus had her pups a few weeks back." Samantha couldn't help it, she just beamed big and wide.

"You named a fox?" She said, curling her hand into his shirt to stay steady as she got up on tip toes to see better. "Instead of hunting her?" Daryl shrugged.

"Not enough meat on her bones." He said with a slight smirk. "Besides, I don't kill for sport." He put a hand behind her, fingers lightly on her lower back and urging her around the burrow. "I hunt for the meat. Use the hide and everythin, if I can." They went up the incline, and came up to a very large, downed tree with its roots exposed and its width long since hollowed in the middle. It was covered in moss, and even a few ferns. He helped her crawl beneath it, coming out the other side to the view of a large rock formation. He led her right up to it, pulling aside a sapling to reveal an opening in the rock. "In ya go." He said, holding it out of the way for her. She grinned at him, then slipped in.

It was so much cooler inside, like the humidity and heat didn't even touch the air in the rocks. And the space inside was so much bigger than she would have thought, the ground flattened out and covered in sandy dirt. There was a set of three crates alongside a smoothed stone slab. Daryl went right to them when he came inside, reaching in and pulling out a flashlight. It wasn't terribly dark in there, the light trickling in from places unseen. But the flashlight certainly made things brighter.

"I keep supplies in here, jus in case. Camp in here when I don't feel like headin back." He handed the flashlight out to her, setting his backpack down against the crates after. "They go on for awhile that way." He said, motioning to where the cave seemed to curve into the dark. "Goes a little lower, splits off. Think people used to use this place long before I found it. Come on, I'll show ya." He said, stepping past her, crossbow now on his back, his strap across his chest. She let out a soft giggle as she followed, and he glanced over his shoulder at her with a raised brow.

"I feel like we're explorers... like on one of those Discovery Channel shows." She grinned at him. And he smiled, making her feel all sorts of silly. She nudged him with her elbow, catching up to his side. "We could be like Indiana Jones, finding hidden treasure and outrunning the bad guys by sheer luck."

"Bad guys, huh." He said, rounding the corner. And when she followed, she had to gasp a little. The cave beyond was way bigger than the first area. The roof, if that was what it was called, was so much higher. It was all like one large round room, and there was a little trickling stream coming from somewhere unseen, pouring down the face of the rock into a little pool. "Found all kinds of old tools in here. Even one of those single load rifles... the kind you shove the thing into in order to load." He stepped in past her as she shone the flashlight around, heading for a beam of light that was coming down straight through the roof like some angelic beacon. He stopped in the middle of it, turning to look at her.

"I really have to get out into nature more, especially if there are places like this to find!" She exclaimed, moving toward him and staring up into the light as she did, the hole in the roof revealing a branch covered sky where sun trickled down between leaves. When she lowered her head, she found Daryl standing very close to her, watching her, his face a perfect calm in the cool air around them. He lifted a hand wordlessly, smoothing some stray strands of hair out of her face, letting his
fingers glide down her neck after. Goosebumps covered her skin everywhere, head to toe, and for a moment she was breathless. For a moment, her heart sped up and stopped somehow at the same time. For a moment she thought maybe... maybe he was going to kiss her. But something happened to his expression. A confusion came over him, and passed quickly into a calm blankness as he stepped back, taking his enticing fingers with him.

"Come on." He said softly. "Should get started on huntin, if you still want to, that is." She blinked at him as he turned his back on her, heading back the way they came. It was like someone had just knocked the oomph out of her. Had she done something wrong?

"Daryl... wait..." she blurted, watching him stiffen ahead of her, but stop. She came up to him, having to go around him because he wasn't turning. She pointed the flashlight at the ground. "What's wrong?" She asked softly. He stared at her, his deep blue eyes quiet. She furrowed her brows at him a little. "Do you... you like me, right?" She asked then, reaching out and touching his good side. He glanced down at her hand, his face sobering a little.

"Course I do." He said, his voice tentative, his eyes lingering back to her face. She took a deep breath, letting it out.

"Then... why is it every time we seem to get close, you pull away? I know... I know we don't know each other really well, but we're learning, right? So... so if you like me, why do you pull away?" Samantha couldn't believe she was just coming out and asking all this. But it was there, it needed to be asked. "I know we just had our first date last night, so don't get me wrong... I don't want to rush anything. But I feel like... like we've been dancing around each other since we met, ya know?" She could feel him thinking, like every word she said was burrowing its way into his head and forcing him to work on it.

"I don't want to hurt you." He finally said, his jaw clenching lightly afterward. "You've been through enough." She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting him to say, but it wasn't that. Why on earth would he ever think he'd hurt her? She couldn't fathom it. It just wasn't a possibility in her mind. So why would he think it? He stepped back a little. "I jus... it's been a long time, since I've had a relationship." His voice was so quiet, almost nervous. "I don't wanna screw things up." She let out a slow breath, closing the space between them gently.

"Daryl, you're not going to hurt me. And you're definitely not going to screw things up. We've both got pasts and both have our demons to deal with. But you've never been anything but kind and gentle with me. I completely believe that you would never hurt me." She shook her head a little at him. "I wish you knew... I didn't think, after all that Liam had done to me, that I would ever be ready to have a relationship again. But then I met you and you just... you make me happy, just by being you. You make me glad to be who I am. And that means so much to me, Daryl. You just don't know." She let her words fill the space between them. "I don't want to rush things. I really don't. But I don't want us to fight... whatever this is between us. Promise me you won't fight it anymore." She gave him a light, yearning smile. "Please, Daryl?"

For a moment, he was far too still. Then he nodded, smiling lightly back at her. "You talk a lot." He said then, making her smile a little brighter. She giggled a little, lowering her forehead to his chest.

"It's a bad habit." She mumbled, feeling his hands come up to her sides. God, she loved his hands.

"Don't ever stop." He muttered, then stepped back, gently grabbing one of her hands and leading her back to where they'd come in. When they reached the crates, and he bent down to pick up his pack, his phone went off in his pocket.

"You get service inside a cave?" She asked incredulously, shutting off the flashlight and putting it in
a crate as he fished his phone out of his pocket, raising a brow when he saw the number.

"It's Rick. One sec." He hit the green call button and held the phone to his ear. "Hey." He said, glancing at Samantha as she picked up the pack instead and put it on her shoulders. "Wait... Rick, stop, one sec. Need to get outside." He said, and motioned to Sam with his head as he went back through the cave opening. She followed him, both of them taking a few steps beyond the brush. "Alright, go ahead." He said, and after a moment or two of Rick talking, a change came over Daryl's face. Shock, slowly turning to nothing she could recognize. She watched him just sit, right where he'd been standing, like someone just shoved him down. His free hand went to his face like someone had punched him. He dropped the phone.

"Daryl?!" She said worriedly, kneeling at his side, her hands going to his shoulder and his knee. It took her a second to realize he was shaking. "Daryl, what's wrong? What happened?" He breathed heavily, wiping angrily at his face, tears glistening where they hadn't been before. He looked at her, and there was just so much pain in his eyes.

"My brother..." He managed to choke out. He shook his head, trying so hard not to cry. "Someone killed him." He muttered. And that was all she needed to hear. She pulled him into her. It didn't matter that Merle had been a royal ass. This was Daryl's brother. Regardless if they got along or not, they had a history. And it couldn't have been all bad. He clung to her, crying almost instantly, holding on to her for dear life. All she could do was hold him, soothe him, whisper that she was there, that he wasn't alone, for as long as he needed.

She felt a tear or two of her own escape, her breath catching in her throat for a moment. She knew grief. Knew how much it tore at a person, how much of a hole it ripped right into someone's spirit. She hated it as much as anyone else. But feeling this man go through it, this incredible person in her arms suffering so suddenly with it... it just made her hate it even more.
"Oh my god! Rick! It's him!"

It had been a little over a month since Daryl's brother was murdered. There were no leads when it first happened, no fingerprints, no forensic evidence except for what type of blade was used and the fact the attack itself was right out of a military handbook. No one saw or heard anything, and the camera in the bar parking lot was for show only. It was quickly becoming a cold case, and Rick couldn't feel worse. Or maybe he could.

He had no love for Merle Dixon. Hell, no one did. Except, of course, for Daryl, who'd never quite been able to turn his back on his older brother. Even after he'd cleaned up his life, Merle Dixon still seemed to have one foot over the threshold. If anything, Rick wanted to find Merle's killer just to give Daryl some peace. Because Daryl was blaming himself. *If I tried harder, if I didn't give him any outs, maybe he'd of turned his shit around, man! Maybe he wouldn't be dead right now! I failed him*!' Daryl had said. But he'd been wrong. Daryl hadn't failed anyone. Merle was the only one who'd failed, and failed hard. Especially when it came to Daryl. And now, Rick felt like he was failing Daryl, too.

In the beginning, Rick had seen something in the younger Dixon that no one else had seemed to witness. An eagerness to learn, a drive to move forward, and so much strength that if used right could be priceless. Rick saw a good man in Daryl, even if Daryl couldn't at the time. And he'd been right. Daryl still had his demons, his ghosts and issues that he dealt with. And there were times his temper got the better of him. But he was a good man with a kind heart who never turned down an opportunity to help. He was so much more than the world had wanted him to be, more than the life he'd been born into. In that much, he and Rick were very much alike.

It was why they'd grown so close. Their childhoods had been shit. Maybe not in the same way, but still. They both wanted nothing to do with what they came from. And it had helped them bond. Now, Rick couldn't imagine a life without Daryl in it. The man was his brother, his partner and friend. There was no one in the world he trusted more with his life or the lives of the people he loves the most. Including Samantha.

He'd seen how close they were becoming, Sammy and Daryl. And at first, he'd had his reservations. Mostly because he knew how badly Liam had hurt Sam. For years, he'd beaten her. He abused her mentally, emotionally and physically. A lot of which she'd hidden so well that Rick didn't even know about most of it. Sure, he'd had his suspicions. But they lived hundreds of miles apart and Liam had controlled her so much, she'd almost written Rick out of her life.

Yet still she rebelled. She held on to who she was so tightly that no matter how hard Liam had tried, he couldn't erase her. She stashed money away over the years, she kept records of everything she could, she kept up with her singing and music. She fought him in every little way she could to stay who she was.

It wasn't until Liam threw Samantha down a flight of stairs, nearly killing her, that -as she called it- she came to her senses. While she was recuperating in the hospital, she reported Liam to the police. They'd tried to arrest him. He ran, and no one's seen him since. He'd probably headed for the border into Canada, if he was smart. Two months later, after Samantha had sold off most of their valuables and changed her last name back to Grimes, she came back to Georgia, hell bent on recreating herself and being her own woman for the first time. And Rick couldn't have been more proud or happy. But Sam was still fragile in some ways. She still had nightmares, an ingrained fear that Liam was going to crawl out of the woodwork and finish what he'd started. In a way she was still fighting him, she maybe always would.
There was no way in hell that Daryl would ever hurt Samantha intentionally. And Rick knew that. But he also knew how bad things could get with Daryl. If someone wasn't strong enough to ride out the storms with him, then hurt was all they'd get. People needed to see what Daryl hid so expertly beneath the surface, and that was not as easy as it sounded. The group, for lack of a better term, had taken Daryl into the fold and it had taken months for everyone to find the caring, wonderful man beneath all the gruff exterior. None of them had given up. Not once. And now Daryl was family to all of them.

Rick worried about Daryl, too, when it came to Samantha. He didn't want Sammy to get attached to Daryl, realize she might not be ready after all, and up and leave at the first sign of difficulty. She'd break his heart if that happened. And he might not ever recover. It had been Michonne who'd finally told Rick not to worry about either one so much. They were both adults. And yeah, it might get tough at some points, but if they were meant to be, they'd figure it out. He hated when Michonne was right. Which was always. Which was part of the reason why he loved the woman.

Ever since Merle's passing, though, Daryl had been essentially a ghost to everyone who knew him. He still went to work, did his job, but didn't speak unless it was work related. When it came to his friends, Daryl was keeping everyone at arms length. He'd stopped going to the diner and only ever saw Carol if she was around when he picked up Vagrant. Maggie and Glenn tried to check in on him, but he was never at home when they did. And when it came to Samantha? Well, Daryl hadn't spoken to her since their hastily cut short hunting trip. He'd hung up her sign for her just like he'd said he would, but he'd done so in the middle of the night when she wasn't around. And if they saw each other in passing, he wouldn't give her more than a nod or a quick 'hey'. If she tried to strike up a conversation with him, he'd find a way to get out of it or simply walk away.

Samantha, in turn, chose to drown herself in work. The studio was officially open and she already had about a dozen clients, mostly kids. She was on cloud nine, being able to teach again and to use her talents how she'd always wanted. But she was also worried about Daryl. As much, if not more so, than Rick was. He didn't blame her. She didn't understand how Daryl thought. That pulling away was easier when it came to dealing with his pain. Letting people in? That was hard. "What if he never wants to talk to me again? I mean, Ricky... I don't want that. I miss just being around him. And, well... if he doesn't want to, ya know, date or whatever, that's fine! I can live with that! But I hate how things are. I just want to help him. I miss talking to him." She said on the other end of the phone. Rick was at home, sitting on his porch, taking a break from mowing the lawn.

"He'll come around, Sammy. You just have to understand how Daryl deals with things. He's never really been good at letting people in. You kind of have to make him do it against his will." Rick said with a smirk before raising the beer bottle to his lips and taking a small sip. He heard her sigh on the other end.

"I just feel so terrible about everything. After all he did for me, and now I have no idea how to help him. What kind of friend am I?" She pouted. He could almost imagine her sitting there in her car, parked on the side of the road with her arms crossed, pouting like a kid in time out.

"I don't know how to do that. It's not exactly like I can stroll up to his front door and demand he listen to me and my ramblings." She said. Rick could hear the humor in her tone, but the worry was still there. "I just feel so terrible about everything. After all he did for me, and now I have no idea how to help him. What kind of friend am I?" She pouted. He could almost imagine her sitting there in her car, parked on the side of the road with her arms crossed, pouting like a kid in time out.

"Just be patient with him, don't give up on him. That's how you help him, Sammy. Now get your ass home. Michonne's making roast and she needs those vegetables to do it." He told her. Sammy had agreed to drive to the little road side market where a vegetable stand was that was owned by Maggie and Glenn, to buy potatoes and whatnot for dinner. It's where she was when she called.

"Pushy." He heard her say, the sound of her car starting in the background. "I got some sweet potatoes, too. Was thinking of making that-" And suddenly her voice cut off, and what he heard next
was a hasty and frightened whisper. "Oh my god! Rick! It's him!" Rick straightened a little, feeling confused.

"Him, who? Daryl?" But why would she be afraid of Daryl?

"No! It's Liam! I swear I just saw him! He was right across the street, watching me! Oh my god, what do I do?!" Her every word was laced with fear, real and seeping into the phone. Rick stood up straight.

"Sammy, calm down. Listen to me. You're closer to Daryl's. Drive there, right now. Get inside and don't leave till you hear from me, you understand? Daryl will keep you safe. Drive, now. Go." He ordered her, fishing his keys out of his pocket and going inside. "I'm headed to the market now. Do not stop till you get to Daryl's." And he hung up the phone, told Michonne about the call and left, his truck tires squealing in the driveway on the way out. He had no reason not to believe Sammy about who she'd seen. And if Liam really was in Georgia, then he better pray Rick didn't find him. Because he wasn't going to leave Georgia alive...
"I believe you, Sam. Got no reason not to."

It was a cooler, late afternoon that it had been in days. For Fall being just around the corner, Georgia still felt like it had been dunked in lava most of the time. Not that Daryl minded much. He'd grown up in the heat and humidity. It was all just second nature to him. Which was why he had no problem being out in the heat, stacking firewood beside the house for the wood stove and fireplace. He'd spent most of the day chopping. His hands had splinters and his arms were sore, but it all felt pretty damn good to him. It was just a sign of hard work done right. He was halfway through the last stack when he heard the churning of dirt and sand from the end of his driveway and the speeding of an engine barreling toward his cabin.

He stepped over some scattered wood, making his way around to the side of the front porch just in time to see Samantha's little yellow car slide to a stop and Samantha hastily get out, nearly tripping over herself as she ran up the few steps. "Daryl!" She yelled out, not having seen him on the side of the house, banging on the door for dear life. "Please! Please, open up!" She sounded so desperate, it made him practically run to her.

"Sam?" He asked, coming up the steps from behind her. She screamed lightly, turning and nearly flattening herself against the door she'd just been banging on. Daryl stopped completely, putting his hands up, confusion all over his face. "What's wro-" He didn't even get a chance to finish the question. She practically threw herself at him, her arms tightening around his shoulders and neck. He barely had time to catch her, having to step back once off the porch steps. He could instantly feel her shaking, crying. "Shit, Sam, what happened?" He asked a little gruffly, but completely concerned. Suddenly everything that had been plaguing him lately, all the distance he'd tried to put in between them, didn't matter anymore. His Sam was terrified, and all he wanted in that moment was to protect her at all costs.

"I saw Liam, at the market." She managed to get out, prying herself off him, her face covered in wet tears, her eyes wide with a fear Daryl wanted to just erase. He never wanted to see her look so scared. "I... I called Rick and he said you were close so I should come here because you'd keep me safe, and he said he would go to the market, but what if Liam followed me? Oh my god, Daryl, what if he's coming?!" She was rambling so fast, Daryl had a hard time keeping up. He reached up and held her face in his hands, then, feeling her eyes lock on him, her breath shudder a little.

"First, ya gotta calm down." He said sternly, making sure she kept focus on him. "Let's get you inside and we'll call Rick. Alright?" He tried to sound reassuring, calm. But there was a deep anger boiling inside him. Like the pits of hell had been opened up in his chest. Liam, that fucking bastard. If he comes here, I'll skin him alive. Daryl thought to himself, but nodded at Samantha and helped her to the door, getting her inside and closing the door behind them. He made sure she saw him lock it. When he turned to look at her, she was hugging herself, staring at him, silent tears rolling down her face. And for a moment, all he could do was stare back. He had no idea what he was supposed to do. Hug her, you jackass. He told himself. Then crossed the distance between them before his inner monologue could change his mind.

He held her, pulling her into him and wrapping his arms firmly around her shaking form. She buried her face into his chest almost instantly, letting out a shuddering sigh, her hands gripping his sides for dear life. And they stayed like that for a long few minutes, till her body stopped trembling and she finally lifted her head, hands letting him go so she could dry her tears. "Better?" He asked, not sure if he should let her go just yet. She gave him a small, unsure smile, but nodded, stepping back. "Alright, lemmie call Rick." He said, letting her go and getting his phone out of his pocket.
It only took one ring for Rick to answer. "Hey man, Sam's here. She's safe." Daryl said immediately. He heard Rick sigh in relief on the other end.

"I looked everywhere near the market, still asking around. Got Mason patrolling. But if he was here, he's long gone. No one else saw him. Maybe... maybe she just imagined it." Rick said softly. Daryl glanced at Samantha who had wandered over to the couch and was sitting with her face in her hands.

"I dunno, man. She's awfully worked up." He said after turning his back to her, keeping his voice low. "She really believes she saw him."

"That's why I'm going to give heads up to people. Put up some wanted fliers. Think she's able to drive home? I can always have Michonne come pick her up." Rick offered. Daryl turned and looked at Sam, and shook his head quietly.

"I'll ask her what she wants to do. I'll text you." Then he and Rick said their goodbyes and hung up. Daryl went into the kitchen, grabbed a clean washcloth, wet it and grabbed a glass of water. Both of which he brought to Sam, sitting his rear on his coffee table so he could see her. "Drink." He said, holding the glass out to her. She blinked a little, then drank. And when she was finished, Daryl reached forward with the cool cloth and wiped her face. She just watched him, her brown eyes focusing on his face till he was done.

"What... what did Rick say?" She asked very softly, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. Daryl shrugged.

"Couldn't find Liam. No one else saw him. But everyone's gonna keep an eye out. He wanted to know if you were up to driving home or if you wanted Michonne to pick you up." He pretty much summarized the whole conversation. Her face got softly confused after a moment.

"No one else saw him? Was he sure?" She asked, brows furrowing. "I didn't make it up, Daryl. I saw him. I would know Liam anywhere, and that was him!" She blurted out, a tinge of anger in her voice. Daryl didn't even flinch. He just let out a slow breath, then gripped her knee lightly.

"No one said you made it up. Just said that no one else saw him." He said sternly, "Rick's gonna put out wanted posters and we got a patrol out. Doin everythin we can, okay?" He asked, letting her leg go and standing, grabbing the empty glass and going back toward the kitchen. He heard her follow hastily behind him. "I'll drive ya home." He said, setting the glass in the sink and turning to see her standing there, arms crossed, staring at him with probably the most frustrated look he'd ever seen on her face. It was cute, actually. He raised a brow at her. "What?"

"You believe me? That I saw Liam?" She asked, not moving. Daryl blinked.

"Pretty sure I jus said that." He said, moving toward her, but she still didn't move.

"No. You said that no one said I made it up." He could hear the edges of tears in her voice, mingling with fear and frustration. "Daryl, I saw him. I swear to you, I saw him." She said the last part so shakily that Daryl had to sigh a little, lifting a hand and smoothing his fingers into her hair, his thumb crossing over her cheek.

"I believe you, Sam. Got no reason not to." He said softly. And like before, she was suddenly just hugging him. He grabbed hold of her instinctively, and just waited. He could feel her trembling, a fearful shake that started somewhere inside her. And he wanted nothing more than to take that away. "Would..." he began, then swallowed, shaking his head at himself, only to have her lift her eyes to look at him. He met her gaze. "Would it make you feel safer to stay here tonight?" He asked, feeling a little ridiculous. Why would that make her feel safer? She was just as safe with Rick, after all. But
something shifted in her eyes, and she gave an emotional little smile.

"Yes. I... I think I'd feel safer here. I mean, if it's okay with you." She replied. He shook his head at her, then kissed her forehead before he realized he'd done it. He stepped back, letting her go and moving around her.

"Offered, didn't I?" He said over his shoulder. "I'll tell your brother." He could feel her at his back, following him again. "Jus relax for a bit. Gonna go pull the tarp over the wood. I'll be right back in." He nodded at her, giving her a firmly reassuring look, then headed outside before either one of them could change their minds.

He didn't know why, but his heart was running a marathon as he texted Rick. What had just happened, exactly? The first woman he'd been seriously attracted to in years was now spending the night at his house. She'd come to him, of all people, when she was afraid, even after he'd tried his best to put her off. And he couldn't be happier about that. In fact, he'd never really been sure pushing her away was the right choice in the first place. He'd only done it because he knew how angry he was when Merle died, how hard it was to control that anger when it was full blown. And he didn't want her to get hurt by his reckless emotions. Yet here she was, seeking him out for safety.

He drew the large green tarp over the wood he'd already stacked, tucking it in and pinning it in place with stones. He hated that he was happy that she was here. She was only here cause she was scared. He shouldn't be happy about that. And yet... the way she'd hugged him, the way he'd just lost his head and asked her to stay? Damn.

She'd asked him, the day he got the call about Merle, not to fight this thing between them. He still wasn't quite sure what this thing even was. Just that every time he thought to end it, she seemed to magically worm her way back into his head.

So why fight it, Dixon? It was all happening for a reason, right? He knew it wasn't that simple, though. Nothing in his life ever was. The past always had ideas of its own.

As he made his way back up the steps, he paused, looking in the direction of the woods where the river lay a ways beyond. He closed his eyes, just long enough to picture the rolling current, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slow. Then he went back in, determined just to worry about keeping her safe... and nothing else.
"She's a pain. Don't let her fool ya."

Sam heard the shower shut off and hastily slipped the oversized t-shirt on over her head. It was all gray with little black stains on it she couldn't quite identify. But it smelled clean, and even better, smelled like Daryl. He'd also given her a pair of plaid pajama pants that she'd had to seriously cinch around her waist. The t-shirt, once in place, fell far below her waist. It almost touched her knees. She was pretty much swimming in it, and felt a little ridiculous. But it was better than sleeping in her own clothes.

Daryl had spent the afternoon trying to keep her calm, getting updates from Rick every hour or so. Then he'd made her dinner. Spaghetti with turkey meat. And it was amazing. Which was saying something because Sam wasn't a big fan of pasta to begin with. He'd insisted on taking a shower, because he'd been working all day and was, in his words, 'covered in grime and splinters.' She'd instantly felt nervous about being left alone, but then realized how stupid that was considering she was literally in the same house as him. He gave her clothes to change into and went to shower.

She was now standing in front of the mirror in his room, staring at herself in his clothes. She liked Daryl's room. In fact, she liked his whole place. There was a cozy feeling to it all, like there was peace itself built into the walls. The fact that Daryl had built the cabin from the ground up by himself might have had something to do with it. It all had such a rustic feel to it, like they were in the middle of nowhere, and yet it still had everything anyone could need. Including a cat.

Jasper, who Samantha had learned was the resident queen of Castle Dixon, meowed up at her. The little one eared, half tailed cat sat down, paws together like a princess. Sam smiled, sitting down on the floor right next to the cat, running her hand over the feline's head. "What do you think, Jasper?" She asked the cat who just closed her eyes and kept purring in succession. "Mind if I stay the night?" She continued. Jasper's response was to flop down entirely and roll over for a belly rub. Sam giggled a little, shaking her head.

"She's a pain. Don't let her fool ya." Daryl said, standing in the doorway. Sam looked up to see him in pajama pants of his own, rubbing a towel through his hair. And not a lick of clothes otherwise. If she'd been a genius, it didn't register anymore. The ability to think just evaporated. Daryl Dixon without a shirt on was the stuff wet dreams were made of. Bad Sam, stop that. She inwardly scolded. But she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

There was a scar where he'd been stabbed by Martin Franklin, pink and clean about the length of a pencil. There were also older scars, nothing she could recognize. The worst was right over his right ribs. It looked like something had ground his flesh up like a hamburger, and it had healed white and angry looking. He noticed her staring at him, then stepped around her, opening one of the dresser drawers and pulling out a brown t-shirt. That was when she saw the scars on his back, though he tried to keep his back out of her view.

What had he been through to cause so much damage to his body?

She remembered Rick saying Daryl had been pretty badly injured in the Army. Maybe that was it. She watched Daryl toss the towel into a hamper next to the closet and then pull his shirt on, making her feel... well, disappointed. Despite the scars, there was just something about his body, the strength in it, strength she'd felt first hand. And seeing those muscles, the fine hairs on his chest.... she was going to need some time to recover.

"You get the bed." He said, squatting next to her and scratching Jasper's belly. The cat just blinked up at him lovingly.
"You're so full of surprises, you know that?" Sam said to him, watching his face as he looked toward her.

"How's that?" He asked, standing slowly. Sammy stood, too, Jasper just staying where she was with her belly out for all the world to see.

"This place? It's just so nice, and neat. And Jasper? Never pictured you having a cat." She said, glancing down, then shrugging. "Lettin' me stay? It's just... nice. Surprising and nice." She saw something pass over his features. And for a moment she thought maybe she'd said the wrong thing.

"Get some rest." He said, and stepped back, turning for the hallway. She blinked, jaw dropping a little and rushing after him, grabbing his elbow and making him stop. It seemed like she was always running after Daryl. He looked at her, not pulling away.

"What's wrong? What was the look for?" She asked sternly, not letting go, instead moving closer. He furrowed his brows at her.

"What look?" He responded, and she just let out a huff. God, he could be infuriating. And she loved it. Weird, right?

"You gave me this look like I said something wrong." She said, narrowing her gaze. Yeah, she could be pushy. And emotional. And irritating. But when she wanted to know something, she didn't stop till she knew. Finally, he responded.

"My life doesn't fit the image people have of me. You included, apparently." He said, but without any anger. Like it was just something he expected. "They see me, they don't think Sheriff's Deputy, or that I'd have a tidy place, or that I'd have the heart for a cat." He slipped his arm out of her hold then, stepping away. "It's no big deal. Go to sleep. I'll be on the couch." He turned his back on her, heading down the hall without another word and disappearing around the corner, leaving her standing there with her mouth open.

She'd known that Daryl cleaned up nicely, that he took pride in his work and was one hell of a friend. But it occurred to her then that maybe... maybe he was right. Maybe she hadn't really imagined him living like he obviously did. He was always so rough around the edges, and the bike and the hair, and the way he navigated his world, she'd just assumed... ah, shit. "Good goin, Sam. Idiot." She stood there for a long moment, shifting on her bare feet, feeling the cool, smooth wood beneath her toes. Then she steeled herself, and walked down the hall, turning into the living room to see Daryl on the couch, flat on his back, one hand behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He glanced at her when he realized she was standing there. And for a moment, they just stared at each other.

"Daryl..." She began, then moved over to the couch, kneeling on the floor beside it. He never took his eyes off her. Damn, those eyes. She could lose herself in a heartbeat, just in his eyes alone. "I'm sorry. Really. I never meant... I didn't... you're not..." she paused, then shook her head, smiling a little sheepishly. "Wow, I suck at apologies."

"Yeah, you do." He responded, making her whole body go still with guilt. Until she saw him crack a little smile at her. She swatted him lightly.

"That's so mean." She said, but smiled widely at him. "Really, though. I am sorry, Daryl. Please forgive me." Her smile only faded when he reached over with his free hand, catching a lock of her hair in between two fingers and moving it out of the way of her face.

"Go to sleep, Sammy." He said gently. "I'll see you in the morning." He let his hand fall. She
swallowed, her smile shy now. But she nodded. Standing up, she paused just long enough to kiss his forehead and then moved away before she dared do anything else.

Once in the bedroom, she curled into his bed. It smelted like wood chips and aftershave. And the sheets were cool against her skin. She left the bedside lamp on. Not that she was scared of the dark or anything. But the idea that Liam was so close, somewhere out in the town she called home, well... it would be hard enough sleeping as it was. She hugged one of Daryl's pillows to her, snuggling as deep down into the mattress as she could possibly get, letting out an enormous sigh just as Jasper jumped up onto the bed and curled into her thighs. She petted the cat idly, listening to the deep purr that vibrated the entire feline's body. It wasn't long before sleep took her over. But it wasn't an easy falling. It was like slipping on ice, and not being able to catch herself, except there was no ending to the fall. She was asleep and in nightmares before she had a chance to fight it.

* * *

She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep before she woke up, sweating and shaking, nearly falling out of the bed, Jasper jumping off of her stomach when Sammy suddenly jolted. For a long, horrifying moment, she had no idea where she was. All she could remember was Liam telling her he was never letting her leave again, and then strangling her. She lifted her hand to her throat, swallowing. It had all been a dream. Just a terrible, horrible, awful dream. She choked down a sob, rubbing her hands over her face. But try as she might, she couldn't stop the tears from coming. They just escaped her eyes and she was sobbing against her will. She kept her face buried in her hands, trying to stop the shaking, the crying. And that was when she felt hands on her. She startled, seeing Daryl sitting on the side of the bed right next to her. Then she just blinked at him, her face crumpling in tears. He pulled her into him, his strong arms and hands engulfing her, holding her tight, his heart thumping steadily in his chest, right against her cheek. And he just let her cry, let her get it all out. All the terror, all the fear that Liam had instilled in her, and for what? Why? Try as she might, she couldn't think of a reason. For any of it. Not a good one, anyway.

Daryl held her fast until she stilled, the sounds of frogs in the marsh behind the house filtering in through the window, still dark as pitch outside. "What time is it?" She finally muttered, sitting back a little. Daryl reached past her to the night stand, pulling open one of the little drawers and taking out a handkerchief, which he promptly handed to her. "Ugh, I'm a mess." She said, cleaning her face and nose.

"It's about two. And yer beautiful." He said so softly, she wasn't even sure she heard him right. He smoothed her hair out of her face as she wiped her cheeks. Then let his hands fall to his lap. He thought she was beautiful? The word 'beautiful' just kept turning over and over in her head. Liam had never called her beautiful. Not even once. In fact, she couldn't remember anyone ever saying it to her.

"You...." she paused, holding the handkerchief in both hands in her lap. "You think I'm beautiful?" He furrowed his brows lightly at her, like he couldn't understand why she would even ask that. "No one's ever told me that before." Her voice sounded so sheepish, even to herself, and she had to look down at her hands. How pitiful are you? She thought to herself. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I didn't mean to. I just... I had a nightmare about Liam." One of her hands came up to touch her throat loftily. "He was choking me."

"Don't need to apologize." He reached over and touched her chin, just enough to raise her eyes to him. "Yer safe, Sam. I won't let that bastard touch you. I promise." His hand fell back to his lap. "And you are beautiful. People should tell you that all the time. You deserve to know it." She met his gaze and smiled ever so lightly.
"But... I don't want to hear it from other people. I just... I just want to hear it from you." She said, realizing how dorky that sounded but wanted him to know anyway. He breathed a little, a sigh that made his shoulders shift.

"Sam, I-" But she found herself cutting him off before he could even get any words out. And what did she cut him off with? A kiss. She actually kissed him, right on the lips. She pressed her soft pink lips to his and felt him tense momentarily. But then he kissed her back, the feel of his stubble tickling her chin lightly. His hands came up and smoothed into her hair, his fingers curling to hold her. She was on her knees on the bed, looming slightly up, the kiss growing second by second into something deeper.

She tasted his mouth, his tongue touching hers tentatively like neither one of them wanted to stop but neither one of them was sure they should go farther. But then, as quickly as she'd begun that kiss, he ended it. "Sam, stop." He whispered, his breath heated. He gripped her arms, gently lowering her away. She felt... confused, silly. Stupid. She raised a hand to her lips and shook her head. "No, don't do that." He said as if reading her mind, grabbing her hand and letting out a quick breath. "I just think... you've had a hell of a day. I... god, you don't know how bad I've wanted to kiss you. I just think we should wait till we're both in a better state of mind. I don't want you to regret it later, I don't want you to feel taken advantage of."

And damn. Shit. Wow.

She stared at him and smiled.

In that moment, she loved him. Sure, they hadn't known each other long and were still learning about one another. But she knew it. Felt it deeper inside her than she'd ever felt anything. No one in her life beside her brother had ever been so kind to her, so thoughtful and caring, so... loving. And it just melted her. It turned her into putty. It made her want to lose herself in him and never find her way back. But she settled for the lingering feel of his lips, the taste of his mouth, the realization that he would never -EVER- hurt her.

"Okay." She said, nodding. "But... I have one request." He raised a brow at her, watching as she curled her hands around his and hugged his fist to her. "Don't go. Sleep... in the bed with me. I promise, scouts honor, we'll just sleep. Really sleep. But I don't want to be alone. I don't..." she paused, meeting his blue eyes which seemed to be lit with a cold and yet heated blue fire. "I don't want to have another nightmare. Please?" She scooted back to where she'd started. "Just hold me?" She let his hand go, settling back and watching, waiting. She would understand if he said no. If he just got up and left. But instead, he nodded very slowly.

"Alright." He agreed, making her heart flutter and calm all at once. "But lights out." He said, reaching to shut off the lamp. He wasn't going to get any protest from her. After the room went dark, and he'd settled beneath the covers beside her, she wiggled into him, till his chest was firmly against her back and she was holding on to his arm for dear life. "G'night, Sam." He said, his breath warming the back of her head. She smiled, and closed her eyes.

"Good night, Daryl." And soon she was asleep again. Though this time was different. She wasn't slipping on ice and endlessly falling. She was drowning in a welcome warmth, the safety of Daryl's arms, and the idea that maybe, just maybe, she had begun to figure out what real happiness was supposed to be like.
"You're too good to me, Daryl."

He woke up just as the first trickle of daylight came in between the curtains. He was laying flat on his back and Samantha was pretty much on top of him. Her head, her upper body, her hand was all against his chest and torso, like she’d simply melted into him during the night. He had one arm draped around her, hand resting on her hip. He could smell the flowery scent of her hair, feel her breathing steadily. And he had to try hard to do the same as he woke up more and more.

Sam was in his arms. In his bed. Holy shit.

The more moments ticked by, the more tense he felt. Partially because his morning wood was a little more prominent than it should be. Damn hormones. He knew that it was mostly not because of Sam. But still, he didn't want her waking up and realizing his dick was happy to see her. How the hell was he going to get out of the bed without waking her up?

Thankfully, he didn't have to ponder on it long because she rolled away from him, still very asleep and only partially pinning his arm. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and, very slowly, pulled his arm away. The relief was palpable when he finally got free, slipping out of the bed and standing. And for a long moment, he just watched her. Partly to make sure she was still actually asleep and partly because... well, she was just damn lovely. Laying there with her hair all a mess in one of his old t-shirts, looking as peaceful as could be. He couldn't help but smile a little.

After a few moments, he grabbed some clean clothes and left the room, closing the door just enough to leave a crack for the cat to get through. After dressing and brushing his teeth, he went outside, doing a once over. Nothing seemed out of place, there was no sign of any other vehicles and no extra footprints he could see. No one had been to the house, beside Samantha and him, since yesterday. Good to know. He went back inside, and decided to make breakfast. Cooking wasn't really his strong suit. He wasn't a gourmet or anything. But he could whip something up out of nothing. A skill that came in handy, especially when no one was looking out for you. As a kid, he learned quickly the benefit of making the unappealing into something edible.

Luckily for Sam, though, Daryl had eggs. And he had bacon. And biscuits. It would be an easy and tidy breakfast that wouldn't leave her cringing. He got the coffee brewing, the bacon sizzling and began to set out plates. That was when he heard his bedroom door slide all the way open, the sound of her bare feet on the wooden floor. She was wearing her clothes again, and had tried to brush her hair out with her fingers. It looked like it had been a losing battle. "Mornin." He said to her, smiling lightly. She smiled at him, sleepiness still on her features.

"I smelled coffee." She said, "Um, I was wondering, do you have an extra toothbrush?" She scratched at her side, then stifled a yawn, shaking her head a little. "Sorry, still waking up. What time is it?"

"You really need to wear your watch more often, it's about 6." He said with a smirk, then motioned toward the bathroom. "There's probably a toothbrush under the sink you can use." She blinked and nodded, still smiling before turning toward the hall again. She disappeared into the bathroom. By the time she came out, he had the biscuits baking in the oven. "What kind of eggs do you like? Can't really do nothin fancy. But I can manage scrambled, over easy and hard boiled." He said, turning to see her pretty much standing directly in his path. She was staring up at him with the most beautiful morning eyes he'd ever seen. And she stood on tip toe wordlessly, placing a very smooth, gentle kiss on his lips that made him forget entirely what he'd just asked her. It was a quick kiss, nothing too engulfing. But even so, when she pulled away, he had to stop himself from being greedy and wanting more.
"Scrambled is good." She said then, and he couldn't help the slight confusion that filtered into his expression. She laughed a little at him, stepping away. "You asked what kind of eggs I wanted. Scrambled." She turned toward the table, and he made a little 'oh' sound, turning around and rolling his eyes at himself. One kiss and she turned him into an idiot. Not that he minded one bit. He could taste the minty after taste of toothpaste on his lips. And he smiled a little, his back to her as he began cracking eggs into a bowl. She sat at the table, running her fingers through her hair some more.

"How'd you sleep?" He asked then, for some reason needing to fill the quiet with more than just the sound of cooking. He glanced over is shoulder as he started whisking the eggs in the bowl. He watched her tug at her unruly strands with her fingers, grimacing as she did.

"Good, after... well, you know." She gave him a sideways smile, then chewed a little on her lip in concentration. He shook his head, setting the bowl down, and went to the bathroom. When he came out, he had his brush in hand. It was old, but clean and did what needed doin.

"Yer gonna yank all your hair out if you keep that up." He said, pushing her hands out of the way before he started pulling the brush through her hair. She held perfectly still in front of him, letting him hold on to the thick strands so he wouldn't yank any out. Once he was sure he'd gotten all the knots out, he stepped back, setting the brush on the counter. He had to admit, he loved the feel of her hair. It was soft and wavy, all natural. No crinkles from dying or perming. And with every stroke of the brush, he'd smelled that flowery scent. "Better." He said, and moved to step back toward the stove when he felt her catch his hand.

"Thank you. That was really nice." She squeezed his hand softly. "No one's ever brushed my hair for me before. It's really relaxing." She let him go, and he shrugged, smiling at her.

"No big." He responded, picking up the bowl to finish whisking.

"You always say that. No big this, no big that." She stood, pushing her chair back a bit and coming up beside him, grabbing one of the mugs he had hanging on the kitchen wall. She filled it with coffee. "But it is big, ya know. Big to me, anyway." She was smiling shyly, her cheeks flushing with that pretty pink hue he loved about her. He reached over her head, opening a cabinet to reveal the sugar. He knew she liked her sugar.

"Creamer's in the fridge." He said, winking lightly at her and then poured the egg into the sizzling butter in the frying pan. He grabbed a spatula and simply went about scrambling while she made up her coffee. It was all strangely nice, and domestic. Who'd have thought Daryl could be domestic? He almost laughed at his own inner musings.

Once the eggs were done, he dished them out on their plates, along with the bacon. A moment later, the timer went off for the biscuits and he set them in a little basket. Then they sat down across from each other, his black coffee in hand as he took a long sip before simply beginning eating. He never said prayers or anything like that. He wasn't exactly a godly man, no reason to stand on ceremony about the little things. When he died, and if he ended up in whatever heaven there was, and God turned out to be real, well... Daryl would be the first to admit he was wrong.

"Did you hear from Rick?" She asked, pushing her eggs around a little before scooping them up on her fork. She took a bite and watched him. He shrugged.

"He texted me about five minutes before you got up. Says there's no news to give, really." He watched her reaction, feeling her tense a little. "Hey, if he's out there, we'll find him."

"If." She said softly, staring down at her eggs. "What if I really did imagine him?" She asked softly, her voice unsure. He put his fork down and reached across the table, grabbing her free hand in his.
"You really believe that?" He asked her firmly, her eyes turning up at him. Then she shrugged, letting out a slow sigh.

"No, I saw him. I know I did. But I can't help but think maybe..." She paused and shook her head. "I don't know. I'm just tired. Of being scared, of thinking he's out there. I just started getting my life together, Daryl. What if he finds me an-" Daryl squeezed her hand, making her stop.

"Listen to me. That asshole isn't going to do anythin to you. I won't let it happen. Neither will Rick. We'll find him. Or he'll find us. Either way, he's done and he don't even know it." He meant every word, too. There would be nothing to stop him from beating the shit out of Liam if he came across him. He'd gladly go to jail to teach that asshole a lesson. A man who hit a woman was no man at all. "In the meantime," He said, slowly letting her hand go, "Let's finish eating, and I'll take you home before I head to the office." She was quiet for a moment. He motioned to her plate and she shook her head a little, smiling lightly.

"You're too good to me, Daryl." She said, picking up a piece of bacon.

"No such thing." He said lightly, and took another sip of his coffee. They ate the rest of their food, having quiet conversation. It was so strangely nice, being able to spend the morning with her. His morning's were usually spent alone in the house or by the river. And the more the minutes ticked by, the more he was sure he wanted this to happen all the time. He wanted Sam to fill his nights wrapped up in his arms and fill his mornings with her smiles and never ending conversations. Shit, he just wanted Sam.

He drove her home, getting her there just before 7:30 without incident. Rick was already on the porch waiting for them. There was a lot to discuss, after all. But for now, Sam was safe. And they all knew it. And that was a good place to start.
"Don't let go."

About a week passed with still no sign of Liam.

Despite Daryl and Rick's willingness to believe her, Sam couldn't help but begin to feel like maybe she had imagined the whole thing. Maybe her anxiety and worry over Daryl just made her see Liam when he was never actually there. That seemed the most logical explanation, considering literally no one else had seen him when she had, and no one had seen him since, either.

As for things with Daryl, well... they were slow. Which was good. They hadn't kissed since that night she'd stayed at his place, but mostly because they hadn't really had a chance to be alone again. So much had happened in a week. Maggie and Glenn had their baby, a little girl they named Anna Beth. And Daryl was pulling extra duty, keeping their market stall open with Carol's help. When he wasn't there, he was working at the Sheriff's office. And when he wasn't at the office, he was visiting his new god-daughter, or attempting to sleep. Sam thought he did way too much, worried that he ran himself a little ragged. But she had to admit, since Anna was born, Daryl seemed much more like himself. Losing Merle had been so hard on him. Harder than he would admit, probably harder than any of them realized. But having -as he so joyfully said- 'another little ass kicker' in the world seemed to do wonders in helping Daryl heal.

"Really, it's okay. I'll open it back up on Monday. They're letting Maggie and Anna go home tonight. One weekend without the stall won't kill us." Glenn was saying, sitting next to Maggie on her bed. Sam was settled on the chair by the large hospital room window. She'd already been there an hour when Daryl showed up with the money the stall had made during the week. And, like almost always, she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

He was standing at the foot of the bed, Anna swaddled into a baby burrito with a little pink knitted hat and fast asleep in his strong arms as he swayed back and forth with her, staring down at her gorgeous little face. "You sure? I don't mind. Rick's makin me take the weekend off. Again. Says I'm workin too much, which is crap." He said, glancing over at the happy parents. Maggie smiled, and shook her head.

"Daryl, really. You've done so much already. Just enjoy your weekend. Please?" She asked him, watching with adoration at how he was with her daughter. Samantha would never understand how people could see Daryl as anything other than who he was. Yeah, sure, he didn't really dress the part of a good guy. He didn't even really carry himself that way. But around the people who really knew him, around his 'family', it was like who he really was came out in all the best ways.

"You did a good job, Momma." Daryl said to Maggie, moving slowly back toward the little see-through mobile bassinet and gently laid Anna down, sure not to wake her. "She's perfect." Maggie gave a very joyful smile, so full of emotion. "And you look wonderful." He said, leaning over and kissing Maggie on the forehead. She gripped his side, peering up at him happily when he stood.

"You know, we love you Daryl. A whole lot." She said, and her voice cracked with emotion. Glenn squeezed her shoulders lightly and she leaned into him.

"Yeah, we do, man." He agreed and Daryl sort of stilled, emotion on his features that rarely saw the light of day.

"Love ya'll, too." He said very softly, watching a tear escape Maggie's eye. She wiped at it with a smile and a little huff of breath.
"Come by on Monday around noon, we should be settled by then and you can visit with your god-daughter some more." Glenn said, grinning lightly. There was just so much happiness in the air. It made Samantha feel all giddy. "You, too, Sam." He added, glancing past Daryl to where she was sitting.

"Oh, I... I would love to. I mean, if that's okay. I don't want to intrude. It's... it's a family thing, after all." She said with a light smile. And Maggie shook her head.

"Don't be silly. You are family. Rick, Michonne and the kids will be there, too. And Carol, Daddy and Beth. Everyone. You have to come. It's Anna's official homecoming!" Maggie explained, nodding a little in encouragement. Sam watched Daryl turn to look at her, waiting on her answer. Finally, she nodded hastily.

"Okay. I'll be there." She grinned. Everyone smiled. Even Daryl.

"Alright, you two rest while ya can. Babies don't sleep as often as people say they do." Daryl said, making his way back around the bed. "I'm gonna head out." He paused, glancing at Samantha. "You need a ride?" She raised both brows, and practically sprang out of her chair.

"Yeah!" She exclaimed, then grimaced a little, a nervous flush filling her face. "I mean, yes please. Rick dropped me off, I was just going to take a cab." Daryl made a little face then shook his head with a smile.

"You were going to let Willy drive you home? Shit, Sam." Daryl said, moving toward the door. "What? Who's Willy?" She asked, glancing at Glenn and Maggie who were both looking at Samantha in amusement.

"Willy is the only cab driver in Athens. And he only has one eye, can't talk without using a swear every other word and we're pretty sure there's a new sentient species of mold growing in his passenger seats." Glenn responded. Sam instantly cringed.

"Oh." She said, looking at Daryl as he opened the door.

"Well, come on, then. Ain't got all day." He said, his blue eyes sparkling with humor. Sam hurried after him, waving at the happy couple on the way out, softly closing the door behind her. Instead of heading for the elevator, Daryl went to the stairs, holding the door open for her. When the door closed, he reached out for her, gently grabbing onto her hip and pulling her toward him. For a moment, he just stared at her, their faces inches apart in the echoing quiet of the stairwell as if he were waiting for her to protest or question. And then he kissed her.

Oh lordy, did he kiss her. Sam felt her entire body become useless, and yet she somehow managed to stay on her feet. The smell of his skin, the feel of his lips on hers, one of his hands on her lower back, holding her into him, his other hand tangled in her hair. It sent shivers up and down her body, made her moan ever so softly at the sudden intense yet gentle feeling of it all. Not once was he firm with her. Not once was he forceful. She knew she could pull away at any moment and he wouldn't try to stop her. But she didn't want to pull away. She'd been dreaming about kissing him again since the first time in his bedroom. And now she just wanted more.

The kiss grew, his body backing up into the wall, her body pressed completely against his. Their mouths parted enough to let lips and tongues dance. God, he tasted so incredible, intoxicating. She could definitely make a habit of this. And his body beneath hers? His hands working her flesh through her clothes? It made things tight and wet in places she didn't think she could ever feel tight and wet in ever again. It was such an entirely physical reaction that she happily had no control of.
And it was more than that, too.

She needed this. Needed to know that he was still who she thought he was. That he still wanted her and still wanted to give them a try. And she wanted to feel this alive, to feel free and safe in his arms and know without a doubt that as long as she was with him, nothing bad would ever happen to her. Her body wanted his body, but her heart, her mind, hell even her soul wanted his everything. Needed him. All of him. And she let him feel it in that kiss.

Eventually, they had to come up for air. They were both breathing heavy, flustered and hot. Her hands were clinging to his shoulders for dear life, her lips perfectly swollen feeling. And his eyes. Damn. Those eyes were going to be her undoing. The icy fire that burned so bright and blue when he looked at her made her feel so wanted. Really, truly wanted. And she'd never had that before.

"Wow." She said, unable to look away from his hypnotic gaze. He cracked that sideways smile, the one that sent shivers down her spine.

"Understatement." He said, lifting both hands and smoothing her hair out of her face, running his fingers through the mess he'd made of her wayward locks. "I've been wantin to kiss you again for... feels like ages. Sorry I took so long." She couldn't help it, she smiled brightly and kissed him once more. Though much softer this time, just to feel that pressure of his lips, to know it was welcome and invited at any moment.

"That was perfect." She said, her breath slightly husky. It actually surprised her. She'd never sounded like that when being any kind of intimate with Liam. Then again, intimacy with Liam had always been one-sided. It was all about Liam, nothing about her. She'd never even had an orgasm before. The thought made her flush a little. "You're perfect." Sam said to Daryl, reaching up and tracing a finger down the firm, solid line of his jaw. He just watched her until the sound of a door being opened a floor down made them both jump, then she giggled, Daryl chuckling lightly as they both moved away from the wall. He took her hand in his and led her down the stairs.

"So where do you want me to drop you off?" He asked, once they stepped out into the lobby, heading for the automatic doors to the parking lot. She leaned into him a little, loving the way their fingers just seemed to naturally intertwine.

"Honestly? Right now, I just wanna be with you." She beamed at him, grinning from ear to ear. He shook his head with a smile. "What? I don't have to work all weekend. No students to teach." She nudged him a little. "So let's do something! We can go on a trip! Maybe we can head to the lake and do some swimming, or we can go to the quarter and hit up all the little shops?" She offered, turning to stand in front of him, stopping him right next to a crappy looking station wagon. "Pleeeeeease?" She said, begging like a little kid. He laughed very lightly, leaning forward and kissing her so softly and quickly, it made her head spin a little.

"Alright. But I'm not really the shoppin sort. We can head up to the lake. Andrews lets the whole department use his boat house whenever he's not there. He's on duty this weekend, so we're free and clear. An if you really feel like shoppin, they got a bunch of touristy traps you can wander round in." He explained. Even when he was talking, if he was looking at her it was like all the hardness in him just evaporated. To think that maybe she had that affect on him made her feel... stupidly cheery.

"Oh my gosh! Yes!" She giggled, tugging him along then toward his motorcycle. She'd seen it when they left the building. "I'm so excited!" He made a sound, probably shaking his head at her.

"I can see that." He said when they stopped at the motorcycle. For a moment, she just stood there staring at it.
"Um, would you believe I've never ridden on one of these before?" She asked, giving him a cutey look. He just smirked at her.

"I can totally believe that. Yer such a goody-goody." He said, quickly dodging her hand as she went to smack him.

"I am not!" She laughed. "I'll have you know I shoppedlifted once." She said firmly, crossing her arms over her chest. He raised a brow.

"What'd you steal? Gum?" He asked. She dropped her jaw, huffing a little.

"Pft, no! It was..." she paused, then shrugged a little, "Okay, it was just a thing of Tictacs. But I was only ten and it was the scariest thing ever! If my dad would have found out, I would have been grounded for life!" She exclaimed, and he laughed. A hearty, full sound that had him grabbing his stomach with one hand.

"Wow." He said finally, shaking his head a little. "Yer right. You are so bad ass." She couldn't help it, she grinned from ear to ear and laughed at herself. "Did you get caught?" He asked, leaning over the bike and unhooking a black helmet from the side. She shook her head with a grin.

"No. It was totally liberating." She said, standing still when he slipped the helmet on over her head, clasping the strap beneath her chin.

"That's my girl." He said with a wink. "Get on behind me, okay?" He said, and then mounted the motorcycle. His girl? Wow. The last fifteen minutes had been full of wowness. She slipped onto the motorcycle behind him, firmly wrapping her arms around his waist, hugging herself to him. She could feel his abs, hard and unintentionally flexing as he put back the kick stand. It brought about images of him without his shirt on. She had to close her eyes, it was just too delicious a memory. "Don't let go." He said over his shoulder. And then they were off.

It startled her at first, but exhilarated her more than anything. Never in a million years would she have thought she would be riding a motorcycle! But then again, she didn't think she'd ever have the chance to be her own person or own her own business or ride a horse or be in love... really in love. Even now, she wasn't sure if she'd ever really loved Liam or if it was just his manipulation of her that had made her think she was, made her think she deserved to be punched, neglected, emotionally abused. To think, all this time, a man like Daryl Dixon existed? It almost made her sad. She wished she'd met Daryl long before now, before Liam. But then again, she couldn't be sad.

"Maybe you went through all that hell so you could get to where you are now." Carol had said once. Carol was a smart woman, a real fighter. Sam and she had bonded over their similar pasts. And Sam was learning so much from her. From everyone, really. Rick had a hell of an unofficial extended family. And one hell of a best friend.

As Daryl drove, she just kept holding on to him, watching the world fly thrillingly by. And she felt... alive. Real. Free. If Liam really was in Athens, she wasn't going to let him take away her new life. She wasn't the meek, broken woman he had made her into. She was healing, and she was stronger than she'd ever felt before...
Daryl dropped Sam off at Rick's so she could pack for the weekend, heading back to his own place to pack the Jeep and make sure Jasper had a way in and out. He called Carol and asked her to take care of Vagrant for the weekend, and he made sure it was alright with Mason if they used his boathouse. After he hung up, standing there beside the Jeep, he suddenly felt nervous.

What in the hell was he doing?

He couldn't go off for the weekend with Sam! *Have you lost your fucking mind, Dixon?* He demanded of himself. He'd been so caught up in the happiness of Anna's birth, cutest damn little squishy baby on the planet, and caught up in Sam... it was like he'd lost his ability to brain properly. "Shit." He said out loud, leaning against the hood, both arms on top of it as he stared at the now blank screen on his phone. She was so excited, he couldn't just back out on her. But he was nervous, head to toe. Spending a weekend together was worlds different from a frightened Sam seeking refuge at his place. This was different. This was the two of them alone with nothing but miles of water and all the pent up attraction he was bound to revisit just by being in the same breathing space.

He wanted this, he'd be out of his damn mind if he didn't. But he also didn't want to screw things up. Didn't want to move too quickly and end up hurting her. He let his head fall to his arm, letting out a deep breath. He'd have to seriously control himself. It wasn't like he was a hormone crazy teenager. He just hadn't been this attracted to a woman in years. And not just physically, either. Sure, he was insanely attracted to her body. She was sexy, head to toe. Beautiful when she blushed. Tugged things inside of him when she chewed on her lip. Her legs were killer. Her body, the way it had felt beneath his hands when he kissed her, had done things to him he would never take back. And the kissing... shit, the kissing. The way she felt, the taste of her mouth, the warmth of her lips, how she responded so willingly to him. Yeah, he was addicted to her physically, which was saying something considering they really hadn't done much. But that wasn't all there was to this.

Her voice was a prayer to him, the sound of her singing, her laugh, all of it. It made him feel calm, still like only the river had ever done. Her eyes were like air to him. He didn't think he could go a day anymore without seeing how they sparkled at him. Her never ending ramblings always made him smile. He couldn't get annoyed by her talking even if he wanted to. She was so sweet, gentle even. Especially with him. She encouraged him to step out of his comfort zone without trying to drag him along. She was smart, funny, far more talented than he was by any stretch of the imagination. And she seemed to see so much in him that he couldn't. He wanted nothing more than to protect her, to make her happy, to give her everything she could ever want. And not once in his life had ever felt that way about any woman. Period.

And to top it all off, when he was with her... he felt different. In a really good way. Like his ghosts, his past, his nightmares were all incredibly far out of reach. And that was something he didn't think would ever be possible. She also made him feel like a far better man than he was. He hadn't known her long, but he knew enough to realize that he didn't want to lose her.

So he would continue to take things slow, to be the guy she deserved, and he'd let her drive the train, so to speak. If Sam was ready to take other steps, then he'd take her lead. He raised his head, slipping his phone into his pocket and moving around to the driver's side only to stop with his hand on the door handle when he heard the sound of tires on his dirt drive. A moment later, a black Ford pickup pulled up alongside the Jeep. "Sonofabitch..." Daryl muttered when he saw who was driving. His hand fell from the handle when Dusty Hendee got out of the cab of the truck, smiling lightly as he pulled off his sunglasses.
"Shit, look at you." Dusty said, strolling up to Daryl. The two shook hands and gave that firm man-hug to each other.

"Dusty fucking Hendee." Daryl said, smirking lightly. "The hell, man?" Daryl asked, stepping back to look him over. "You haven't changed much. Cept maybe for the gray." He joked lightly. "What in the hell are you doin in Georgia?" Dusty smiled, shrugging a little.

"I'm in sales now, not anything fancy. But I travel all over creation. Passing through and what do I hear but Daryl Dixon is a fucking Sheriff's Deputy? I just had to see it with my own eyes." He patted Daryl on the shoulder lightly. "You look good man. But... what's with the hair?" He chuckled lightly. Daryl leaned his rear against the door of his Jeep.

"A work in progress." He said, smirking. "How'd you even know where I live?" He asked, feeling a little strange. Happy to see his old battle buddy, but... strange. Like Dusty just shouldn't be here. Dusty was a part of his past. And Daryl had worked very hard to leave his past right where it was. Dusty crossed his arms lazily over his chest and just kept smiling.

"Stopped by the Sheriff's office. This chubby deputy named Draper, I think it was, told me where you lived. Don't think that guy's got a full hand in the deck, if you know what I mean." Dusty said, then motioned to Daryl. "But you, man. Shit! What in the world possessed you to become the law?"

"The Sheriff offered me a job." He said, a touch of humor in his voice. "Guess I jus needed to keep on keeping on. Seemed like the thing to do. Can't imagine doin anythin else now."

"I'm happy for ya, really." Dusty said, his face sobering a little. "After Kandahar... I wasn't quite sure you'd bounce back." Daryl straightened a little, his face blanking for a moment.

"Yeah. Wasn't easy. I'm sorry bout that, by the way. Pushin you away, I mean. Wasn't jus you. I did it to everyone. I jus... needed to forget." Daryl said honestly, feeling his jaw clench afterward. Dusty just smiled lightly and shrugged like it was no big deal.

"Man, you saved our asses. If moving on was better for you, then I'm good with it. Really. I owe you everything." Dusty said firmly, nodding.

"Naw, man. You don't owe me shit. We all had each other's backs. Simple as that." Daryl could feel anxiety creeping up around the edges of his hold on things. "Look I... I've worked really hard to get past all that. Mind if we not talk bout it?"

"Hell yeah, man. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to drudge things up. Honestly, I just came by to see if you wanted to grab a beer or something. Whataya say?" Dusty asked. Daryl blinked, then motioned to his Jeep.

"Actually, I'm headin out for the weekend. How long you gonna be around?" He asked, glancing at his watch. He was supposed to leave ten minutes ago. Dusty noticed the subtle glance.

"Aw, shit. Sorry, didn't mean to hold you up. Tell ya what, pick a day this coming week and we'll catch up then." Dusty offered. Daryl nodded.

"I have to work every day but Wednesday. How bout we meet at the diner on Main? Round seven? Best food in town." He offered. And Dusty smiled big and wide, holding out his hand.

"Sounds like a plan." They shook hands firmly. "Man, really. It's good to see you. You have no idea." They let go of each other and Daryl moved to open his Jeep door. "Have a great weekend. See you Wednesday!" Dusty said, stepping back. Daryl waved idly out the window as he started up the Jeep.
"Wednesday." Daryl reaffirmed, then headed down the drive, trying not to go fast. There was a tension in him that almost snapped the moment he was away from Dusty. He'd been a good man. A bit of an ass back in the Army, but hell. Daryl had been no better. Seeing him now, though, after all these years when it finally felt like things were rounding out for Daryl... it just didn't sit well at all. It gave him a slight sick feeling, and he had to fight it down with thoughts of the river. Which turned into thoughts of Sam. Which turned into him smiling despite himself the rest of the way back to pick her up.

* * *

Dusty watched Daryl drive off before getting back into his truck. For a moment, he just sat in the cab, studying the outside of Daryl's cabin. He'd really done a good job getting his life back on track. Dusty honestly couldn't be more happy for the man. And true, it was probably not the brightest fucking idea he'd ever had asking Daryl to catch up with him. But he owed the man. The least he could do was pay for dinner. So far, no one knew him by sight. Any surveillance photos of him were too blurry and obscured by a hat and sunglasses making him seem like every average built guy in existence. He wasn't entirely stupid, after all. He'd stick around, have dinner with Daryl, and move on toward the valley. The Old Man wanted to meet up with him in person for updates and a head count. Not unusual, really. He always wanted to keep in touch with his Lieutenants.

Finally, he started the engine and turned the truck around to go back up the drive. It would be good to catch up with Daryl, as much as Daryl would allow, anyway. And of course, Dusty would have to lie through his teeth about what he'd really been doing. There was also the fact he'd killed Daryl's sorry excuse for an older brother. But Daryl was far better off without that waste of human shit. So no regrets there. At all.

When he got back to the road, the phone started ringing. He put his blue tooth in his ear and pressed the button. All he had to do was listen. That's how it worked. The messages were short, usually with instructions and location. This time, it added the fact that there was competition in the quarter. A heroin kingpin. When the message ended, Dusty took out the blue tooth. Looks like he had someone else to put in the ground before Wednesday. Then all he had to do was worry about having dinner with the man who'd saved his life in hell on earth...
"I wanna show you somethin."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Mentions of abuses, suicide and rape.)

Sam couldn't help the huge smile that was on her face. Two nights and two days with Daryl? On a house boat?! Could things get any better? She was practically beside herself with giddiness. And she was still on a ridiculous high from their kiss at the hospital, a kiss she really wanted to recreate. Often.

She had noticed, however, how quiet Daryl was. He still smiled at her, still paid attention when she talked like he always did. But there was a different sort of quiet about him. A reserved sort of stillness, like he was trying very hard not to think about something that just kept pestering him. When they reached the boat house, which was literally a square looking wooden house with a solar panel roof floating on the water at the end of a dock, he'd simply handed her the keys and asked her to open things up while he unloaded their stuff. She unlocked the door, opened all the windows, let the fresh air in.

It wasn't a big place, but it was open concept, clean and was covered in sea decor, which she thought was funny because they weren't actually at the sea. Still, it was comfortable. There were two stories, if you could call it that. The upper floor was really just a bedroom, wide open and only cordoned off by a railing. The bottom floor was a living room, a dining area, and a full kitchen. The only enclosed room was the bathroom, which was just a shower stall, a sink and a toilet. There was a deck around the back of the house, giving a full and clear view of the lake, some really nice soft chairs set out for relaxing in. It was all pretty awesome. And probably expensive as hell. "Mason's parents own the textile mill. He's some sort of heir to the throne, or somethin." Daryl said, as if reading her mind, plopping the bags next to the door and stepping further in.

"I can't imagine ever owning something like this." She said, turning to look at him, smiling brightly. "Not that I'd know the first thing about living full time on the water." She crossed the floor toward him, keys in hand. Part of her still couldn't believe she'd asked Daryl to do this with her. Part of her couldn't believe he'd agreed. All of her was glad he had. She held the keys out to him and he took them quietly, slipping them into his pocket. "So what do you want to do first? We can swim!" She exclaimed, watching the slight smirk spread on his lips slowly. "Or we can make something to eat, or just explore? Or maybe we can fish? I saw your pole, I've never been fishing before!" She rambled on, to the point he stepped forward and slipped his hands onto her sides, pulling her gently into him and silencing her with just that endless blue stare.

"We have all weekend, Sam. Pace yerself." He said softly, then he kissed her. And just like that, she was calm and safe and everything she never was when she was alone. It was a slow, long and somehow still earthquaking kiss that left her eyelids feeling heavy when he pulled away. She felt one of his hands come up to her face, pushing her hair back. "Let's start with unpackin. We'll figure it out after that." He said, her eyes opening the rest of the way to stare up at him. She smiled brightly.

"Okay. But only if you promise me something." She said, tilting her head a little. He gave her a questioning look, narrowing his eyes a little. "Promise me this weekend will be amazing." She said very softly, almost a whisper. He smiled then, a real, bright smile of his own. He kissed her again,
just a press of lips, but so warm and tender.

"Come on." He said, stepping away from her and turning for their bags. She just smiled a little and grabbed her things, fully aware he hadn't promised out loud. But pretty sure he'd just promised in his own way.

Once all her stuff was settled, and what little Daryl had brought for himself, she went about rummaging through the kitchen. She was surprised that it was fully stocked. And not just non-perishable stuff, either. But fresh fruit and vegetables, even meat in the freezer. She was standing in front of the refrigerator with the door open, one hand on her hip, trying to figure out what on earth she was hungry for when she felt Daryl behind her. He slipped his arms around her waist, her back pressed to his chest, his mouth by her ear. "I wanna show you somethin." He said softly, the feel of his breath on her skin giving her goosebumps. He reached past her and closed the fridge door, then took her hand when she turned, leading her out to the deck where the comfy chairs were.

And what she saw? It was the stuff of fairytales, really. Dancing all over the water in the relative dark were fireflies, hundreds of them, glowing their little green in random intervals and making it look like the lake had come alive with hovering stars. "Oh my god..." she whispered, grinning and moving to the railing, gripping it with both hands and letting out a short laugh. "I've never seen so many! They're everywhere!" She exclaimed, turning to see Daryl leaning against the frame of the sliding door, his hands halfway in his pockets. He was smiling at her, the look on his face soft and tender. It made her feel weak in all the best ways. He looked past her for a moment, at the little glow bugs and their reflections in the water. And she watched a shadow pass over him. It was so quick, so sudden, she almost missed it. But he cleared his throat and straightened up, moving to sit in one of the chairs. He plopped down quietly, stretching out one leg.

"Daryl..." she said, gently catching his attention. He looked up at her as she wandered over to him. "Are you alright?" She asked, hovering slightly over him. "You've just been... more quiet than usual since you picked me back up." He just stared at her in that way of his, then he reached for her, pulling her gently into his lap till she was sitting, one of his arms draped over her thighs, his other hand resting on her lower back. Her arm was around his shoulder, her other hand resting softly on his chest. She loved being this casually close to him. It felt so natural, so perfectly real and somehow incredibly safe. She'd never thought that was possible, with anyone.

"I jus don't wanna mess things up with you." He said then, making her thoughts flee, her expression sober as she watched his eyes. "How much has Rick told you... about me?" He asked her. It was such a strangely pointed question. He usually didn't ask things like that. She shrugged a little.

"He said you had a rough childhood, kind of like him and me, but different. That you ended up in jail and then joined the Army." She watched his expression grow increasingly guarded as she spoke. "He said that you were almost killed overseas. And that when you came home, he knew he wanted you as a deputy because he could tell," She paused, lifting her hand up to his face and cupping his cheek, "That you're a good man." His guarded expression seemed to falter, and he swallowed looking down, away from her gaze.

"I didn't use to be." He said softly, his hand on her thigh, stroking her bare leg softly with his thumb. "I was as much of an asshole as Merle was. When the judge said prison or Army, it wasn't a hard choice. I was always lookin for the easy way out. Cept the Army was not as much of a cake walk as I thought. I really grew up, had to." He let out a deep breath, leaning his head forward and resting it against her. "Second tour in Afghanistan... things happened. Rick's right, I almost died. I healed up well enough after time, but..." she could feel how tense he was as he paused, it made her want to find a way to cure it. "My head had a hard time gettin straight afterward. PTSD, they said. I was violent,
angry, seein ghosts." She could hear his voice cracking lightly, then he cleared his throat, lifting his head to look at her. "I've worked really hard to be where I am now. Rick and the others, if it hadn't been for them, I don't think I'd have made it this far. But I'm not one hundred percent, ya know?" He said, and she saw it then.

That shadow just disappeared and all she saw was pain. Real and desperate and haunting. And it occurred to her... she knew that pain. It was her own pain. Hers was caused by Liam and her parents and years of abuse. Daryl's was caused by his childhood and something else. But it was real and it was just like hers and she would know it anywhere. It was the pain of a broken soul. And she still saw it in her own eyes when she looked in the mirror. "I'm tellin you all this cause... I want you to know bein with me, hell even jus bein my friend, it ain't easy. I don't mean to make it hard, but sometimes it is. And I guess... I feel like you deserve better. Shit, I know you do." There was just so much emotion in his eyes, she couldn't help the silent tears that escaped her own. "Sam..." he whispered when he saw the tears, and he shook his head. But before he could say anything else, she lifted her hand and put it on his lips, her fingers trembling.

"I'm not going anywhere, you hear me Daryl Dixon?" She said as firmly as she could. "Whoever you were, it's not who you are now. And what haunts you, what's still hurting you? I can handle it." She said with a nod, letting her hand fall. "Liam... he would beat me if I cooked food wrong. He would spend his free time making me believe I was worthless and that my dreams were dust. He would... rape me. He called it sex. But I was never as willing as he thought. When we were around people, he would force me to pretend that everything was alright, that I wasn't hurting from the beating the day before. It got to the point where I didn't know that any other life could exist for me. I mean, I rebelled in every little way I could. But there came a point where I was standing... in front of the mirror... with a knife..." she felt her voice crack and she had to inhale deeply, letting it out slowly. "I thought killing myself was the only escape." Her voice had turned into a broken whisper. It was her turn to look away. She didn't want to see his eyes now. She wasn't sure she could take what was in them.

"Liam came home. Found me before I could do anything. He was so... angry. I mean, I'd never seen him angry like that. He beat me so much, I thought he'd broken every bone in my body. Then he threw me down the stairs. And I knew... as soon as I hit the bottom... that I was going to die. That was when I realized, I wanted to live. Really live." Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Daryl lifted his hand and turned her gaze back at him. And to her surprise, there were tears on his face, too. In fact, it shocked her. She saw him cry when his brother died. But this was different. This was... silent and deeper, somehow.

"That's why you deserve better than me." He said, swallowing a little. "But if you mean to stick around my sorry ass... Overseas. "Tell me... what happened to you, over there. Overseas." She said softly. She couldn't say why she needed to know, and a huge part of her felt like she was intruding on something fragile and barely held together. But it was all that stood between him and her, between him accepting that she wanted him. And if she could hear it, take it in, show him that it didn't matter, then maybe he could believe it, too. "Please, Daryl."

For a long moment, she held his gaze. She wanted to see into his soul, see that she wasn't wrong, that everything she was drawn to in him was real and unwavering. "Tell me... what happened to you, Sam. This thing, inside me... I can't escape it. I work every day to keep it under control. But sometimes, I don't win. So I gotta know, are you sure that's what you want? After all you've been through, after all that fucker did to you, this is what you want? A broken man?"

His whole body tensed beneath her, and he squeezed his eyes shut, new tears rolling down his cheeks quietly. "You'll hate me..." he whispered, his voice tangled with emotion. "But alright." And all she could do was brace herself for the words to come...
"You always surprise me in the best ways, Daryl."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Sexual scenarios.)

When he'd finished telling her all there was to tell, he couldn't look at her, and he couldn't stop the trembling in his body. Talking about killing that little girl was as good as reliving the horror of it, sometimes. It could mess him up for days. Longer, even. But it was oddly different, this time, because for a change he wasn't worried about being haunted by the nightmares the words brought about. That was going to happen now whether he worried about it or not. No, he was worried about Sam, and how she would look at him. He was waiting for her to get up, to walk out, to leave him sitting there broken and hollow like he deserved. But that's not what happened. That's not what he got.

"I love you, Daryl." She said, and he couldn't help it. His eyes shot up to hers in complete surprise, his breath catching in his throat. And for a painfully long moment, he thought he'd imagined it. Till she said it again. "I love you, I have for awhile and I didn't want to say anything because I thought it would be too soon, ya know?" She continued, shifting herself in his lap so she was facing him more. "And you don't have to say it back if you're not ready. But you need to know, it's true. And I'm not leaving." She paused, bringing her fingers up to push his bangs out of his eyes. "What happened to you, Daryl... I know someone's probably already said it, but it wasn't your fault. You had no choice. And I get that doesn't make it better, but you gotta know... what happened, it doesn't make you bad or evil. And I will never, EVER, see you that way." And that was all it took for his control to falter. He curled his arms around her and held her to him, his face in her shoulder as his body shuddered, tears claiming him with gentle sobs.

Twice now, he had cried in front of this woman. And neither time had it made him feel weak. That was saying something. She was just... everything. Who she thought he was, that was who he wanted to be. He knew it in that moment. He was determined to be everything she deserved. Eventually, when the tears stopped, he lifted his head to look her in the eyes. "I still think you deserve better than me." He said softly, feeling her wipe his cheeks with her thumbs. "But if yer crazy enough to want me, I guess I'll jus have to work at bein what you deserve." She cracked a small smile, and he reached forward, pressing their foreheads together. He had never been this honest with a woman. Ever. She brought out so much good in him, and she somehow managed to just erase his shame, even if only for a little while. For that alone, he'd gladly go back to hell, just for her.

* * *

"Wait, so... he sat on it? That's so gross!" She laughed from where she was sitting across the table from him, her fork in hand, a piece of pork chop on the end of it. They'd gotten to talking about much lighter things, and it was honestly just soothing. It was like they hadn't missed a single beat, able to pick up being happy no matter what came along.

"Yeah, it's why he turns the lights on no matter what now." He said, smirking a little before cutting a piece of his own food. She only laughed more, shaking her head. He'd just finished telling her about the time Rick went to use a roadside gas station's bathroom, didn't turn the light on, and ended up sitting on a toilet covered in cockroaches. Normally, people didn't want to hear stuff like that during
dinner, but they'd been on a tangent, sharing ridiculous memories. "Pretty sure he's scarred for life. Can't even see a roach now without runnin, screamin like a little girl." She had to put her fork down, shaking her head, one hand on her stomach as she giggled uncontrollably.

"Oh I am never letting him live that down. We need to get some fake roaches and put them everywhere." She grinned, making him chuckle.

"That's my girl, thinkin with your mischievous mind." He said, watching her eyes sparkle at him. They finished their meal like that, laughing, just talking. Just being. After they cleaned up, and spent some more time on the deck drinking wine and talking, she got this look on her face that was all sorts of confusing to him.

"This place has high ceilings." She said, standing up out of her chair, her empty wine glass in hand. "I just had the best idea!" She practically squealed, heading back inside and leaving him there a little stunned and a lot confused. He stood up and followed her, setting his glass down on the table inside next to hers, looking around and not seeing her.

"What are you up to, woman?" He asked out loud, and then he looked up to see her poke her head over the railing.

"Get your ass up here, Dixon!" She giggled. He raised a brow, letting out a slight chuckle. Then he headed up the stairs, getting a full view of the bed and Sam... jumping on it like a little kid. "This... is... awesome!" she laughed as she jumped. He stopped at the top, laughing a little.

"You lost your mind." He said, watching a pillow flop onto the floor as she bounced. He stepped closer to the bed, watching her go up and down, her hair flailing wildly.

"You love it!" She exclaimed, flopping down onto her knees and bouncing a little till she stopped naturally. "And you know it." She said, grinning up at him now. "Come on, when was the last time you jumped on a bed?" He narrowed his gaze on her, stepping close so his legs were up against the mattresses, pulling her into him. She came so easily, hands gliding up his biceps, grinning from ear to ear like she'd just discovered the secret to all happiness was just jumping on a bed.

"I jump on this thing, I'll break it." He said. It was a sturdy enough bed, and the mattresses were stupidly comfy. But he was pretty sure he'd do damage to something if he attempted to jump on it. She laughed at him, then tugged at him.

"Come on, Daryl! I bet I can jump higher than you!" She said, and was about to stand up when he grinned and nudged her back onto the bed, making her land on her back with a bounce. "Hey, that's cheating!" She laughed, getting up on her elbows and smiling at him.

"Ain't no winnin if neither one of us is bouncin. I'd say that's fair." He said, crossing his arms over his chest, hands flat on his ribs. She chuckled at him. Then got back up on her knees, inching her way toward him and sliding her hands onto his sides firmly.

"Still cheating. You could just say you forfeit." She tilted her head, meeting his gaze from a bare few inches away. He shook his head at her.

"Never." He said, then let his hands fall from his ribs and he held on to her, kissing her before she could get away and start bouncing again. She giggled and kissed him back. At first it was innocent, but there was just something about her attitude, the joy she filled the air with, the way she moved into him that made him want so much more than just an innocent kiss. And she didn't protest, either, happily opening her mouth to him. The joyous air began to turn heated before either one of them knew what happened, and before long she was moaning into his mouth, their tongues colliding, lips
working, her hands gripping at him like he was a life preserver in tumultuous water.

His hands seemed to have grown minds of their own, sliding beneath her shirt, fingers gliding up her bare back to the edge of her bra. And when he felt himself reach for the bra clasp, he froze. He stopped himself entirely, ending the kiss, pulling back, feeling startled and just... woah. "Shit..." he muttered, trying to catch his breath. And she was looking at him in confusion, and then she smiled softly like she suddenly understood why he'd stopped, bringing both of her hands up to his face.

"Daryl, it's okay." She said. There was heat in her eyes, a hunger in her voice he recognized, and it only made him want to keep going and never stop.

"We don't have to, Sam. Really. I don't wanna rush things." He said, his voice sounding gravelly with unused need.

"I know." She said, her face sobering. And then she grabbed the edges of her shirt, gliding it up and over her head, revealing her bare torso and red lace bra to him. She let the shirt fall away to the side, he could see goosebumps all over skin, see her trembling lightly. "I want to, Daryl." She whispered, inching closer to him. "I don't want to be afraid of wanting you. I don't want you to be afraid to want me." She was still whispering, but the words were just filling him up. And when she reached for his shirt, tugging it up tentatively, he let her. He didn't stop himself. He let her see his upper body, the scars, the trembling of his own. She let out a series of quick breaths, staring at his form as much as he was staring at hers. "Please... please..." She begged him, her voice catching, shivering. And that was all it took.

He kissed her, deep and longing, pressing her to him, growling lightly in his throat. Daryl was a man like any other. There was a point where fighting the need, the hunger, just became too much and it either needed to be addressed or jacked off elsewhere. He'd reached that point with her without even seeing her completely naked. He wanted her. He wanted to taste her, to feel every inch of her, to examine every curve, to run his mouth over every sensitive spot just to see how she'd react. But he had to remember to be gentle.

His past sexual encounters had usually been of the quick and hurried, drunken variety. He'd never really had the want or need for a real relationship. And after the Army, he didn't dare try. With Samantha, everything was different. Everything he wanted wasn't just physical. He wanted to please her, wanted to make it all about her. Yeah, he'd get his few minutes out of it, but for her? He'd make this last. He'd make her feel like the goddess she was, even if he wasn't very experienced in that art. He'd sure as hell was going to try.

It wasn't long before she was on the bed beneath him, her fingers gliding tentatively along the scars on his back. She knew now where most of his scars came from, including the ones he'd gotten from his father. She touched them like they were holy, like they were pieces of art that made up the whole of him, and fuck if it didn't make him want her even more. He pulled his mouth away from her, hovering above her, looking down the length of her torso to where her shorts began. Then he got on his knees, pulling her up with him. She watched him, her eyes in a silent state as though she were mesmerized, her body shaking lightly. "I won't ever hurt you, Sam. You want to stop, you jus say so." He said to her, softly caressing her face. She smiled at him, letting out a breath.

"I know." She whispered. And he nodded, never taking his eyes off her eyes as he reached behind her, undoing her bra. She let it fall, her breasts coming into view, those goosebumps ever present as her nipples hardened in the cool air around them. She pulled the bra off to the side, discarding it. And finally he let his eyes lower to what she had to show him. Perfectly round, just the right size, he lowered her back down to the bed, letting his fingers glide down her sternum, just between each breast. Her breath came a little quicker, her eyes slightly wide. It was like she'd never been touched.
so gently before, and that thought made him hate Liam even more than he already did. Daryl was
determined to make it right, to make her feel how she always should have been made to feel. And he
was going to start by working her flesh with his hands, his lips, his mouth. He kept his wits about
him as he did, waiting for her to say 'stop'. But she never did.

Instead, she curled her hands in his hair, breathing heavy, little sounds escaping her throat that just
made his dick harder and harder. But it was far from being his turn. He explored her skin, tasting,
touching. Her neck, her breasts, her stomach, everywhere he could get. He drowned himself in the
smell of her, the way she was reacting, urging him on with every tremble and every sound. When he
got to her shorts, he undid them slowly, watching her watching him. She licked her lips, like she was
anticipating so much and just didn't know what to do with herself. He pulled the shorts and her
panties off at the same time, gliding them down her legs, and instantly staring at her sex. Her legs
were apart, knees bent, feet flat on the bed. She was completely nude before him and fuck was she a
goddess.

He slid his hands up her legs, down her thighs, squeezing her flesh subtly, bringing his thumbs closer
closer to her vagina without actually touching it. She was watching him like she'd never
experienced someone taking so much time just to glorify her. And glorify her was what he wanted to
do. He knelt on the floor then, grabbing her hips and rear and pulling her toward the edge of the bed,
making her gasp, her legs over his shoulders in one quick movement. It sounded like she was about
to question what was happening, but that was also the same time his mouth found her folds.

He let his tongue do the searching, her body arching back almost instantly, her hands coming up to
her head when he found that nub of pleasure to tease at. And tease he did. Over and over, feeling her
whole body react, tasting the sweetness of her nether regions, hearing her get louder and louder. He
wasn't sure he'd ever made a woman moan so much. And by the way she was trying to smother her
sounds, he was pretty sure she'd never sounded so loud to herself. He worked at her till she came.
And she came hard, crying out in a half scream that was all pleasure and surprise, her hands gripping
the bed for dear life, her thighs nearly crushing his head. When she finally stopped, he gently
lowered her legs off of him, standing, wiping his mouth a little before getting onto the bed beside her,
pulling her up more so she wasn't hanging half off. She was so slack, eyes closed, her mouth set in a
small 'o' shape as she tried to get her breathing under control. He chuckled a little, propping himself
up with one elbow, his still half dressed body lined up against her naked one.

"You gonna live?" He asked her softly, his free hand tracing lines along her ribs, beneath her breasts,
grazing the pert flesh with every pass. She just cracked a light smile, letting out a very big sigh.

"I dunno. I've never..." she swallowed, opening her eyes and actually looking nervous and shy, "I've
never had an orgasm before, which I'm assuming that's what that was." His expression softened.
Never? Shit.

"What'd you think?" He asked quietly, looking down the line of her body, feeling his dick strain
against the confines of his pants. Goddamn, she was perfect. Petite and strong, shaped in every right
way. And she made all the right sounds. All that moaning and screaming she'd done? Damn if it
didn't almost break him before he'd had a chance. He was imagining how tight and warm she'd feel
around his dick and he had to close his eyes, letting out a shallow breath.

"I think... that was amazing. I didn't know someone could do that with just their mouth." She said,
giggleing a little and curling into him. He let his eyes meet hers, her fingers came up and trailed his
lips, soft pads smoothing just above his stubble. "You always surprise me in the best ways, Daryl." She
said, her smile fading but replaced by that ever present tremble of hers. It was like she was
perpetually stuck in a position of fear that she over ruled with need alone. Need for him. He didn't
know how he knew it, but he was convinced she'd never been that way with Liam. Ever.
"We don't have to do anymore. Jus happy to make you feel good," Daryl said, and honestly it surprised him a little. Sex had always been so quick and somewhat selfish on his part. But that was because it was never anything serious, just a means to an end. This was different. He was different. Sam was definitely worth more than that. She blinked at him, then smiled a little.

"You're too good to me, Daryl Dixon." He felt one of her hands slide down his torso, leaving a trail of heat as she went, stopping at his pants, fingertips sliding in behind the button. "But this isn't just about me. It's about us. Both of us." She pressed herself impossibly closer to him, talking with her lips hovering over his mouth. "I don't want to ever be in a relationship that's one sided ever again. There's no you, no me. Just us. So..." she kissed him once, twice, "Make love to me, Daryl. Please, make love to me." She begged him, her voice pleading. She didn't have to say anything more. Her permission was all he'd wanted, and he ran with it. Gently and hungrily at the same time, he pressed his body into hers, drowning them both in a heated kiss neither one of them had any control over...
Liam hadn't started out being a horrible human being, or so she'd first thought. She'd fallen in love with him because he was kind and seemed so genuine. But that all changed the moment they said 'I do'. The first night he hit her was on their honeymoon. She'd never known a kind, real day with him since then. She sometimes felt so stupid that she hadn't seen the signs. There had to have been some. Even at first, when he was gentle with her, there was still something selfish about it. But he was her first real relationship and she just didn't know any better. But she knew now.

One look at Daryl, and her whole life fell in line. He was the answer to all her prayers. She couldn't even believe it, really, that he was there, loving her. Really loving her. Heart, body, soul. He'd opened himself completely to her, and in turn she was more vulnerable and open with him than she had ever been with anyone. With Liam, it had all been against her will. But with Daryl? He'd left it all on her terms. He never made a move without making sure it was what she wanted. And now that they were there, in bed, completely naked and wrapped up in the undeniable heat of their attraction, he still took his time, still made it about her safety and her comfort, and she had never thought that would ever be a possibility. That he existed was a miracle to her. That he wanted her was unbelievable to her. And if she'd been in love with him before, she was lost in that love now.

She'd helped him shed his pants, her hands trembling at just the idea of him wanting to be inside of her. Liam had always told her she was lucky because no man would ever want an 'ugly snatch' like hers. And after awhile, she'd believed him. But when Daryl had worked her sex with his mouth, doing everything he could to please her, making her orgasm for the first time in her life... well, that proved to her even more than Liam had been wrong. He'd lied about everything. Every awful thing he'd said to her and made her feel, it was all wrong. And Daryl was the proof.

Sam couldn't take her eyes off Daryl's as he hovered over her, her legs spread for him, his dick so hard and pressing against her pelvis. His blue eyes were nothing but icy fire, that heat that made her tremble inside and out. She made a small sob, pushing her pelvis into him. She couldn't take the teasing anymore. "Daryl, oh Daryl..." she whispered, "Please, please, please..." She groaned. And that was it. He slid the tip of himself in between her folds and pushed. He didn't just drive himself in, either. He pushed lightly, inch by inch so she could get used to his size. He pushed himself in, his breath catching, his jaws clenching till he was sheathed all the way to the hilt. And he held himself there. She couldn't help how suddenly impassioned she felt, like having him inside her was enough to trigger things she didn't even know she knew how to do. She pushed herself into him, wanting him so much deeper than he already was. He gasped out, then growled a little, the sound sending shivers all over her form. Here was this man who was so strong and potentially lethal, and yet he was controlling everything he was just for her.

And he moved, in and out, in and out. Over and over, catching a rhythm that was intoxicating and so wonderfully tense. She could feel his muscles working, her hands gliding over his arms, his chest, her thumbs teasing his nipples, her back arching as he lowered his head to mouth at her neck. He began to drive himself faster, harder, but not hard enough to hurt her. The care he took with her just made her heart explode. She was sure he'd hear it. But then he slowed, he stopped, he pulled out.
"Turn over..." he breathed against her mouth, burying her in a kiss that made her own breath disappear.

At first, she was confused, but she turned over, onto hands and knees. And for the first time, she was nervous. Liam only made her turn over when he wanted to use her asshole. Which was never pleasant and always made her hurt for days after. But to her surprise, Daryl didn't even go near it. Instead, he had her up on her knees, holding her around the waist so she had to hold on to his arms, her back to his chest. He was kneeling behind her. She could feel him pressed against her, his dick sliding in between her ass cheeks in a surprisingly sensual way till she was practically whimpering with need. Then she felt him maneuver and suddenly he was inside her vagina again, so unimaginably deep that she was crying out with impossible pleasure.

He nibbled at her ear, sucked on her neck, drove himself in and out from an angle she didn't know existed. And what he was hitting inside of her was building a pressure that was so incredibly toxic and fucking good that she wasn't sure if she should just explode with pleasure or lay down and die. But explode with pleasure was what happened. She was coming before she could recognize what was happening, and she nearly screamed out with the intense pleasure of it, her whole body squeezing, wave after wave of it rushing through her as he kept driving himself in and out of her. Until he slowed again, stopping, sliding himself out, lowering her onto the bed as he trailed kisses down her spine, toward her rear. She was slack again, twitching everywhere, muscles reacting in places she didn't know muscles existed.

When he turned her over again, sliding himself against her, she had completely lost the ability to form words. It was all so much, in all good ways. She felt herself instinctively reach for his dick, grabbing the thick of it, pumping him up and down, feeling her slick cum on his shaft. And he kissed her deep while she did it, the both of them moaning in each other's mouths till Daryl growled and took himself away from her hand, pulling his mouth away and entering her again. He drove in and out, using her up. And for the first time, she was glad to be used up. Because it was on her terms. She wanted him to have her, all of her, to take of her all that he wanted, all that he needed. And when she felt his rhythm intensify, she knew he was close. She grabbed his firm ass, squeezing, pushing along with his driving until his eyes squeezed shut and he moaned out raspily, a series of heavy breaths leaving his throat as he finally came, pumping into her repeatedly till he just couldn't anymore, his orgasm subsiding in a series of pulses that left her vagina twitching around him.

Her hands loosened on his rear, sliding up to his sides. Both of them breathing heavily, his arms shaking lightly as he stayed hovered over her, his head hung, his eyes closed as his groin still twitched lightly. Her vagina felt swollen, bruised even. But it was so different from how Liam had made her feel. This was worlds better. This was heaven.

Finally, Daryl pulled himself out. She almost whimpered, not wanting to lose the feel of him. But he didn't leave her, he laid on the bed beside her, her body turning instantly into his, her knee and thigh between his legs, her arms holding on to him. She was still trembling, so many parts of her still twitching. And he kissed her. So sweet, so longingly, as though he could never tire of kissing her. Finally, as the adrenaline began to fade and they were just laying there staring at each other, he spoke, his rough, gravelly voice making her vagina feel momentarily tight all over again.

"You're still shaking." He whispered, his fingers gliding up and down her spine. "Did I... did I hurt you?" He asked. She could see the worry, the uncertainty in his eyes and she let out a soft sigh, her lids heavy, her lips stretching into a smile.

"No, you didn't hurt me. I'm just..." she took in a breath again, sliding her hand up a particularly long scar on his back, "Still reveling. What you did, Daryl Dixon, was make me feel like I've never felt." She whispered to him, nuzzling her nose against his. "All those sensations, all those feelings..."
kissed him once softly, "I didn't know I could feel that way." She felt him smile, meeting his gaze. There was so much softness in the way he looked at her, affection, and something else. Possessiveness. She knew the look of possessiveness. Liam had always had that look, because she'd been an object to him, a thing. Daryl's look was different, though. Daryl's was more of a protective nature, a need to keep her safe, sated, happy, loved, because she was his to protect, not to harm. And she did feel loved. More than she could ever remember feeling. But then his expression suddenly changed and his body tensed.

"Shit... I didn't use a condom!" He nearly exclaimed, meeting her gaze with soft worry. And she laughed. She couldn't help it. She laughed hard, shaking both of them, burying her head into his shoulder. "What's so funny?!" He demanded. Finally she just grinned at him.

"It's okay, Daryl. I'm on the pill. And I never miss a day. It works really well, trust me." She explained, watching his worry turn to only slight doubt until she kissed him sweetly and then cuddled against him. She'd taken the pill in secret for years with Liam because she never wanted to be pregnant with his child, and Liam never wanted to use condoms. If he'd know what she'd been doing, well... she didn't want to think about it.

Silence stretched on around them, his hands gliding along random parts of her body. She was so comfortable. So at ease. Her vagina was throbbing slightly. But even in throbbing, it still felt good. It felt even better knowing it had been her choice. No one else's. Just hers. She'd chosen this. And she'd chosen Daryl. And she couldn't ever regret anything about that.

"I love you, too, by the way." He said then, his voice a whisper but the words felt like they dove down into the depths of her soul. She lifted her head and blinked at him, feeling the edges of tears in her eyes almost instantly.

"Really?" She whispered, searching his gaze. And it was all right there, in his eyes.

"Really." He replied, smiling warmly at her. And she couldn't help it. She squealed and giggled and turned him onto his back and pinned him down and kissed him, all so quickly he was left laughing a little, too, meeting her mouth happily. A few moments later, she was curled into him again. This time he was on his back, and she was draped half over him, listening to his heart beat while he held her. She could feel sleep creeping up on her, the safety of Daryl's arms lulling her away. And as she finally let herself relax entirely, she knew that this was how it should be. This was what real love was. And she was determined to fight for it every day, no matter what either of their pasts tried to do...
"Everybody's got a soulmate, Daryl."

Chapter Notes

(The lyrics in this chapter are from a song called, 'Love Come' by Sarah McLachland. Look up the piano version. It's beautiful.)

Daryl was laying on the ground. The sky above was dark, stretching on forever, speckled in stars that moved like the fireflies had over the lake. The air around him was stiflingly hot, dry but still uncomfortable. And yet, the sweat that was on his face was cold. He shivered because of it, blinking rapidly for a moment. That was when he realized he couldn't move. His whole body was stiff and useless. He couldn't even open his mouth to cry out. That was when he felt something land on top of his leg, then something land on top of his groin. Things kept falling on him, covering him, getting heavier and heavier. And he realized that he was surrounded by walls.

No, not walls.

Dirt.

He was in a hole, long enough and big enough to bury him in. And that's exactly what was happening. Dirt was falling on him, someone shoveling it in. He wanted to yell, to scream at them, to tell them he was still alive. But his mouth just wouldn't move. Nothing worked. Was he dead? Was he just some sort of broken spirit trapped in his corpse?

For a moment, two faces hovered over the hole.

He knew those faces.

One was Dusty, who was holding the shovel, staring down at him with a look of sorrow and disappointment. It was the Dusty he'd seen earlier, not the Dusty he knew from the service. And the other face?

It was her, the little girl. She was kneeling, peering over the edge, a bright, red hole in her forehead where Daryl had shot her. And she was speaking. Her mouth was moving, but there was no sound coming out. Then they both disappeared from view. And before Daryl could even think about what he'd just seen, dirt fell again. This time... it covered his whole face, blotting out the stars and stealing any chances he had of stopping them from burying him alive...

"Daryl!" He heard Sam's voice, filled with worry... with fear. He awoke with a violent startle, sitting up so fast he didn't have time to realize Sam was hovering over him. They ended up smacking heads together with a loud crack. And shit, it had hurt. For a moment he was dazed, then he saw her holding her head with both hands, and she was wincing, kneeling on the bed naked in the dim lights that filtered upward from the floor below.

"Shit, Sam!" He breathed out, reaching for her, ignoring his own sore head. He realized his whole body just felt tense and was beaded in sweat. *F*ucking nightmares, fucking ghosts. He thought to himself, gently touching her arm. She lowered one hand, blinking at him, confusion and wariness on her features. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." He said, realizing it was just a stupid and useless phrase. He shook his head, letting out shallow breaths, feeling anger rise in his belly. He hadn't meant to hurt
"Daryl?" He heard her ask, her voice slightly shaken. His back was to her, he didn't dare turn around. And he simply walked downstairs, leaving her on the bed, putting distance in between them. Everything in him was raging at himself. He paced, he fought the urge to punch something. And finally decided to go out onto the deck, out in the chill air, surrounded by nothing but water and the softly blazing sunrise on the horizon. He gripped the railing so tight, it cracked softly under his palms. He hung his head, closing his eyes tight. He could see the girl, feel the dirt falling on him again.

He needed to think about the river.

The rolling water, the calming currents, the smooth rocks, the quiet air. He let himself fall into the memory of it, almost desperate to be there. If he'd been at the cabin, he'd have just gone there. But it was miles away now, and he couldn't just leave Sam. Suddenly, he felt her hands on his sides, smoothing around his stomach, the feel of her body pressed against his back. It was like thinking about her just made her magically materialize. He had to open his eyes to be sure he wasn't imagining it. He saw her hands, and let out a shuddered breath.

Slowly he straightened himself, scared to say or do the wrong thing. He turned very carefully, seeing her standing there wearing his t-shirt which came just below her pelvis. He didn't touch her, but she didn't let go of him. He leaned his rear against the railing, and she just pressed herself to him. Her eyes were locked on his. And what he saw, he realized, was just worry and confusion. Had he imagined the fear he'd seen upstairs? He swallowed, the anger disappeared, replaced by regret and so many other things he couldn't put a name to.

"Are you okay?" She asked him then, her voice a smooth caress that made him let out a soft rush of breath.

"Am I..." he shook his head a little, finally letting his hands come up to her face, smoothing her hair back, gliding his thumbs along her cheekbones. "I hurt you." He finally said, his voice sounding shaken and angry at himself.

"Daryl, it was an accident." She said then, her face softening at his touch, she gave him a slight smile. "You were having a nightmare, your whole body was working like you were trying to reach for something so... I tried to wake you. That's all. You didn't do anything wrong."

He blinked at her, then shook his head a little. "You don't understand..." he found himself whispering, having to clear his throat before talking more clearly. "The nightmares... they happen all the time. I can't control them. If this happened accidentally," he commented, touching her forehead lightly, "Then what if I do somethin in my sleep? What if I hurt you worse than jus bonkin heads?" He realized he was shaking lightly at just the thought of it. "Shit, Sam. I'm a mess." He shuddered, closing his eyes. He wanted to tell her she was better off moving on and forgetting about his broken mind. All she'd get was pain or heartache somehow. Rationally he knew this was all just an accident, but his anxiety and his rage were doing the thinking for him at the moment. Until she reached up and took his face in her hands.

"Hey, don't do that..." she whispered, her eyes searching his when he opened them. She seemed to be thinking, like she was trying to figure out what to say or do next. Then, to his surprise, she just started to sing softly, never taking her eyes away from his...

'Love come, light up the shadows. 
Let the beauty of you enter in, for I have hungered for a tender touch
He found himself completely going still, as though just the sound of her voice held a power he didn't understand and wasn't willing to fight. It soothed him, covered him like a blanket, made him calm like only the river ever had. He felt his lips part, his breaths coming slower and steadier the more she sang.

'But love has taken me in, lifted my load.
And in this empty space a wonder grows,
I dream of some kind of peace I could hold up as true.
I never knew anything about love before you...'

All the tension was gone, all the anger and fear. It was like she'd reached in and just pulled it out, leaving him full of her instead. A tear escaped his eye, but he just kept his hands on her sides, warmed by the feel of her body pressed against his, her hands smoothed against his bare shoulders. She never stopped looking at him, holding his gaze, her eyes sparkling.

'Love has taken me in, lifted my load.
And in this empty space a wonder grows,
I dream of some kind of peace I can hold up as true.
I never knew anything about love before you...'

When she finally stopped, she reached a hand up, wiping his tear, letting out a shuddering breath of her own. Then she stood on tip toes and pressed her forehead to his, "See?" She whispered. "We can do this together." And those words undid him. He pulled her into him, hugging her so tight, his face in her shoulder. In just a few minutes she'd managed to put him back together when it usually took him hours to do so on his own. Had he been so wrong all this time? What if the only way to beat this thing was to let someone else help him? But how could he ask her to do that? With all she'd been through, she shouldn't have to work at piecing together a broken man. But then, like she'd read his mind, she said, "We'll help each other. We'll keep each other safe. And we'll make it together."

He pulled back so he could see her face. And he shook his head a little, letting out a sigh. "How often can I say I love you before you get tired of hearin it?" He asked her then, not even caring how sappy it sounded, or the fact they'd pretty much barely started a real relationship with each other. She beamed at him, and kissed him softly.

"You can say it as often as you want." She grinned at him then, taking a small step back. He smiled at her warmly. Then he stepped forward, scooping her up, one arm beneath her legs, the other at her back. She squeaked, giggling as she put her arms around his shoulders.

"And how many times can I show you?" Daryl asked, their faces so very close. Sam raised her brows as though it quickly dawned on her what he meant. "Cause I love you, and I sure as hell wanna show you." She blushed then, the pink of her cheeks showing her shyness kicking in. And he kissed her, stepping into the boathouse as he did. He carried her up the stairs after, taking her back to the bed.
They stripped each other, and Daryl made love to Sam all over again, losing himself in her like his rage and fear had gotten lost in her voice. He could do this with her forever if she let him. She sang for him again in that bed, only it was the sound of her crying out his name, moaning out her pleasure, while he whispered his love along her skin and brought them both to coming long after the sun had come up. And twice more they repeated the process in various ways, they couldn't seem to stop themselves, wasting half the day in that bed till noon came and went and they were both ridiculously sated and exhausted in the best ways possible. He was aching, but damn if it wasn't good. She'd said as much herself. And they both fell asleep again, in the middle of the day, with nothing between them but their own flesh and the calm, sated sounds of their breathing, lulling them away.

* * *

"Yer walkin like you just rode a buckin horse." He joked, setting a couple of plates with sandwiches onto the table as she came out of the bathroom. They'd both been pretty ripe when they finally woke up and decided to get out of bed. The shower was too small for two people. She insisted he go first, just cause she said she wanted to take forever in the water. And she had. It had been nearly an hour. She stuck her tongue out at him, sitting a little stiffly in her seat.

"And whose fault is that?" She asked, staring up at him as he loomed over her. He grinned like a school boy, leaning down and kissing her warmly. She smelled like vanilla.

"I will gladly take responsibility." He said when he straightened up, turning toward the fridge to get something for them to drink. He was wearing a pair of old blue jeans and a black t-shirt with the Army logo on it. His hair was still damp. She'd dried hers, and she was dressed in a pair of dark green shorts and a purple shirt with pink butterflies of varying sizes all over it. Sometimes, he wondered if she got her clothes at a kid's store. He set down a couple of glasses of juice, sitting across from her. "It's turkey. Hope that's alright." He said, motioning to her sandwich. She just grinned and picked up the sandwich, taking a huge bite. He chuckled a little. "Pace yerself, woman." She just chewed and watched him happily. He started in on his sandwich, and when she swallowed her bite down, she started talking.

"I was thinking in the shower about what to do next. And I know exactly what we should do with the rest of the day." She said, her expression firm, like she'd already made up both of their minds. "You, Daryl Dixon, are going to teach me how to fish." She grinned then, and he chuckled a little, setting his sandwich down and taking a sip of his juice before responding.

"You think so?" He asked, watching her furrow her brows in response.

"Oh, I know so. You brought that pole of yours for a reason. So... teach me! I bet I'll learn so fast, I'll be catching more fish than you in no time." She grinned again, and he nodded lightly.

"I'll take that bet." He said, "But it ain't bout how many fish. It's bout the size." 

"Well, then. I bet you that by the time we're done fishing, I'll be the one with the biggest catch." She said firmly, grabbing her glass and drinking.

"What's the prize?" He asked then, playfully wiggling his brows at her. She set her glass down, and shook her head at him.

"The prize is..." she paused, thinking lightly, "If I win, you have to strip tease for me." She giggled, like she couldn't believe she'd actually said it out loud. "And if you win, I'll do it for you." She blushed slightly, but still giggled, her pink lipstick painted lips spread wide in a cheery smile. Daryl nodded slowly, then reached a hand across the table, holding it out for her to take.
"Deal." He said, grinning like an idiot. She took his hand and shook.

"Deal." She responded, then they both went back to finishing their meal, feeling like a pair of high school kids who'd just figured out that being naked together was great. He couldn't help but keep watching her. When she ate, when she talked, hell even when she wasn't doing anything. She was quickly becoming like a touchstone for him, a guiding focus to distract him from the world around him. He'd have jumped straight through the bowels of hell just to be able to hear her laugh, or see her smile, or touch her skin. How had he become so irrevocably addicted in such a short time?

"Everybody's got a soulmate, Daryl." Maggie had said to him once. "You'll find yours, too." He hadn't believed her then, just wrote it off as her being ridiculously in love with Glenn. But he sure as hell was starting to believe her now...
'If she'd just learned her place, learned to obey, he wouldn't be in this mess.'

It was nearly midnight on Sunday by the time Liam saw Sam walk up the steps of her brother's house, the redneck deputy right behind her, a duffel bag draped over one of his shoulders. At first glance, the blue eyed man was strong, sure, confident in his skin. He looked rough, like a biker, someone who could hold his own in a bar fight. But he was nothing compared to Liam. *I'm a day trader, for fuck's sake.* 'He had money, he had prestige. This guy? He was a hillbilly playing at being a good guy. What could he possibly offer Sam in this shitbox of a sweltering hot town?

The house was dark, the family had been in bed for hours. He knew, because he'd been waiting there for her to come back, sitting in an old rusted Navigator, parked several houses down with nothing but a pair of binoculars to help him see. It was a good thing the porch light was still on, and the little solar powered walk lights, or he wouldn't have been able to see anything at all.

Not that seeing gave him any kind of comfort.

He watched as the deputy set down the duffel, standing on the bottom step and holding Sam's waist with both hands, fingers gliding along the edge of her rear as she turned to look at him. Sam was on the porch itself, her hands coming up to cup his scruffy face as she kissed him. And it wasn't just a friendly first date, good night type kiss, either. It was full, it was sensual, it was riddled with emotion. It made Liam go still in the quiet of the driver's seat, his hands gripping the binoculars so tight, he heard a soft crack from the plastic. She had never... not even once... kissed him like that.

Finally, they stopped. The deputy stepped back, letting his hands fall away. Liam couldn't tell what the man said, but it made Sam laugh, her face lighting up with soft joy. She picked up her bag, unlocked the front door and went in, giving the man a tentative wave before closing the door behind her. The deputy waited another moment, probably to hear the door lock again. And then he turned, scruffing his hair lightly with one hand, the other slipping into his pocket to pull out the keys. Liam watched the deputy walk back to his Jeep, all the while fighting the urge to reach for the rifle that was sitting next to him.

But the deputy stopped at the end of the walkway, keys up in one hand. He was standing still, quiet. And then he began to look around, just his head moving slowly as though he were searching the darkness for something he'd heard or sensed. His eyes landed right on the Lincoln, but kept going past it, brows furrowed. Liam had parked away from any street lamps and the inside was as dark and shadowed as possible. Finally, the deputy got back in the Jeep and drove off a moment later, leaving nothing but the quiet night behind him.

The porch light of the Grimes' house went dark shortly after. The little glow from the solar lamps did little to illuminate it. Liam tossed the binoculars aside, gliding one hand over the rifle momentarily before looking at his reflection in the rearview, turning the mirror so he could see the reflection of his dark image.

Sam looked... happy. Happier than she'd ever looked with him. Sure. he could admit he had a temper, and that he may have been hard on Sam sometimes. But if she'd just learned her place, learned to obey, he wouldn't be in this mess. He wouldn't be lost and on the run. And she wouldn't be kissing that fucking hillbilly. Her standards had apparently lowered considerably since she'd forced him to flee by turning him into the police for beating her. Shit, he was only trying to stop her from killing herself. Stupid bitch.

He ground his teeth together a little, shaking his head. No, he couldn't think like that. Not if he was going to get her back. Not if he was going to prove to her that she was his and no one else's. The
court may have dissolved their marriage, but she was still his wife. Body and soul, he'd get her back. She was nothing without him, after all. And he'd be damned if anyone else got to have her.

He'd have to do something about her brother. Not kill him. He was pretty sure that wouldn't help his cause with Sam. But something. And that deputy. That Daryl Dixon. Liam could forgive her for going to her Sheriff brother, after all he was her only family besides Liam. But Dixon? When he got Sam back, he'd have to punish her for that. He'd have to put her in her place. The idea that she let that man touch her, kiss her, probably have sex with her... he let out a deep breath and turned the mirror back to its original position, reaching forward and starting the engine of the Lincoln.

Sam was back, and tomorrow she'd be at her pathetic little studio. Fuck, if it really meant that much to her to teach snot nosed little kids to sing, he'd let her do that back in New York. But for now, he knew what she'd be doing, where she'd be. And he'd keep watching. He needed to be careful about this. About the steps he'd take. He'd win her back, he'd take her home, she'd call off the dogs, they'd renew their vows, and then... all bets were off.
"I'm just happy."

Dr. Hershel Greene's farm was gorgeous.

There were wide open fields for horses, several barns that were as big and red as barns could be. There was his veterinary practice in a large white building at the end of the long gravel drive, and his house sat nestled against a swath of trees that stood tall and hung over like towering giants, offering shade and a cool breeze. The house was surrounded by a garden with all sorts of flowers and plants that just lit up the yellow siding, always looking perfectly spring like. A huge wrap around porch lined the entire outside of the house, a roofed overhang offering protection from the sun and weather.

A portion of a field was cordoned off for people to park their vehicles. Several large open tents without walls were set up just beyond the house, people milling about and listening to a string band that was set up underneath the tent closest to the house. Tables with a pot luck style meal were set out, everyone bringing something and adding more and more as the minutes passed. There were pink balloons and pink streamers. Children were running and laughing. Everyone was dressed in their Sunday finest even though it was a Monday. And it was all for one little baby girl, Anna Beth Rhee.

A large banner that said, 'Welcome to the world!' hung over the porch, flowing softly in the breeze above where Sam was sitting next to Mama D and Maggie's younger sister Beth, watching the frivolity that was already afoot even though the party hadn't even technically started. "And I swear he's got his eyes on me." Mama said, finishing her story about an older colored gentleman named Robert Ward who had bought the hardware store she lived above. "Mm, mm... I tell you, girls, it's good to be ogled by a good lookin man." She said with a smile that was both infectious and funny, making both Sam and Beth laugh.

"You should ask him out, Mama." Beth said, the blond haired, petite Greene girl pulling one leg beneath her. She was wearing an off white spring dress that came to her knees, a spray of blue flowers all over it. "It's the thing to do now, you know. A lady askin a man out." Mama D chuckled and shook her head.

"Ah, child, I'm too old to be goin on dates. If he wants my attention, he knows where to find me." She winked and Sam giggled a little. "And you, miss thing? How goes it with our favorite sexy deputy? You two were somethin special, that night you came for my good cookin." She asked, grinning. Sam couldn't help it, she blushed instantly, looking away, her pink lips spread in a smile as she let out a breath, smoothing out the skirt of her own spring dress. It was all pink with tiny yellow and orange accents.

"It's been amazing." She said warmly, looking back to see both Mama D and Beth staring at her with happy eyes. "He's amazing. I don't think I've ever been so happy." She said, smiling brightly. Mama reached over and patted Sam's leg.

"That's cause you got yourself a good man. Deputy Daryl will take good care of you. He'll never do you wrong. Take it from Mama D, girl. You two?" She made a hand gesture to the sky. "Match made in heaven, mm mm." Sam laughed lightly. "I know a good thing when I see it. And you both got it, in each other." Mama let go of Sam's leg, relaxing back in her chair. She was dressed very colorfully, in bright purples. A dress, a hat, even a handbag. All purple. It made her beautifully happy features stand out even more. "Now tell Mama, cause I'm dyin to know..." She leaned in a little, and spoke quietly, just enough for Sam and Beth to be the only ones to hear, "How's that man in bed, hm?" She wiggled her brows and Beth started laughing immediately, Sam had to put her hands up to her hot face, just giggling beside herself.
"Hey now, don't be givin away my secrets." She heard Daryl say, turning even redder when she looked to see him coming up the porch steps. He was wearing his dark blue jeans, boots and deputy shirt, his badge on his belt, his gun at his hip. Mama D laughed heartily.

"You can't blame a girl for tryin, Deputy Daryl." She winked at him and he chuckled, coming over to the bench Sam was sitting on and settling in beside her, tucking an arm around her shoulders. She happily leaned into his frame as he kissed the top of her head, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee.

"Sorry I'm late." He whispered to her. "Had to close up the office, everyone's out on calls cept for me and Rick." She let her hand find his thigh, resting it there comfortably. She was so comfortable there, with him and with Mama D and Beth. Watching everyone getting ready for the party to welcome Maggie and Glenn's little girl into the world. It was... perfect, everything about it.

"Where is Rick, anyway?" She asked after a moment. She'd seen Michonne and the kids, but hadn't seen Rick yet. Sam had driven here from the studio by herself. Just mentioning his name seemed to have an affect, because that was when his truck came lumbering toward the parking area. "Never mind." She said with a grin. Rick stepped out after he parked, waving at them.

"Daryl, get over here and help me." He called. Rick was wearing his Sheriff's uniform, still technically on duty, just like Daryl, who stood and slipped away from Sam, leaving a cool spot where he used to be. She watched him walk away, dyeing his rear as he hopped off the steps and jogged over to Rick to help her brother pull some bags of ice out of the truck bed, along with a few coolers.

"It's a heck of view, watching him walk from behind." She heard Beth say, Mama chuckled and Sam couldn't help but giggle again.

"Believe me, I know." Sam replied, all three women laughing and staring at Daryl who turned just in time to see it. She watched him raise a brow, and Rick nudged him with a knowing smirk before leading the way to the food tables. A moment later, a cheer and an applause went up when Maggie and Glenn pulled into the parking area.

It didn't take long for everyone to gather beneath the tents, cooing and coddling the newest member of the small town. Gifts were given, food was eaten, and music kept playing. It was just all sorts of wonderful. All the love these people had for each other, and now Sam was a part of it? It was like a dream come true. She'd lived her early years under the tyrannical thumb of a fanatically religious father and a cowardly mother, then lived life after college under the brutal hands of Liam. To be here now, surrounded by all this love and hope, and all these good people, it was almost too much for her heart to take. How far she'd come in such a short time still astounded her. And she knew without a doubt it was because of her brother, his family, his friends. Her family and friends now, too. And Daryl. Hands down.

"Penny for your thoughts." Daryl said from behind her, slipping his arms around her, clasping his hands at her stomach. She leaned back into him, her head on his shoulder, her back to his chest as they watched Judith dragging Carl and Sophia around the makeshift dance floor while the band played an almost hyper version of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

"I'm just happy." She said softly. He squeezed her gently, stepping back and turning her so he could see her face, bringing his hands up to her cheeks, gliding his fingers into her loose hair. "Really, really happy." She felt her voice choke a little, unable to help the emotion that was filling her up. He smiled so warmly at her, it just made her control waver even more. And he kissed her. Softer, soothingly, as tenderly as he'd ever done. For a moment, the whole world fell away. Her hands rested on his chest, her heartbeat slowing to a steady calm to match his own. And all that happiness
just poured out of her and into him like she wanted him to feel it, too.

That was when a cheer went up from Glenn, of all people. They broke their kiss to clapping and laughter all around them. They eyes of all the people they cared about on them, making her blush, ducking her head into Daryl's chest as she giggled uncontrollably. He wrapped his arms around her, smirking over her head. "Ya'll got better things to do than watch us?" He asked, a series of laughs following. That was when Rick came up and patted him on the shoulder lightly.

"Nope." Rick said, Sam lifting her head to look at him. He looked proud, happy. Approving. It made her feel relieved in a way. They'd only talked briefly about the weekend, but to know he was good with her relationship with Daryl meant more to her than she'd realized. "Hate to do this to you two, but we've got a call, Daryl." He said, waving his walkie talkie lightly. She heard herself make a disappointed sound, hugging Daryl tighter than before. He just kissed the top of her head.

"Enjoy yerself." He said to her, watching Rick walk over to Michonne and say something before kissing the chocolate skinned woman and walking toward his truck. Daryl glanced down at Sam before stepping back, his hand gliding down her arm. "See you tonight?" He asked, grinning softly at her. She just beamed and nodded quickly. And then he let her go, turning on his heel and jogging after Rick. She watched them drive off, feeling elated. She had never known life could be this good. And now that she did? Well...

She turned slowly, letting her eyes fall from person to person. All the laughter, all the smiles. Beth dancing gently with baby Anna in her arms. Glenn and Maggie watching from one of the tables, leaning into each other like their love was all they needed to survive in the world. Mama D and her new suitor, Richard, acting all shy by the water table. Michonne and Carl watching Judith shake her little tushy on the dance floor. Carol working the grill better than any man could. Sasha sitting next to Hershel with her brother Tyreese, probably talking about the horses. And so many others. The list went on, the faces all happy, in various stages of display. And all she wanted to do was imprint the sights on her heart, to carry them there, to keep them with her all the time. Because this was heaven. This was her happily ever after. With Daryl and her brother and all these amazing people who knew next to nothing about her, but took her in anyway. No amount of money, no city in the world, nothing could compare to these people or the life she was building in Athens, Georgia. Because nothing was more priceless than knowing that this was home.

If only she'd known what was waiting in the shadows for the right moment... to tear it all down...
"Alright, but you move fast, brother."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Drug related death.)

Daryl and Rick were both ducked down beside the passenger side of Rick's truck, parked just outside the Gas and Grill, an old gas station and burger shop off the highway, luckily surrounded by nothing but a mile of fields in either direction. That was pretty much the only good thing going for them at the moment. Deputy Mason Andrews and the only female in the department, Deputy Jay Robard, were hiding behind their Jeep parked on the opposite side. And standing in the middle of it all, way too fucking close to the pumps, was a man none of them recognized.

All they knew about him was that he was high out of his mind, and waving an automatic rifle around like he was seeing enemies everywhere. The sheer fact he hadn't hit the gas pumps yet was a goddamn miracle. The owner of the gas station and his cashier were locked inside the small building. And there weren't any customers. But if the guy managed to catch just one of the pumps? Well, that would be one hell of an explosion.

"He's too close to the pumps. We try to take a shot and miss, and we all go up." Rick said over the radio. 'Whataya wanna do, boss?' Andrews replied, the soft pop of static following. Daryl nudged Rick.

"Distract him. Have Mason meet me round back and we'll come up behind him. We'll grab him and ya'll can move in." He said, and the sound of another few rounds going off filled the air, making them both cringe. The truck exploded shattered glass down onto the pavement as the bullets took out a window, some of which fluttered down around them. Daryl shook his head after, small pieces falling out of his hair. None of them were saying what was going through their minds. This had to be Spinners. The guy was violent, hallucinating, but high as a fucking kite. And neither he nor Rick was too eager to get dirt deep in that mess again. They just didn't have a choice.

"Alright, but you move fast, brother." Rick demanded, then messaged to Andrews the plan. A moment later, Rick stood up, inching his way out in front of the truck and getting the guy's attention. The man either didn't understand Rick, or was just too lost in his imaginings to care. He shot at Rick, who dove behind the truck just in the nick of time, all the while Daryl and Mason making their own way around to either side of the building. The guy was turning again. From this point of view, he could see that the guy was covered in sweat, his nose was bleeding and his pupils were so wide that they nearly drowned out the color. He motioned to Mason to wait for a three count. And when Rick distracted the guy again, Daryl motioned with his fingers, counting down.

The two rushed, Daryl going for the guy's torso, Mason going for the legs. It wasn't that they practiced this sort of thing. It was just what made sense, considering Mason Andrews was much leaner than Daryl. Whereas Daryl had far more upper body strength. They tackled him to the ground, the rifle going off in his hands, bullets ricocheting off the tar. But Daryl managed to get the gun away, nearly shoving it off to the side.

The guy was mad strong, kicking and bucking, raging at them as the other deputy and Rick joined them and tried to keep the man under control. And then, all of a sudden, he just stopped moving. His head lolled back, his eyes rolled inward, and he was just painfully still. Daryl let him go, Mason
pushing away from him. "Fuck..." Daryl said, leaning over and feeling for a pulse. There wasn't any.

It took twelve minutes for the ambulance to show up. But it didn't matter. They'd done CPR repeatedly while waiting, until they were pretty damn sure there was no reviving the guy. The troopers showed up. The ambulance took the body away, and suddenly they had a pissing match on their hands.

"Look, we can work together on this thing, or I'll go over your damn head. I don't care. This is my county, and this is the second death connected with Spinners." Rick said, shifting on his feet, hands on his hips. Captain Greg Lee let out a sigh, the short but strong looking man shook his head.

"I don't care what you do. This is our case. And the gas station is off the highway. So that makes it our jurisdiction." He replied, crossing his arms over his chest. Daryl wanted to just smash him under his boot.

"Hey, dickhead, Cooke County jurisdiction supersedes trooper boarders and you know it. If this shit is in our county, then we need to be a part of the investigation. How far you think you'll get if people won't cooperate with you?" Daryl growled out, Rick glancing at him but not stopping him. "Cause that's what's gonna happen. I guarantee it."

"First of all, Deputy," Lee began, staring at Daryl like he was as inconsequential to things as the dirt beneath his shoes, "If you plan on telling people not to cooperate with us, I'll arrest your redneck ass for interfering with a police investigation. Second," he looked at Rick, then. "Get a rope on your dog, Sheriff." Daryl was about to say something more when Rick put a hand out, patting Daryl's chest once.

"I'm gonna say this only once. My people run point on this, we share what we find, you do the same. Or I will go straight to Governor Wilhelm, who just so happens to be a Cooke County native, a friend and big campaign supporter of the Sheriff's office, and you'll be cleaning Deputy Dixon's boots with a toothbrush before the sun sets." Rick said calmly, stepping forward, towering over the shorter man. "You don't want to fight me on this, Lee. You may have the numbers," He motioned to the several troopers milling about, "But I'm the one with the connections."

For a moment, Lee just stood there, clenching his jaw, thinking. He wasn't a stupid man. He knew when to back down. But Daryl had a feeling they hadn't seen the last of this fight. Fucking troopers. So high and mighty with their fancy vehicles and state funds. "Fine. But we're farther ahead on this. We'll give you the scene, the cleanup. But tomorrow, we go over everything you found. And only then do I show you what we've got so far." Lee said, but didn't wait for a reply. "I'll be in touch, Sheriff." He said, moving away, glancing once at Daryl with a hard expression before ordering his troopers out.

Daryl and Rick stood side by side, watching everyone leave. Andrews and Robard stood close by. "Why do I feel like we just inherited one hell of a shitstorm?" Rick asked, glancing at Daryl. Daryl shrugged.

"Cause we did." He said plainly.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon, well on into the evening, was spent clearing the scene, collecting evidence, and spending nearly two hours at the County Morgue for the autopsy. Nearly every organ in the man's system had shut down. Until the tox screen came back, they wouldn't know for sure, but it was probably safe to say the culprit was definitely Spinners. The man was a repeat offender in Louisiana, by the name of Jordan Gould. He'd been arrested for drunk and disorderly three times, assault with a
deadly weapon, petty theft and a few other smaller things. But there'd never been any history of drugs, or none they could find. So why all of a sudden would he overdose on them now? And where had he gotten them?

There were still overdoses and cases of people getting sick all over the state. It was like an illness, spreading farther and farther, even outside of Georgia now. And yet people were still using the shit like it was honey in tea. It didn't seem to matter that it was deadly if people didn't use it right. Hell, it was nasty even if people did use it correctly. Eventually, the outcome was the same. Take enough of it over a long period of time, and the body just eventually gave out.

Daryl glanced at his watch. It was nearly nine. He'd called Sam earlier to tell her they'd have to postpone their plans for the night. He was staring down a pile of files and evidence, his desk cluttered with it. And Rick was doing the same in his office. They'd sent Mason and Jay home an hour earlier. No point in everyone being exhausted. Daryl sat back, stretching his arms over his head with a sigh. Then he stood, walking over to Rick's office. He poked his head in.

"Hey man, gonna get some coffee from the diner. You want some?" He asked, catching Rick's attention. Their coffee machine had busted weeks ago and they'd just never remembered to replace it. The Sheriff sat back, the chair squeaking lightly as he nodded.

"Yeah, please. Blacker the better." He replied. Daryl grinned.

"Is that what you tell Michonne?" Daryl cracked, Rick narrowed his gaze and threw a pen at Daryl's head. He ducked it with a chuckle.

"Ass." Rick called after Daryl as he headed for the door, humor in his voice. Daryl just ignored him and headed outside. It was cool now, though there was still a touch of humidity in the air. The street was quiet for the most part. The movie theater was still open, but the last showing had just gotten out and people were heading to their cars. Most of the shops had closed already. The only other lit up place was the diner, further down. He didn't rush, he just took his time, crossing the street at the yellow blinking light. He was about twenty feet away from the diner when someone stepped out from the small alley beside the barber shop.

"Deputy." The man said, and Daryl couldn't have said why but he immediately felt on edge, slowing his steps until he stopped entirely. The man was dressed all in black, long sleeves, a hood over his face and sunglasses at night time. Bells and whistles went off in Daryl's head like the man was waving a neon sign. He reached for his gun immediately, but the man just held up his hands. "I'm not here to cause you trouble." The man said then. And he had some sort of English accent. Who the fuck was this guy? Daryl narrowed his gaze, not moving from that spot.

"What do you want?" He demanded, watching every move the guy made.

"To give you a warning." The man said, lowering his hands. "I've been hired to eliminate you. But it turns out you are not the sort of target I typically prefer to kill." Daryl tightened his hand on the grip of his gun, taking a very slow step back. "That being said, I have returned the money paid to me. But you should know the man who hired me is determined to see you dead, one way or another." Daryl blinked, brows furrowing.

"Yer sayin... you were paid to kill me, but you decided not to? Why? Who hired you?" He asked, the man slid his hands into his pockets idly, completely unworried about Daryl's grip on his sidearm.

"I prefer to kill the sort of man who deserves it. I did my research on you, Deputy Dixon. You're a man of honor. You served your country well and have done good things for this community. I am not American, obviously. But I know a patriot when I see one." He walked toward Daryl now, who
slowly let go of his sidearm. The man stopped a few feet away. "As for who hired me, I do not know his name. But I can tell you this... he firmly believes you have something that belongs to him. And men like that are dangerous. Recklessly so. Be careful, Deputy." And that was all he said before turning back down the alley and disappearing, leaving Daryl standing there silent and still.

What the fuck just happened? He asked himself, looking down the now empty alley and feeling completely dumbfounded. Someone wanted him dead? Why? What did he have that belonged to someone else? The questions kept assaulting him until he finally started walking again, wary and suddenly feeling far more tired than he should have. He'd have to get a gallon of coffee to make it through the night. No way in hell was he going to sleep. Not after that odd encounter.

And, as he headed back to the office, cups in hand, he couldn't help but think he hadn't seen the last of that English man. He just wasn't entirely sure if that was a good thing or not...
"I'll be careful. It's all I can promise."

By the time Wednesday rolled around, they hadn't been able to see much of each other. With work at the Sheriff's office so suddenly hectic, and her own students to worry about, they'd barely had five minutes to themselves. It was a little disheartening, considering how wrapped up in each other they'd been over the weekend. Sure, really it had only been a few days. But when she heard that Daryl had Wednesday off, she switched everything around just so she could be with him. To say she was addicted was a severe understatement.

They were in bed, completely nude. No sheets, no blankets, pillows on the floor after their latest intimate encounter. He was on his back, one hand behind his head. The other was trailing random designs on her back. She was laying somewhat on top of him, listening to his heartbeat. The air was warm and humid but there was a gentle breeze coming in through the open windows of Daryl's bedroom. "Are you still meeting that guy for dinner tonight?" She asked then, lifting her head to look at him, her hair a disheveled mess that sort of just went all around them. He met her eyes.

"Yeah, it's been a long time. Else I'd make a rain check. Rather be here with you."

"Thought you'd be happy to see an Army buddy. You seem like you're dreading it." She commented, shaking her hair out a little and sitting up, relaxing back on her rear, legs crossed Indian style. She rested her hand on his bare stomach, playing with his happy trail. He just watched her, his eyes gliding over her nakedness with appreciation.

"I should be happy. Truth is," He sighed a little, then sat up himself, one foot on the floor as he scooted a little closer to her. "Tryin to forget everythin that happened, I ended up jus walkin away from it all. Him included. He didn't deserve it, he had my back over there. But it was easier not havin reminders. Seein him last week... it didn't do me any favors."

She tilted her head a little, then touched his face softly, her fingers following along his jawline. "Maybe you shouldn't go. With what happened at that gas station, and all the stuff at work, you're stressed enough as it is." She said truthfully. And he was. He was tense, he was severely quiet. It wasn't till after they'd made love again that he'd relaxed a little. She could tell there was a ton on his mind and most of it wasn't good. He reached up and took her hand in both of his, kissing her knuckles before just holding her hand in his lap.

"Can't jus bail now. Besides, I don't even know how to get a hold of him." Something crossed over his features, a thought that made him tense up again. She'd been seeing it all day.

"What is it?" She asked softly, and when he looked at her, it was a little dark. Not toward her, but something quietly angry. He shook his head. "No, uh uh."

"Can't jus bail now. Besides, I don't even know how to get a hold of him." Something crossed over his features, a thought that made him tense up again. She'd been seeing it all day.

"What is it?"

"You love it." She pressed her forehead to his. "Now tell me." For a moment, he just sat there holding her. And she let him, knowing he liked to think about what he said before he said it most times. She was also really enjoying the fact that they were just cuddling naked and perfectly happy with it. She was greatly beginning to enjoy cuddling. Naked or not. Which was a little funny because
"Monday night, I was stopped by someone who said they'd been hired to kill me." He said plainly, as though he were talking about the weather and not an assassination attempt. Her head shot back, surprise and shock all over her features. Had she just heard what she thought she'd heard?! "He said he didn't wanna do it, but warned me the guy who hired him wasn't gonna stop. Said the one who hired him was keen on killin me cause I have somethin he thinks belongs to him." And she went completely still in his arms. Mind reeling, body in shock along with the rest of her.

"Daryl..." And that was pretty much the only word she could get out. Why hadn't he told her about this? This was... this was insane! She slid out of his arms and off his lap, pacing the floor for a moment. She could feel him watching her, then she stopped and looked at him, hands on her bare hips. She didn't even care that it mimicked a lot how her brother stood when he was frustrated. "Why didn't you tell me all this? Do you know who wants to kill you? I mean, damn... and what did Rick say? Who was the guy who told you all this? What do you have that-" And she stopped in her barrage of questions.

Liam.

"Oh god! Oh my god!" She was suddenly panicked and scared, the frustration bleeding away to an intense terror that made her whole body begin to tremble. "It's him, it's Liam! I know it is!" And with that, Daryl was out of the bed and holding her. She clung to him, shaking uncontrollably.

"Hey, we don't know that." He said soothingly. "Besides, the guy who warned me, he said I had something, not someone." She shook her head a little against him, looking up and meeting his eyes. Tears fell instantly. And she stepped away from him, putting space in between.

"I AM a thing!" She almost yelled, and she watched his whole body stiffen. "You don't get it, he sees me as a thing, a possession. Not a person, not like you see me." She sobbed a little, hands coming up to her face. "He said, he always said that he would kill anyone who tried to take me away. Anyone who touched me, even. And he has money! Money the courts and banks don't know about! He could have hired that man! Oh god, oh god!" She was hysterical, panic was in control. She should run, far away, and never look back. But she felt Daryl's hands on her, firm and steady, forcing her to look at him. And what she saw... wasn't fear.

"You listen to me, woman." He said, his voice gravelly and almost hard. "You are not a thing, I don't care what that fucker said. And if this is really his doin? Then he can do his best. I didn't survive all the shit I've survived jus to find you and lose you. You hear me?" He demanded, bringing his hands to her face and holding her gaze. "An this ain't yer fault, so whatever yer thinkin about doing, don't. He ain't gonna win, you understand? Not here, not now. Not ever. I won't let him."

God, he was so sure. So incredibly stern and positive. For a moment, she saw the ruthlessness in Daryl's eyes, the ability to be hard and terrible if he needed. There was a soldier in that gaze, the same one who'd done everything he could to save people, to keep his battle buddies safe. And there was a man in love in those eyes, the kind that would tear down the world to protect the woman he loves. All she could do then was cry. He held her, sitting on the bed with her in his lap and just let her cry it out till she was a complete mess. Finally, when he'd wiped her face with one of his handkerchiefs and she was relaxed against him, she spoke again.

"I know I'm right about this." She whispered, feeling his hands firmly holding her and trying to revel in it. "It's him. And... I'm scared."

"If it's him, he ain't done nothin but hire the wrong guy and be an all around idiot." He said, his voice
rumbling lightly in his chest. "I'll talk to Rick. We'll figure this out. But till we do, I don't want you anywhere alone. You stay with me, with Rick and the family, or with someone else. But you don't so much as cross the street by yerself, you hear me?"

It was funny how he ordered her to do things, but it never really sounded like an order. Not like Liam used to do. With Daryl, it was more like an intense need for her to comply because he just loved her so damn much. And God, she loved him. She lifted her head, nuzzling against his face and sighing a little. "Okay. I promise..." But she paused, pulling away just enough to look at him. "But what about you? What if he hires someone else? Or what if he comes after you himself?" He just gave her a soft smirk.

"I'll be careful. It's all I can promise." He replied, and she knew he was right. He couldn't stop work, he was a deputy for crying out loud. It wasn't exactly like he could just call in sick for a year. And with the case that he'd barely told her about, Rick needed all the help he could get. Spinners sounded awful. And to know those drugs were in Athens made her feel sick, just thinking about a kid getting their hands on it. She nodded lightly, then slid off his lap, laying down on the bed. She didn't have to say that she wanted him to hold her, he just knew. He laid down beside her and wrapped her in his body. And she just melded into him, desperate for his comfort, his warmth, his strength.

In the back of her mind, she could hear all the awful things Liam used to say to her. And she shivered lightly. "I love you, Sam." Daryl said then, out of the blue, and suddenly all the nasty words just faded, disappeared, destroyed by the simple act of Daryl's declaration. She pressed herself deeper into him and let out a shaken breath.

"I love you, too." She said softly, and just held on to that. The world was scary, and monsters lurked in the shadows. But in Daryl's arms, she knew... none of them could touch her.
"I don't... understand..."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Mentions of blood.)

Daryl was sitting in his usual booth at the diner, nothing but a glass of water in front of him as he waited for Dusty. Everything in him wanted to leave. It wasn't Dusty's fault, really. There was just so much shit that got stirred up when he first saw the guy that Daryl wasn't all too eager to dig up more. But he'd said he'd be there. So there he was.

His mind was on... well, everything. Losing Merle, Spinners, Liam, the English guy, Anna Beth, Samantha, Vagrant, the river. A mix of good and bad that all were taking turns floating through his consciousness. In some ways, life was really fucking good. Better than he could remember, really. He had his family, he had Samantha. And he'd never been a happier man. But in other ways? Life was getting hard. He still felt guilty about Merle, wanted to kill the guy who murdered him. He wanted to hunt down Liam and run him over with his Jeep a few hundred times. He wanted make it so that Spinners no longer existed in Cooke County. And he really wished he hadn't agreed to dinner with Dusty.

"You're going to bore a hole into my table." Michonne said from the counter, pausing from her work going through receipts. He blinked, turning his eyes away from the paper placemat to look at her and letting out a sigh before relaxing back a little. "What's on your mind?" She asked, setting her pen down and leaning her forearms on the counter top. After a moment or two, he slid out of his seat and wandered over, sitting his rear on one of the spinning stools.

"Everythin." He replied, grabbing a napkin and reaching forward to wipe some dough off of Michonne's neck. She just let him, like it was no big deal. Daryl really wasn't the touchy feel sort with anyone, except of course for Samantha. And when Judith decided she needed to climb him like a tree. But he found he was comfortable enough to hang on and hug certain people, like Maggie and Glenn, Rick and Michonne, among a few others. Strangers, though... it was tough just to shake hands sometimes. He dropped the napkin on the counter, then folded his hands together.

"Everything, hm?" She asked, grabbing a coffee cup and pouring herself some. "Let me see if I can guess... you're worried about the Spinners," She said turning back toward him and resting her hip against the side counter. "You're head over heels in love with Sammy, and worried that Liam really has come back to rear his ugly head." He raised a brow at that and she smiled. "Rick tells me everything, remember?" He nodded. He was alright with that. "What else? Um..." She paused, narrowing her gaze on him. "Merle. He's still floating around in there." She said, reaching forward with one finger and tapping his forehead. "It's a whole lot you can't control, Daryl, don't you think? I mean, except for being in love with Sam, of course. That's a really good thing."

"You sound happier about that than Rick does." Daryl responded, smirking a little. Rick was happy, to Daryl's surprise. He was encouraging their relationship one hundred percent, and Daryl had to admit he was relieved and honored. Rick was his brother, his best friend. To think he trusted Daryl so much with Sam meant everything.

"We're both happy, because you're both happy. And you both deserve it." She took a slow sip of her coffee. "What about this Hendee guy? Haven't told us much about him." Daryl shook his head a
"Ain't much to tell. We were overseas together, same unit. He was there when..." he cleared his throat a little, "When everything went to hell." He met her eyes and shrugged. "Jus wants to catch up before he leaves town."

"You sure that's a good idea?" She asked, concern on her deep brown features, her dread locks falling slightly forward when she leaned on the counter again. Sometimes he hated that certain people knew him so well. It didn't give him much room to argue.

"I owe him that much. I'll deal with whatever happens after. Always do." He said, and she nodded, a light smile playing on her lips before she reached over and touched his face softly.

"Just don't try to do it alone. Okay?" She pinched his cheek a little like he was a kid and straightened up, glancing over toward the door. "Speak of the devil, that might be him." She said, watching a man suck in the last of his cigarette before tossing it to the ground to snuff it out. Daryl nodded, standing off the stool.

"It is." He replied. And a moment later, Dusty Hendee came into the mostly empty diner.

"Hey man, glad you could make it." Dusty said with a big grin, walking up to Daryl and clasping hands with him immediately. Daryl just nodded and motioned to the booth he'd started in. Both men sat, Daryl taking his glass of water back into his hand, letting the condensation slip down to his finger tips. Michonne brought over a menu.

"Start you off with something to drink?" She asked Dusty. She didn't usually do the waitress bit at the diner. She mostly took care of the finances and the ordering. But Carol was with Sophia, and the two younger waitresses had college tours till Friday.

"Ooh, how bout..." he paused, glancing at either side of the laminated menu, "Got iced tea?" He asked, glancing up at Michonne with a smile that was all charm and no limits. She smirked at him, more out of amusement than anything else.

"Sweetened or unsweetened?" She asked, hand on one hip.

"Sugar all the way, beautiful." Dusty said with a wink. Michonne just shook her head and walked away, Dusty watching her with the hungry eyes of a single man.

"Hey." Daryl said, snapping his fingers to get Dusty's attention. "She's married, man. Give it up." Dusty looked back at Daryl with a slight laugh, raising both hands in small surrender.

"Can't blame me. She's gorgeous." Dusty said, looking down at the menu again, perusing over the dinner choices. "Gotta say, though, you two looked pretty cozy from where I was standing outside." He raised just his eyes to Daryl mischievously. Daryl just shook his head.

"You haven't changed at all." He replied, then. "And she's family. Her husband is my best friend, like a brother to me." He said very sincerely, just as she stopped at the table with Dusty's iced tea. She smiled warmly at Daryl, probably having heard every word. He just acknowledged with a curt nod.

"What would you like to eat?" Michonne asked, not needing to write it down. She had a good memory. Dusty ended up ordering the meat loaf and loaded potatoes. Daryl hadn't ordered anything. His appetite just wasn't with him. Dusty didn't seem bothered by it.

"So, man, you have to tell me everything." Dusty said, taking a long sip from his iced tea before
relaxing back in his seat. "You married? Got little Daryls running around?" Daryl let out a short laugh.

"Hell no, man. You picture me as a dad?" Daryl responded, shaking his head. "Naw, never married, never had kids." He didn't think he ever would, either. He loved Sam, sure. But they had a hell of a long road before either one of them would consider marrying. And kids? Shit, what right did he have being a dad?

"You kidding? You'd be a great dad. You always had a way with kids. I just scare em. Which is funny as hell considering you're the gruff one." Dusty said, watching Daryl turn his glass in his hands, making little water rings on the table top. "So no girlfriend?" Dusty asked, then grinned like an idiot. "Boyfriend?" Daryl just blinked at him.

"I have a girlfriend." He said patiently. The term sounded a little antiquated when he said it out loud. Sam wasn't just some high school crush. And she wasn't his wife. So what the hell should he call her? "Her name's Samantha." He added, feeling like it was important to say her name out loud. "She owns the music studio in town."

"The pink one?" Dusty asked, grinning a little. "The one with the purple sign? That place is adorable, man." He chuckled, then nodded. "Seriously, though. Good for you. I'm never in any place long enough to settle with anyone. Far too much of a lover and a roamer to give it all up to just one." He winked, taking another sip of his drink. Daryl just smirked lightly.

"Yer missin out, man." He said, letting the glass go and rubbing his wet fingers on his black faded jeans. "Honestly, I've never been happier."

"I bet. It must take a hell of a woman to pin down Daryl Dixon. What's she like?" Dusty asked, sounding as though he genuinely wanted to know. Daryl paused for a long moment, using a napkin from the dispenser on the table to wipe up the water rings he'd made. Then he let out a breath.

"She's amazin. Big heart, way too smart and talented for me. Dunno what she's doin with my dumb ass." He smirked a little, then shrugged. "She's beautiful, makes me wanna be better than I am. She's patient with me, stronger than she thinks she is, an has this smile..." he shook his head, chuckling a little, "She's jus... everythin." Daryl realized then he hadn't really voiced these things to anyone but Sam herself. Everyone else had just sort of ran with the fact that he and Sam had a relationship now, no one judging or asking questions, just accepting it for what it was and being happy for them both. Dusty nodded, grinning.

"Damn happy for you, man. She sounds like a keeper." Dusty responded. "I didn't think you'd ever be ready for that, ya know?" His face sobered a little as he spoke. "Wasn't even sure you'd make it as far as you have, to be honest. I can't tell you how relieved I am to know how good you're doing, how happy you seem." He nodded a little. "You deserve it, man." Daryl just nodded once at him, then cleared his throat.

"So, tell me about your work. Sales, right?" Daryl asked, changing the subject as quickly as he could. Dusty didn't seem to mind, giving a grin and a slight smirk.

"Shit, it's perfect for me. Never have to stay in any one place too long, has great perks, the boss has sort of taken me under his wing, trusted me with a whole hell of a lot. And to top it all off, the amount of money I'm saving? I'll be retired by the time I'm fifty, living in the Bahamas, only having to worry about what drink to pour myself next." Dusty grinned, wiggled his brows and drank the last of his tea.

"Whataya sell?" Daryl asked, doing his best to be interested. Truth was, sales wasn't exactly
something he knew a whole hell of a lot about. It seemed like one hell of a boring occupation.

"Pharmaceuticals. I bounce around, pitching product and selling to the highest bidder. Not the most glorious thing, but it pays the bills." Dusty said just before Michonne came over with his plate of hot food. Dusty stared at the meal like it was heaven on a dish. Neither man spoke for a few minutes while Dusty dug in, eating like he hadn't eaten in days.

"How bout your brother?" Dusty asked then, swallowing a piece of meatloaf. "He still kicking around?" Daryl got a little still, his quiet eyes glancing down at the plate a moment.

"He died, over a month back." Daryl said calmly, despite the twinge of regret and pain in his gut.

"Shit, man." Dusty paused, his voice a little quiet. "Sorry. I remember you telling me what a dick he was, but... still gotta be hard." Daryl nodded a little.

"He never changed. Was never gonna. But I still feel like..." Daryl shook his head a little, "I never stopped tryin to help him get his shit together. Feel like I failed him somehow." He wasn't sure why he was admitting this to Dusty, but it felt good to say it out loud. He cleared his throat a little. "Anyway, is what it is."

Dusty nodded. "What it is, man, is not your fault. I don't know what happened, but I know you. And I know you never gave up on him. Cause that's who you are. So don't blame yourself for his bullshit, okay?" Daryl furrowed his brows a little, watching Dusty who just stared right back at him. He couldn't tell why, but something about the whole conversation seemed strange to him. Off, somehow. "Let's talk about something less downer, like..." Dusty paused, "Like your work. Only fair. What's it like being a deputy? A law man?" Dusty grinned again, as though the previous conversation hadn't just happened. Daryl shifted in his seat a little.

"It's work. Hard work. Makes me hate computers a little, all that filin and shit. But I get to help people, and make a difference. Work with my best friend, and get to be a part of somethin bigger than myself." He replied, watching Dusty practically shovel mashed potatoes into his mouth.

The conversation went on like that, back and forth, tossing around stories. Dusty's exploits on the road, Daryl's transition from asshole to good guy. It was nearly an hour and a half later, the two men walking down the sidewalk. Main street was busy, hectic even, by small town standards. It was Horror Movie night at the cinema, and stores were still open, the evening rush well under way. People they passed either nodded or greeted Daryl cordially. An older woman with a walker and her husband stopped to talk to him for several minutes about their dog, Pickers, who Daryl had fished out of a well for them the year before. After they wandered off and Daryl and Dusty started walking again, Dusty chuckled and nudged Daryl.

"Look at you, man. You're like... the popular kid in school." He said, making Daryl just shrug. He didn't like attention, to be honest. But he was never rude about it. He let people do their thing, and he just typically kept to himself, being polite when need be.

"This is me." Daryl said, motioning to his Jeep a few parking spots down. The talking hadn't been so bad, really. But Daryl was good and done. He wanted to go home. He wanted to hold Samantha. He wanted to convince himself he wasn't going to have nightmares about Kandahar. Though that was a battle he wouldn't win, most likely. Dusty nodded, extending a hand. They shook and did that guy-hug thing, which Daryl never really understood. Why do two things at once? A handshake gave the same damn message.

"Thanks for doing this with me, man. Really. It's good to see you, and I'm glad we caught up. I know you don't think so, but I do owe you. You saved all our asses back there. If you ever need me,
"for anything..." he pulled a card out of his wallet, handing it to Daryl, "You call me. I mean it."
Daryl glanced at the series of phone numbers and nodded.

"Thanks." He said, meeting Dusty's gaze. The other man just grinned and smacked Daryl's shoulder lightly. Then he turned and walked off, leaving Daryl to stare at him. He shook his head a little, glancing at the card and sticking it into his pocket before turning toward the Jeep.

But he didn't get far.

One moment, he's on the sidewalk, the next he's going through a store window, crashing through a display of glass figurines inside the Hallmark store, feeling like he'd just been hit by a bulldozer.

His Jeep had exploded when he was just five or so feet away, sending him flying by the sheer force of the explosion. It was all so fast and loud, he didn't have time to register what had happened. He was just blinking up at a ceiling, dazed, confused. And in pain. Lots of pain. The sound of a fire, car alarms ringing out and people screaming met his now fuzzy hearing. He coughed, glass falling off his body as he did. His keys... were somewhere. Though why that mattered, he wasn't sure.

He heard footsteps crunching the glass beside him, a man yelling that someone should call nine one one. And then the man was telling him to hang on, that help was coming. But Daryl was just blinking at the ceiling, trying to figure out why his chest hurt, and why his thigh felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. He heard a woman's voice say, 'Oh my god! There's so much blood!' And all Daryl could manage to think of was... where?

Before he finally closed his eyes, a face swam in his vision. The face of the little girl he'd shot, her forehead in view with that bright red bullet hole. She looked... scared, worried, and she was talking. But he couldn't hear her, just like always. "I don't... understand..." he muttered.

And then, it was lights out for Daryl Dixon.
"He said to tell Samantha that this was, and I'm quoting here, 'no big.'"

The waiting room was filled with faces she knew, faces she didn't. And all of them there for Daryl. It had been four hours since he'd been rushed into the emergency room by helicopter. Three and a half hours since he'd been rushed to surgery. And not a minute that went by since she'd gotten there that she wasn't inwardly screaming and panicking.

There was no news, really. All Rick could tell her was that his Jeep exploded and he was hurt, really badly. Luckily, when it happened no one else was close enough to get injured as bad. A few cuts and scrapes, but nothing much else. It was only Daryl who was currently fighting for his life. Only Daryl the explosion had been meant for.

She watched as Rick weeded his way through the crowd, coming straight for Samantha who was sitting with Michonne and Carol. "It was a bomb, in the engine block. When Daryl hit the button on his keys to unlock the door, well..." he swallowed a little, letting out a deep breath that was filled with shaken anger. "If he'd been closer, he'd be dead now." He said softly. Michonne reached up and took Rick's hand. There was so much emotion on her brother's face, so much worry and sorrow, fear... Sam reached up and grabbed his other hand, she just had to. "Any news from the doctors?"

Rick asked then, swallowing down whatever urge he had to cry. Rick wasn't a crier.

"He's still in surgery." Michonne said, letting go of Rick's hand and moving her bag out of the seat next to her. Rick sat down, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. There was blood stained on her shirt, her pants. She'd heard the explosion and come running. And the moment she'd seen it was Daryl who'd been hurt, she dove right in to help him. "He was hurt... really badly." She said, her voice shaking a little. "There was this... piece of metal in his leg, it..." She swallowed, shaking her head, clearing her throat, "Went all the way through." Sam closed her eyes, gripping the edge of her own shirt for dear life. "And there was this wound in his chest. It wouldn't stop bleeding." Her voice was getting quieter and quieter as she went, explaining what she'd seen. "I just... I don't know if..." and then tears rolled out of Michonne's eyes. Rick hugged her close, enfolding her in his arms, a tear of his own escaping. Sam glanced at them, feeling hollow and numb, like someone had scooped all her happiness out and left nothing but shadows behind.

She got up with a quick and soft 'excuse me' and just made her way out of the crowded room, out into the hallway, stopping at a wall and pressing her head against the cool tile, palms flat against it as well. She closed her eyes and breathed, desperate for the panic to leave her. She wanted someone to come and pinch her, to wake her up so she could pretend this was all a really bad dream. She wanted Daryl to walk down the hallway and tell her it was a big practical joke. But as the moments wore on, none of that happened.

"He'll be alright." She heard a man say, her head snapping up as she startled, taking a step to the side and seeing someone she didn't recognize. Immediately she felt exposed, vulnerable, wary. But the man offered a light smile. She saw blood on his shirt, dried like Michonne's. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Dusty Hendee. I had dinner with Daryl before... well, all this." He said, slipping his hands into his pants pockets. He looked nice enough, she supposed. She relaxed a little, wiping angrily at a tear that escaped her hold. "You're Samantha, right? He told me about you. You should know, you made him light up just saying your name." He said warmly, keeping his distance, like he didn't want to invade her space. She felt sobs threatening to escape. But she wouldn't let that happen. She needed to be strong for Daryl, for everyone. "He really loves you." Dusty said then, and gave a firm nod. "I, uh..." he fished his wallet out of his pocket, pulling a white card out of it and holding it out to her. "I can't stay. I wish I could. But if anything happens, if you need anything, just give me a call, okay? Please?" He asked gently.
For a moment, she just stared at the card, then nodded slowly, taking it with one hand. "Okay." She said, just one word, but it was all she had for him. He smiled, then nodded, before taking a step backward and steadily walking away down the hall, disappearing around a corner. She kept staring at the far wall, feeling far too much and yet not enough. She wanted to scream, wanted to yell, wanted to cry till her heart stopped hurting. She also wanted to lay down, to close her eyes and fall asleep and not feel anything at all. But then a woman obstructed her view of the spot she'd been staring at, and she blinked.

The woman was wearing scrubs. Little spots of blood splashed across her mid-section. And she was walking right toward the waiting room. Samantha jolted, realizing this was the surgeon, and darted for the waiting room, getting there just behind the much taller, red headed woman. "Dixon?" The woman said, peering around at all the faces. Rick stood up instantly, everyone went silent. "That's us, all of us, I mean. We're all here for him." The woman raised her brows, glancing back at Samantha when she realized someone was standing behind her. "He's my deputy." Rick continued, moving toward the woman and motioning to Samantha. "And this is his girlfriend, my sister." The woman nodded, then rested her hands idly on her hips.

"I'm Doctor Farrow, I'm the lead surgeon who worked on Deputy Dixon." She said, her voice sounding a bit like she should be on the radio. "We were able to repair the damage to his leg. Luckily the shrapnel didn't damage the bone. Barring infection, I don't see why it shouldn't heal perfectly. He needed some stitches on his forehead and he has quite a few superficial cuts pretty much all over. So nothing too serious there. His chest, on the other hand, is a mess. He had four broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a hell of a hole, really, just beneath his sternum. We took out all the shrapnel but one piece and managed to fix what we could, but he's going to need further surgery. There's a piece of shrapnel about the size of a quarter resting dangerously close to his heart. We were going to try to take it while we were already in there, but his vitals began to spiral and it was decided that it was far more important to get him stable for the time being."

Sam found herself trembling. The more this woman said, the more she wanted to break down. She couldn't even form real thoughts. Everything in her mind was gibberish, with repeated inserts of 'Daryl'. "But..." Rick began, clearing his throat, one hand resting on Sam's upper back warmly. "Is he going to be alright?" It sounded so stupid, so strange. Alright? What about this was alright?! He had a hole in his chest! A piece of metal next to his heart! The doctor seemed to think for a moment, then responded.

"Look, I'm not in the habit of making promises. Situations like this are hard to gauge. He's strong, he's healthy. But with damage like this, it's not a given that those things will help him through it this early on. There's the risk of infection and blood clots, the risk that the shrapnel near his heart could move before we can get to it, or that he'll just never get stable enough for us to go back in. There's a real list of bad outcomes, here. That being said, I like his odds simply because I don't like to lose. And I never give up on my patients. He's already proven he can withstand a hell of a lot. And if he can keep that up? Well, I'd say yeah... eventually, he'll be alright. The next forty eight hours will tell us more."

"Can we see him?" Carol asked softly, Sam hadn't even heard her step up. The Doctor nodded a little.

"I'm going to let immediate family, if he has any, go in once we have him settled in the ICU. And though I think it's incredibly amazing and telling that all you good people are here just to support him, I'm going to have to say no to anyone else. You should all go home, get some sleep. It's late, and there's nothing more any of you can do." Dr. Farrow looked at Rick, then to Sam, reaching out and gripping Sam's shoulder firmly. "I'll have a nurse come get you as soon as he's settled. I'm
guessing you're Samantha, right?" Sam blinked, raising both brows in slight surprise.

"H-how'd you know that?" She asked, stammering a little. The doctor smiled.

"He had a moment of lucidness before being taken into surgery. He said to tell Samantha that this was, and I'm quoting here, 'no big.'" She let her hand fall from Sam's shoulder. And Sam smiled sadly, tears escaping her eyes with a sob.

"He always says that. Always." She said, her voice cracked and emotional. She felt Rick's arm drape over her shoulders, squeezing her into him.

"He's a smart man, then. And he's got a very talented group of physicians working to make sure he's right. So hang in there, and we'll get you in to see him soon." And then the doctor just disappeared out the door. Sam couldn't hold it back anymore. She just started crying. The flood gates opened, and her body just shook with sobs. Rick folded her into him, letting her cry into his chest. Michonne and Carol were at her back, and people were talking softly and worriedly.

'Don't you leave me, Daryl Dixon.' She thought, clinging to Rick's Sheriff shirt for dear life. 'Please, please don't leave me.' All she could do was hope Daryl was right, that this really was no big. But even when he got better, 'when, not if' she told herself, would he be safe? Liam did this to Daryl. She had no doubts, it was a truth so deeply a part of her that there was no possible way to deny it. If Liam was willing to blow up a vehicle in a public area just to get at Daryl, then what would he do to get to her? What would he do when he found out Daryl wasn't dead? A small voice in the back of her made her freeze momentarily, her sob catching in her throat, nearly choking her.

'It won't be over till Liam's dead... or you and Daryl are.'

Samantha wasn't violent. She wasn't a fighter, not in the physical sense. And she was only now learning how to be strong for herself, for Daryl, too. So could she do what it took to fight Liam when the time came? Could she stop? Could she kill him if she had to?

She'd never hated anyone in her entire life even though she'd had plenty of reasons to. Not her parents, not Liam. But that was before she had something, someone, to lose. Liam had tried to kill Daryl. And now hate was a real and burning thing in her chest. She wanted Liam dead. She hated him with every fiber of her being. And it almost made her sick to her stomach. Hate was not a good emotion to have. But until Daryl was better, and unless Liam was arrested first, hate was all she had to keep her from completely giving up...
"When is a monster not a monster? Only when you love it."

Chapter Notes

(The lyrics in this chapter are from the song That's All by Michael Buble. Enjoy!)

It was four days before they did the second surgery. The outcome was promising. The shrapnel hadn't moved at all and they were able to get it out without any issues. Daryl was stable. So far, there hadn't been any complications. But he was still unconscious. He was hooked to a machine to help him breathe. There were IV's and a heart monitor and other things Sam didn't understand. It was frightening to see him like that. And he was covered in cuts, scrapes, bruises. He had a line of stitches on his forehead below his hair line that made a sort of semi-circle curve toward his ear. He was so still, so unmoving that if she hadn't known any better, he would have looked dead to her.

Dr. Farrow said now it was just a matter of waiting on Daryl. He was constantly being monitored. Nurses came to check on him all the time. And the doctor herself was there several times a day sometimes. They planned on keeping him in a medically induced coma for at least another week. They wanted his lung to get stronger and his vitals to stay consistent. Dr. Farrow made it very clear to them all that when Daryl did wake up, he was going to be in an incredible amount of pain. That recovery was not going to be simple or quick. He was going to need physical therapy for his leg. And he wouldn't be able to do anything strenuous for at least a couple of months. ‘He's going to need time and a hell of a lot of patience.’ She'd said. Sam could do that. If it meant he was alive and with her, she could give him all the time and patience he needed.

Rick was like a force to be reckoned with these days. He'd nearly torn the county apart looking for Liam. But there had only been two sightings, and both were of Liam on his way out of town. At least she knew she wasn't crazy. There was proof now that other people had seen him. And it was on the security camera of the Hallmark store showing Liam messing with Daryl's Jeep. How he'd gotten a hold of a bomb was beyond her. Liam was smart, but he didn't know how to make those sort of things. Or at least, she didn't think he did. In any case, he wasn't just wanted by police. He was wanted by the FBI now, too.

There was a police officer outside Daryl's hospital room door twenty four, seven. Rick had pulled every string he had for a non stop protection detail outside of the department. And Sam herself never went anywhere alone, even though she was spending most of her time at the hospital. Someone was always with her when she left. Even when she made her way back to the studio. Whether it was one of the deputies, or someone she knew, it was like she had a constant shadow.

The town itself was in an uproar of sorts. People had donated tons of money to help with Daryl's medical expenses. His room had filled with flowers and cards and such in a matter of a few days. She'd had to start setting them on the floor against walls because there were just so many. She wondered if Daryl knew just how much of an impact he'd had on so many people, just by being himself. He had plenty of visitors, too. There was no lack of love for Deputy Dixon.

It had been quiet for a few hours now. Rick and Michonne had left, and the sun was starting to set outside the wide window that peered over the parking lot. Sam was sitting in the chair she'd pretty much claimed at this point, her guitar in her lap, softly strumming while she watched him. She'd cried more than a few times over Daryl's still form over the days. The fact that he was getting better hadn't
dimmed the grief or pain in her heart.

Who knew loving someone could hurt so much?

When it was quiet like this, just the two of them, she didn't want to cry. Not anymore. She wanted to help him, to soothe him, to make him feel better. Considering the state he was in, there was only so much she could do. What she wouldn't give to see his bluer than blue eyes warmly watching her. What she wouldn't do to hear his voice say her name, just once. But she'd have to settle for filling the silence her own way. And as she strummed the guitar lightly, she began to sing softly.

'I can only give you love that lasts forever,  
and a promise to be near each time you call.  
And the only heart I own, for you and you alone.  
That's all, that's all.

I can only give you country walks in springtime,  
and a hand to hold when leaves begin to fall.  
And a love whose burning light will warm the winter night.  
That's all, that's all.

There are those I am sure who have told you  
they would give you the world for a toy.  
All I have are these arms to enfold you,  
and a love time can never destroy.

If you're wondering what I'm asking in return, dear,  
you'll be glad to know that my demands are small.  
Say it's me that you'll adore for now and ever more.  
That's all, that's all...'

Once she finished, a soft clapping made her look away from Daryl toward the door. A man was standing there, dressed in a business suit with the jacket hanging over his arm and his tie half undone, clean cut, maybe around the same age as Daryl and just as fit looking. She didn't know him. But then again, she'd met a lot of people over the last several days she hadn't known. She smiled lightly. The man looked friendly, and didn't give her any uneasy feelings. She was learning to trust those feelings. Besides, the officer outside the door never would have let him in if he was bad news. She blushed a little, still not used to people admiring her talent, even though she was right in her element when she sang.

"That was beautiful, truly. You sing like an angel, Miss Grimes." The man spoke with an English accent. Odd. She smiled brightly.

"Samantha." She corrected warmly, leaning down and setting her guitar in its case before standing. "Please, come in. Are you a friend of Daryl's?" The man stepped in, coming over toward the bed and looking over Daryl's form with a calm, but oddly compassionate expression.

"You could say that." He reached a hand over Daryl toward her, holding it out for her to shake. "Leonard Abbott. I was British Armed Forces for awhile. Deputy Dixon and I crossed paths in Afghanistan. His unit quite literally dug my team out of a ditch." He said smiling, shaking her hand firmly, but not enough to hurt.

"Did... did you come all the way from England to see him?" Sam asked, feeling a little stupid afterward, but oh well. He shook his head, slipping his hands into his suit pants.
"I've been in America going on four years now. I'm in Georgia on business. It wasn't till recently I'd run into Daryl again. Then hearing what happened to him..." He shook his head a little.

"He's going to be alright." She said firmly. She'd been saying that a lot lately. She wanted to believe it as much as she wanted other people to believe it.

"I don't doubt that. He's a survivor, this one. What happened in Kandahar would have killed a lesser man. This?" He motioned lightly to Daryl, "Will be no match for him."

"You know about Kandahar?" She asked quietly. There were very few people Daryl had told about that day. Rick, Sam, Michonne, Carol, but that was it. Everyone else knew little details. Pretty much just that Daryl had almost died overseas. But when it came to the rest, it was just too hard on Daryl to give all the details. This man must have known Daryl fairly well back then to know about Kandahar.

"I do. A terrible situation, to be sure. Heard he even tried to turn down the purple heart the Army wanted to award him with." He said, looking at Daryl's face. Sam blinked. She had no idea Daryl had a purple heart. "If I remember correctly, he said nothing that happened that day was something to be rewarded." Leonard looked back at her. "I had a mentor once upon a time, serious fellow. But fairly intelligent, as far as grizzled military men go. And he told me once that war is only good for three things: Giving evil men excuses to do evil things, turning good men into killers, or laying the innocent to an early rest." He moved slowly toward the end of the bed. "What Daryl was forced to do... well. It was a product of a war no one could win. An impossible situation within an impossible situation. Leaving the Army, coming back to Georgia?" He smiled warmly at her. "It was how he kept war from turning him evil."

All she could do was listen. The way he talked was exotic enough to be the only thing she could focus on, his words giving her an insight into Daryl that she hadn't previously had. "He's always been a good man, even if he hasn't always known it. His history speaks of such. What's happening now, to both of you? Because of Liam? It goes against everything I stand for. I want to help you." Leonard added.

"Wait... what?" Sam blinked, furrowing her brows a little. "How do you know about Liam?"

Suddenly, she didn't feel so comfortable around him. If anything, it was just an intense confusion. He didn't seem like he would harm her. But still. Leonard smiled quietly.

"There isn't much I don't know if I wish." He said, stopping his steps just a few feet from her. "In my line of work, it pays a great deal to know who I'm dealing with, and who I'm targeting." He said the last firmly, staring at her grimly. And she knew.

"It was you, you were the one Liam hired to kill Daryl!" She whispered harshly. She didn't know why she didn't say it louder. For some reason, she didn't want to reveal him to the officer outside. She quickly moved past Leonard to the door, closing it quietly and turning to look at him again.

"You warned him Liam was after him." She said, eyes a little wide.

"Yes, I attempted to. To answer questions you have yet to ask, I kill people for a living. I work for the United Nations as a sort of... cleaner of messes. But on my off time, when I'm bored, I'll take a job from anyone, who has the right connections, off the books for the right amount of money." He moved toward the window, touching the leaves of a bouquet of flowers idly. "I am, however, very selective about who my targets are. I don't kill the innocent." He looked back at her, letting his hand fall. "I don't kill heroes." She was very still, listening to him. "Your ex husband contacted me through a third party, who convinced me to take the job as a favor. It wasn't till I'd already been paid that I learned Daryl Dixon was not the man Liam made him out to be."

"Wait... did you... did you really know him then, before?" She asked, not sure why that was an
important question. To be honest, the whole thing had her increasingly overwhelmed. Leonard smiled a little.

"Yes. We really did cross paths in Afghanistan, though I doubt he remembers. It was only a short encounter, and we never met again." He leaned his rear against the window sill. "But I remember his gruff, take no shit attitude. Off putting, at first. But he made sure my men and I got our hummer out of that ditch, helped replace a tire, and checked for roadside explosives before we were sent on our way. Even something as commonplace as that sticks with a man in such a hellish place."

She crossed her arms over her chest after a moment, staring at him. This was all so surreal. Like something out of a movie or television show. "You said you wanted to help. How?"

"Ah. Yes, well." He nodded, looking at Daryl again, "War does make killers. It is truly the one thing I am adept at. When I aim to end someone, it is a thrill I cannot deny exists. My choice to kill only evil men may be my only saving grace when Death comes knocking on my door." He smiled a little like it was funny, to think of Death coming for him. He stood away from the windowsill and faced her. "And to help you, I aim to kill your ex husband." Aaaaand her jaw dropped. Shocked was a good word for how she felt.

"I..." She started but stopped. What the hell was she supposed to say to that? "I don't want anyone to die." She found herself whispering. Then she cleared her throat. "I hate Liam. For what he's done to me. What he's done to my... to Daryl." She said, blinking a little. "But I just... I don't want anyone to die because of me." Leonard shook his head, smiling knowingly.

"Miss Grimes, rest assured this only has a small bit to do with you. Fact of the matter is, I tend to be a slightly vindictive man, and Liam Forester misled me. I do not appreciate being lied to. My services are not a tool for mindless revenge. I have, honestly, killed men for lesser transgressions against me." He put a hand out, touching her shoulder lightly. "To be plain, I was not asking for your permission, just simply informing you of my intentions. And to assure you as far as your ex husband is concerned, neither you nor Daryl will have much to worry about for much longer." He let his hand fall, reaching into his pocket and pulling out what looked like an LED light attached to a key ring. He held it out in his palm to her.

"Works like a regular flashlight." He pressed one of the two buttons on it. A bright little light emerged. Then he motioned to the second button, a red one. "This however, is a panic button. It will send a signal directly to my cell phone. Should you even smell Liam, press this button. I'll find you, via the GPS inside the casing." He waited quietly then for her to take it. When she did, she held it gingerly. She felt like she should be quoting Mission Impossible. "Keep it with you always."

Then he stepped past her, reaching for the door handle, opening the door and pausing to look at her one last time. "Daryl sees himself as a monster for what happened in Kandahar, you know." He leaned against the door, holding it open with his back as he slipped his hands into his pockets. "It reminds me of a quote I heard once." He smiled at her. "When is a monster not a monster?" He paused, watching her blink and furrow her brows a little. "Only when you love it." He winked at her, then exited the room entirely, stepping out of view as the door very slowly closed behind him.

Sam found herself staring at the closed door for a ridiculously long time, the sounds of Daryl's machines filling the room. She was trying to make sense of everything Leonard had said to her. She was trying to come to terms with the fact that Liam was pretty much already a dead man. She'd never wanted that. Well, not really. She hated him now, and she knew it. But she just didn't have it in her to want someone dead. She went to her guitar case, pulling her keys out of the little pocket inside the lid. And she put the flashlight, aka panic button, onto it. Then she scooted her chair closer to Daryl's bedside, taking his hand into hers gently, resting her cheek against the back of it. "You're not a
monster.” She said to him, reaching her other hand up to his hair and running her fingers through it. “I love you, Daryl.” All she could do was hope he could hear her, and know it was true.
"I'm dreaming."

The sun was far too bright. Even attempting to shield his eyes didn't lessen the need to cringe against the white of it. And the never ending waves of sand around him weren't helping. They seemed to reflect the sun's rays, making the world around him seem impossibly bright and unreal. It should have been hot. He should have been sweating. But he felt cold enough to have been standing in the middle of a snow drift.

He also felt strangely light. Which didn't make any sense since he was in full gear, his P-90 strapped to his kevlar vest. He should have felt like he weighed a hundred pounds. He was also completely alone. His unit was nowhere to be seen. There were no landmarks. No vehicles. No people. None of what he was experiencing seemed rational. It wasn't until he saw her that he realized why.

The little girl was moving toward him. She was wearing the bomb covered vest. Her hair was blowing in a breeze Daryl couldn't feel. "I'm dreaming." He said, and his voice sounded hollow, slow. He lowered his weapon, watching the girl make her steady way toward him. It was strange, like she wasn't actually walking but floating. Her feet didn't actually seem to touch the ground. She left no footprints in the sand dunes behind her. "Wake up..." Daryl told himself, but he instantly began to feel like that was a fruitless venture.

The girl stopped barely a few feet from Daryl. If he could have felt his heart beat, it probably would have been hammering. But he couldn't feel it. All he could feel was the cold. She lifted her hand slowly, watching him with her wary little eyes. And she touched her forehead with two fingers, right where he'd shot her. But this time... there wasn't a hole. There was no wound. Just a spot of red dirt when her fingers fell away. He felt his legs give out on him. He fell to his knees before her. A crippling grief overtook him.

"I'm so sorry." He said, his hollow voice echoing impossibly around them. "Please forgive me." He pleaded, his words choking, frozen tears falling down his cheeks. The little girl blinked at him and moved forward, reaching out with both hands and placing them to either side of his face.

'It was not your fault.' He heard a child's voice say, but the girl's mouth never moved. And she was speaking English. That couldn't be right. 'You can understand me here.' The voice said, as though reading his mind. 'We can understand each other.'

He blinked at her, feeling a warmth spread from her fingers into his ice cold flesh. "I shot you. I... I killed you." He stammered, the warmth spreading more and more like liquid fire in his blood, heating up the unfeeling parts of his body. Suddenly, his chest began to hurt. Suddenly, his thigh ached terribly. He found himself falling onto his hands, gasping against the sudden physical anguish. But the girl never let him go.

'You did. But I was going to die. You could not have stopped that. I do not blame you.' For the first time, the girl smiled, squatting before him, forcing him to meet her eyes. 'Please stop blaming yourself.' And suddenly she let him go.

He felt like the world rushed around him, the sand began to swirl and whip and sting his skin. The blaring sun was far too hot. He felt heavy and confined. And the pain... god, the pain. It made him cry out, falling completely, rolling onto his back and clutching his chest. He watched, wide eyed and tear filled as the girl stood, her hair flying around her head. She smiled warmly at him. 'Wake up now.' She said. And all he could do was blink as the ground suddenly gave way beneath him, and the sand swallowed him whole...
He awoke with a start, gasping. He could hear monitors going off, he could feel himself choking against something. And the pain. Fuck. His chest, his leg, his everything felt as though something had torn him to shreds and hastily sewed him back together with rusty chicken wire. He felt hands on his shoulders, saw a face looming over him. A red headed woman he didn't know.

"Deputy, I need you to listen to me. I'm Dr. Farrow. There is a breathing tube down your throat. I'm going to pull it out, but I need you to hold as still as you can and try very hard to relax. Nod if you understand me." She said, her voice firm and authoritative. He blinked, his whole body tense, his eyes squeezing shut against the pain. But he nodded. And the next thing he knew, she had her hand around whatever it was sticking out of his mouth. "I'm going to count to three and it's going to come out quickly. One, two, three." And she pulled firmly and swiftly. He felt something drag out of him in an almost slimy, grating way. He was gagging against it, and coughing hard after it came out until air filled his lungs naturally and he was left panting, head falling back onto the pillow behind him, breathing hard, hands coming up to clutch his chest.

"Good job. Good, good." The doctor said, still looming over him. "I'm sure you're in a lot of pain, and we're going to take care of that. But I need to do a few things first. Can you tell me your name?" She asked, pulling out a little pen light and flashing it in his eyes. He grimaced at her, wanting to swat at her hand but in too much pain to bother.

"Daryl... Dixon..." he croaked out. His voice was severely raspy, like he'd swallowed a pound of sand and hadn't drank anything in ages. He closed his eyes, clenching his jaw shut tightly and letting out a sound with a deep breath through his nostrils. "What..." he spoke again after a moment, feeling her move his hands out of the way to listen to his heart and lungs with her stethoscope. "...happened?" He finished. Whatever it was, it had to have been bad for there to have been a breathing tube down his throat. And his chest... goddamn. He hadn't felt pain like this since Kandahar. The doctor didn't answer him right away. Then she pulled her stethoscope out of her ears, hanging it around her neck. She pulled the blanket down to his waist and untied the gown he was wearing, which was on backward so they could have easy access to his chest.

A nurse, who he hadn't noticed before, held a cup of water out toward him with a straw. She nodded at him with a smile, he blinked at her and took a slow sip, coughing lightly when he was finished. It felt good to have the water down his throat. But the coughing just made him wince. The doctor was inspecting something on him, he could feel her touching his tender skin. He lifted his head to see stitches. Lots of them, in ragged tangled angles. It looked like something had torn into him just below his ribs and they'd pieced his skin back together. He was also bruised, in various stages of healing.

"Fuck..." he muttered, his head falling back again, unable to keep it up for long it seemed. The doctor chuckled lightly.

"You were the victim of an explosion, Deputy." She finally answered his previous question. "You were hurt quite badly, as you can see. And I'm sure you can feel." She closed his gown back up, moving to his legs and pulling the blanket away from just one of them. He made himself glance down again. More stitches. Though his leg looked a hell of a lot better than his torso. She did her inspection. Then she covered him back up with the blanket. "Despite how you're feeling, though, you're healing incredibly well. You've surpassed even my expectations, so far."

She stood up near the head of the bed, writing something on a clipboard. "This might sound like a stupid question, but I want you to give me an honest answer, in as much detail as you can." She looked back at him. "How do you feel?" Daryl closed his eyes again, swallowing roughly.

"Hurts to breathe." He said, still not liking how his voice sounded. "Ribs feel... awful. And..." he
opened his eyes, blinking up at the ceiling. There were tears trying to work their way out. He was just in that much pain. "My leg feels like it's on fire." The doctor nodded like she'd been expecting as much. She wrote a little more on the clipboard, then looked over at the nurse. "Go ahead." She said, and the nurse began squeezing a needle of liquid into one of Daryl's IV's. "What Mia is giving you now is a good dose of morphine. I'm sorry you had to wake up in so much pain, Deputy. But it was necessary to gauge your progress and to make sure you were appropriately lucid." She patted his shoulder lightly, tucking the keyboard against her hip with her opposite hand.

He wanted to ask her all sorts of questions. He wanted to know what the hell she was talking about... explosion? What fucking explosion? The last thing he remembered was saying goodbye to Dusty, and then walking to his Jeep. But it was like he blinked and suddenly felt drowsy. The pain began subsiding almost instantly. It was such a relief that all the questions he should have asked disappeared, right along with any other thoughts except for one. "Sam..." he said softly, roughly. The doctor smiled and nodded.

"She's right outside. I'll send her in. But you rest, Deputy." She said. And there was no way he was going to protest. Her form swam in his vision. And he could feel unconsciousness slipping in around him like a warm blanket. The pain was distant, unreal. And his eyelids became so heavy, he couldn't have fought the coming rest if he'd tried. Just before he drifted completely away, he felt someone's hand in his hair, a hand in his hand. And he knew without even opening his eyes to see that it was her, his Sam. And he let out a much steadier breath than previously, sleep overtaking him.
"Daryl, I swear if you don't use this thing, I'm gonna hit you with it."

"Daryl, I swear if you don't use this thing, I'm gonna hit you with it!" Sam called from the kitchen, coming around the corner toward the bedroom. Daryl was sitting on the bed, one leg up, tying his boot. She stood in the doorway, waving the medical walking cane at him. "You heard what the doctor said. Until you pass the stress test, you're stuck with this thing." He let his foot fall to the floor, glaring at her lightly. She just crossed her arms and stared at him.

"Makes me feel like a gimp." He said then, standing and moving toward her. There was a hitch in his step, a limp that was completely involuntary, but honestly getting better every day.

"You are a gimp." She said, reaching out and grabbing his hand. She put the handle of the metal cane into it. "Until your physical therapist says otherwise." It had been nearly a month since Daryl had first woken up. He was doing world's better. But getting to this point hadn't been easy. The first few weeks had been awful, actually. He'd been riddled with pain that was almost uncontrollable, and he didn't want to become dependent on drugs to deal with it. Eventually, though, his body began cooperating. His last checkup had been fantastic. His lung was perfect, his wound was all but healed, just a ragged looking pink fleshy scar where all the stitches had been. The only thing that was having an issue was his thigh.

It wasn't that it hadn't healed. The muscles just weren't quite catching up with the rest of him. He couldn't walk or stand for very long before his leg would get too weak to hold him, hence the cane which he absolutely hated. She had to fight with him nearly every day just to use the damn thing. Which was a lot easier to make sure he did now that she was living with him.

She'd moved in just before he got out of the hospital. It was the only way anyone would let him leave. The doctor didn't want him to be alone. And the threat of Liam was still looming over their heads. She hadn't told anyone about Leonard Abbott. For one thing, she wasn't sure anyone would believe her. Who the hell could take seriously the idea of an English NATO hitman wanting to kill her ex husband? Even she wondered sometimes if she'd imagined the whole thing.

"Yer mean." Daryl said, breaking her train of thought and making her smirk.

"Only because you're a big baby. Now come on, we're gonna be late." She said, moving to turn and instead finding herself pulled into him by his free arm. He shook his head at her.

"Not so fast." He said, bringing his hand up to cup the side of her face. And he kissed her. It never ceased to amaze her how each kiss with him managed to make her mind go blank and her body go tingly. And she cherished those kisses far more now than she did before the explosion. She'd almost lost Daryl. She wasn't going to take one moment with him for granted ever again. When the kiss finally broke, he let out a deep breath. She loved hearing that sound. It just reminded her that his lung was completely healed. "I hate that I can't take you to this bed right now." He muttered, trailing soft kisses along her jaw, toward her ear. "Strip you down, massage every... last... inch..." he whispered, sending chills all over her body. She couldn't help the way his words made her feel, her nether region tightening almost instantly.

"Uh uh..." she said, far more breathily than she intended, stepping back and shaking her head at him with a knowing smirk. "Don't you do that, Daryl Dixon. You know what that does to me." She said, and he grinned.

"Damn right I do." He replied, giving her one more soft, sensuous kiss. They hadn't had sex since before the accident. Which, admittedly, really sucked. For both of them. She missed the feel of his
body against hers, the way his strong muscles worked, the sensations he flooded her with, the
orgasms and the heavy breathing and the... well, all of it. But until the doctor said he was one
hundred percent, she didn't dare encourage it. And he wasn't one to demand it, either. She softly let
the kiss end, catching her breath. She smiled at him, stepping back.

"Soon." She said, catching the heat in his eyes. Not soon enough, dammit. She had to let out one
more quick breath and turn around before her resolve failed.

The drive to Rick's was nice. Summer was on its way out, trees changing color and the air far less
humid. They drove with the windows down in her VW, much to Daryl's chagrin. He missed his
Jeep, and couldn't ride his motorcycle or Vagrant yet. He was stuck being a passenger in her tiny car
and he hated it. But he never complained. That was one thing she'd learned quickly about Daryl
during all of this. No matter how much he was hurting or how uncomfortable he was or how agitated
he could get, he never -not once- complained. He just took it in stride and pushed through it, stronger
than she could ever hope to be.

One thing she had noticed early on was he hadn't had a single nightmare since he woke up. She
hadn't said anything about it because she didn't want to jinx it, but it made her wonder... what had
happened in his mind while he was unconscious? She might ask him eventually, but for now she was
just glad he could actually sleep.

She was happy they were getting out for the day. They were meeting with Rick and his family to go
as a group to Hay Day. It was the last fair before the fall, where farmers sold the last of their
overstock and families spent their time playing games, feeding animals, riding horses, swimming in
Dill Pond, eating food, listening to live bands and generally having a good time. Even though she
knew Daryl wasn't really one for crowds, he didn't even protest when Rick suggested it. Probably
because Daryl had been going stir crazy, not being able to work or hunt or ride. Keeping himself
busy turned out to be a lot harder than imagined, and when she came home from work, he tried to
give her space to unwind but she could always tell he was glad to have company. And she was glad
to come home to him.

It was strange thinking about it sometimes. They really hadn't been together long, considering. But
she was living with him now, and damn happy to be doing it. It was a bit of a learning experience for
them both, and probably doubly as hard to get used to due to the fact that Daryl was still on the
mend. But they found their rhythm, just like always. And she couldn't imagine wanting to live
anywhere else now, or with anyone else.

"You sure you're okay with this?" She asked, glancing at him in her passenger seat. He looked over
at her, reaching over and resting his hand on her leg warmly.

"Yeah. I'm good." He replied, winking once before looking back out the window. She could always
tell when he had a lot on his mind. Now was no different. She was sure he was thinking about the
Spinners problem. Working with the troopers, Rick and the other deputies had managed to catch a
dozen different sellers. But they were all low on the totem pole, and users themselves. They'd
discovered that the leader of this particular group of drug sellers was dubbed The Old Man. And that
he had a very strict set of rules, carried out by his lieutenants, a group of men and women who
answered only to him. One of which they'd managed to arrest, but was killed in prison by another
inmate. He'd given little to no information before his death. And they weren't any farther ahead than
they'd been before they caught him.

There had been three more Spinner related deaths since the explosion, and several hospitalizations.
Luckily, none of them were in Athens, or Cooke County for that matter. It was like after Daryl was
hurt, someone decided to pull Spinners out of Cooke County completely. Why was anyone's guess.
Because the Sheriff's department had made such quick headway on the case, the troopers kept working with them. But with leads running dry and the Spinner's epidemic leading farther away from Cooke County, Rick and the Deputies probably wouldn't be a part of the case much longer. Which had Daryl angry, because he felt useless sitting on the sidelines. Daryl was a lot like Rick when it came to being forced to give up on something he'd worked hard on. All Sam could do was try to take his mind off things. Which was easier said than done sometimes.

When they got to the house, she stopped the car on the curb and put her hand over his. "Hey." She said, getting his attention. "When we get home tonight, why don't we go to the river for a little while." She suggested. And she watched a small smile play on his lips, that look of warm love filling his eyes. She loved that look. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it softly.

"Sounds good." He said, letting her hand go. She beamed at him, then got out of the car. He got out, having to use the cane to steady himself. He was always a little stiff when getting out of her low, little car.

About ten minutes later, Rick, Daryl, Michonne, Carl, Judith and Sam were all piled into Michonne's SUV, headed for the fair. Judith insisted that Daryl sit next to her, and he complied readily, always happy to give in to his 'little asskicker.' Sam had to admit, she loved seeing how he was with Rick's little girl. He was so gentle, funny, and yet serious at the same time. And Judith just adored him. For the first time, she wondered... would Daryl ever want kids?

They'd never really talked about it. And she'd always tried not to get pregnant with Liam. Besides, they hadn't been together long. She shouldn't even be thinking about it. But somehow, the idea of Daryl and her having children made her feel... warm, content. Hopeful. One thing at a time, Sam. She told herself, just in time for them to arrive at the fair.
"That's why they call it nature."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Sexual scenarios.)

The day at the fair was the best one they'd had in awhile. Daryl could admit he'd been a bit of a dick lately. He was frustrated and felt more useless than shorts in a snowstorm. And he was angry. Not at anyone around him, angry at Liam. At the fact that the dirtbag had tried to kill him. At the fact he'd almost succeeded. That pissed him off more than anything, actually. In war, it was a given. People had tried to kill him and he just had to deal with it like bad weather. But this was his home. That was his town. People he protected could have been hurt or worse, all because this sonofabitch wanted him out of the way.

And then there was work. Or more like the fact he couldn't. He’d nearly begged Rick to just let him sit at his desk and do paperwork. Which had been all around funny to Rick, considering how much Daryl hated doing paperwork. The answer had been a big fat no. And Daryl was left to his own devices, healing slowly and attempting not to go completely mad in solitude. Not that he didn't like solitude. He'd never had a problem being on his own. But he couldn't hunt, couldn't work on the house, couldn't take Vagrant out for rides. It was like he was under arrest in his own home.

The only saving grace in it all had been Sam. She was way too damn good to him. She took care of him better than he took care of himself, to be honest. And he had to admit, living with her was pretty damn wonderful. Getting to see her face first thing in the morning, getting to hold her throughout the night. Daryl's life was becoming more domestic than he'd thought possible or had ever wanted. Sam had changed a lot of things in his existence, for the better.

Night was full on. It was slightly chilly, but comfortable. They were laying by the riverbank on a blanket, an afghan wrapped around Sam as she cuddled against him. Neither one of them had spoken in awhile. He was a little sore from all the walking at the fair, but he felt better than he had in awhile. With the little LED lamp they’d brought, he could see the way the water moved over the rocks in a slick black tumble. He felt calm, at ease. His anger and frustration was pretty distant, and he was glad for it. He had his river, he had his woman, and he was on the mend. Life was good. Hell, life was heaven.

She had her fingers in the opening of his shirt, gliding lazily through the fine hairs on his chest. He could smell the vanilla from her hair. And her body was warm and comfortable against him. God, he missed her body. The softness of her skin, the way her flesh reacted when he touched it, the sounds she made when he pleased her. He'd never wanted any woman as much as he wanted her. It wasn't purely a physical want, either. He really, truly enjoyed making her feel good, giving her all those feelings and experiences she'd been denied for far too long. He knew how damn lucky he was that she'd chosen him, of all people. And he spent every moment trying his damndest to be what she deserved. He wasn't quite sure he'd ever picture himself the way she did, or the way anyone else did for that matter. But he was lucky, because he was still here, which meant he could still try.

"I want to try something." He heard her say, turning his head to see her lift hers. She looked shy, soft shadows playing on her features in the lantern light. He gave her a small look of confusion.

"What's that?" He asked softly, sliding his hand up and down her back slowly beneath the blanket.
She began to blush, which made him smile slightly. He moved his hand up to her neck, beneath her ponytail, brushing her skin with his fingertips. "You okay?" She nodded lightly, smiling a little, then biting at her lower lip. He absolutely loved when she did that.

"The doctor said you couldn't do anything strenuous yet, but... that doesn't mean I can't." She said, sitting up away from him. He furrowed his brows, now completely confused. He propped himself up on both elbows.

"What're you talkin bout?" He asked, watching her slip the afghan off and set it aside in a bundle. She looked back at him, putting her hands to her blushed face for a moment and smiling. Then she shook her head and let her hands drop to her lap before straddling him, pushing him down onto the blanket. And in an instant both of his brows raised and he could feel his face go calm and quiet.

"Don't say anything, okay?" She said, still smiling, face pink and eyes sparkling. She reached for his belt, undoing it, moving for the button. Whatever she was going to do, he should just damn well let it happen. But there was always this voice in his head concerning Sam. He didn't want her to feel obligated to do anything.

"Sam," He put a hand over hers, "Sweetheart, you don't-" And she swatted at his hand, silencing him.

"Quiet, you." She ordered, giggling a little. He couldn't help but smile at her. He pulled his hand away and she undid his button. She slipped her hands to either side of him and scooted his pants down to his thighs, revealing his quickly awakening dick. He was watching her, though. Every expression on her face, every move she made. She was staring down at the area of nakedness, and she licked her lips just a little. It made him shiver just to see it. She let her hands glide around him then, gripping his dick firmly, and she pumped it tentatively at first. He let out a slight gasp, closing his eyes a moment. Her hands were so warm, a contrast to the night air. And his dick quickly responded, which seemed to urge her on. When he looked back at her, she was smiling a little.

She met his gaze, smiling even brighter. Then she stood up, her hands leaving cool air around his very hard dick. She stood over him in her summer dress, and reached beneath the skirt, pulling her panties down in a very slow movement that just made his mouth go dry and his dick pulse with anticipation. "Just lay there and relax." She said, still blushing, her voice sounding heavy with anticipation of her own.

"Yes ma'am." He said with a smirk, putting both his hands behind his head and just watching her. She lowered herself on him, reaching beneath her skirt to grab his dick. She rubbed the tip of him against her folds, so slick and warm that he had to close his eyes, breathing in deeply and letting it out slow. And then she pushed him all the way in, lowering her hips, resting her hands on her thighs, a gasp escaping her mouth. She was so fucking tight, so ridiculously wet. He moaned a little, but forced himself to stay still. Any ache in his body he may have been feeling before was a distant memory now.

She began to move on top of him, rocking back and forth, gliding him in and out in smooth, strong motions. "Damn..." he whispered, looking at her, watching her ride him, her eyes closed, her head slightly back as though it felt just as good for her as it did for him. She began to make little sounds, her fingers gripping her legs tight. He wanted to touch her, to do all sorts of things to her. But this was her show, tonight. So he settled with hiking her skirt up out of the way, gripping her thighs, her groin. She moaned out into the night. She was so fucking sexy, so incredibly hot. He couldn't take his eyes off her, the way the dim light enhanced her features. He loved the thrill on her face, the expression of concentration and pure pleasure as she worked him in and out of her. He found himself panting lightly, feeling that pressure grow in succession.
He could fight it. He was good at that, at making himself last as long as possible. But she'd started this, and he was beginning to have ideas of his own. So he let himself relax into it, let his dick do the tensing. And it wasn't long till his hands were gripping her hips for dear life, a growl escaping his throat, his breaths coming quick as he held her down on himself, holding her tightly in place as his dick pulsed again and again. He had never come harder with anyone than he did with Sam. And it was consistent. Each time it was like someone opened a spillway and he couldn't control the flow. When it finally ended, his chest heaving, his hands relaxing, he blinked slowly at her, watching her relax on top of him, staring down at him as his hands smoothed onto her bare thighs. She rested her hands over his, the blush in her face now one of pleasure.

"See? Nothing strenuous for you." She giggled a little and he let out a soft sigh.

"Yer a genius." He said, and reached up for her, pulling her toward him. "Come here." He said, his voice deep with the aftermath. She slipped off of him, tugging his pants up and buttoning them before pulling her skirts down and lining herself up against him. He kissed her, passionately, slowly, tasting her mouth, gliding his tongue in a soothing dance with hers. He loved kissing her, could do it all day every day, really. And she always responded as though she felt the same. When the kiss broke, she smiled brightly, closing her eyes and settling more against him. "Nope." He said, turning onto his side and leaning on one elbow. "Your turn now." He said. She raised a brow at him, smirking a little, her expression as confused as his had started out being.

"My turn?" She said, and then her face went momentarily blank when she felt his hand slip between her legs. He smiled at her. He couldn't help the possessiveness in his eyes. She was his. But not like Liam had seen her. Never like that. She was Daryl's to make happy, she was his to pleasure and protect and care for, for as long as she let him. Her eyes closed, her breath catching, her hands instantly clinging to his shirt as a little whimper escaped her throat. She buried her face into his side, her legs opening instinctively to his touch.

He teased at her slick folds, sliding one finger inside her, then another, searching for that g-spot. He knew exactly where to find it in her, he'd learned fast, back in the boathouse. And she whimpered more into him, her hips bucking slightly against his hand when he found it. He knew she could take a lot. Daryl wasn't small by any means. So he slid one more finger in, and worked in and out. It amazed him how she always seemed tight, no matter what. She began moaning his name in soft succession. And he slid his fingers out, gliding up between her folds, straight for her clit.

The sounds she made? Hot damn. If he hadn't already spent himself, he'd be ready to go just from hearing her alone. He worked that button of hers gently, but rhythmically. It wasn't something to smash or pinch or tug at. He knew it was sensitive, and that it didn't need as much bashing as most men thought. She responded when he gave just the right amount of pressure, feeling her body getting more and more tense as her moans got louder and louder. He could feel her hands shaking against him, and she lifted her head, one of those shaky hands curling around his head and pulling him down to kiss.

Her mouth was so hungry, so wanting. And she moaned into him as she got more and more desperate, her legs spreading momentarily wider. He felt her vagina begin to pulse against his hand, and he knew she was ready. She came quickly, hard and trembling everywhere, her whole body tightening as she broke the kiss and let out a long moan that sent shivers all over his body. He watched her, slowing the motion of his fingers till her body began to relax and she eventually went slack, a sign that she was well and truly done. He wiped his hand on the blanket a little before grabbing the skirt of her dress and gently rolling it back down. She just laid there, eyes closed, breathing slowly. He rested his hand on her stomach, propping his head up with the other, just watching the shadows kiss her skin.
When she finally opened her eyes to look at him, she smiled slowly, her lids heavy. He smiled back at her, and she giggled a little, lifting one hand to her face. "I can't believe we just did all that outside." She said. He chuckled and lowered himself down completely to her side, pulling her into him.

"That's why they call it nature." He wiggled his brows at her. "And you started it. Remember that." He said, and he kissed her cheek gently, nestling his face into the side of hers. She let out a deep breath, completely relaxed in his arms.

"You're right, I did. See what you've done to me, Daryl Dixon?" She said, humor in her voice. He closed his eyes, feeling sleep coming steadily. It was strange to him how easily he could sleep these days.

"I didn't do a damn thing. Yer jus a sex goddess, and you don't even know it." He commented, and she giggled. She reached for the bundled blanket and lazily draped it over them both before settling again.

"Should we sleep out here?" She asked softly, feeling her ribs rise and fall beneath his arm as she breathed.

"No way in hell I'm movin now." He muttered, the sound of the river soothing the air around them.

"What about animals?" She asked, stroking his arm slowly beneath the blanket. He smirked a little.

"You are an animal." He quipped, and she smacked his arm lightly. "Now shush, woman. People are tryin to sleep." She giggled at that, then just kept stroking his arm.

"I love you, Daryl." She said, her voice mingling with the delicate sounds of the river and the night around them.

"Love you, too." He replied. And the night carried them away into a calm, sated sleep.
Three more weeks went by quickly after that. Fall was full upon them and Daryl had been given the okay to do everything he used to do. His limp was all but non-existent, only showing up when he used it too much. He was back to work, which had him feeling so much less useless. To top it all off, Rick had found the funds in the budget to get Daryl a brand new truck, decked out in the Sheriff's department colors and logo. To say Daryl was on cloud nine was pretty much an understatement. He'd been so patient about everything that Sam hadn't really realized how stir crazy and frustrated he'd actually been. Now that life was starting to go back to normal, or normal for them, everything seemed to have found a content rhythm.

No one knew what had become of Liam and she hadn't heard from Leonard Abbott again. They were starting to go back to just living their lives like neither man existed, and it was perfect. She was oddly comforted by the knowledge that Liam had a hitman on his ass. But sometimes she still had nightmares that he came back for her and killed Daryl. They were nightmares that Daryl quickly snuffed out with his mere presence.

She was standing in front of the coffee machine, elbows on the counter, humming as she waited for it to brew. She was in nothing but an oversized t-shirt, thanks to their exploits from the night before. It made her smile to think about how they never tired of each other. People talked about the 'honeymoon period', how after a few months the sex died down. But it was like she and Daryl were the exact opposite of that. She never tired of having sex with him. But honestly, she would be happy if they didn't, too. Just having him to love, knowing he loved her? That was all she needed.

"I'm Mia Calhoun. I, um... Daryl and I, ya know..."
cabin had all begun to turn shades of orange and red. The woods seemed less dense to her because of it. She couldn't have seen views like this in New York City. Contrary to opinion, the city had trees and vast, sprawling parks. But the brownstone she'd lived in with Liam didn't have trees near it. And the yard they shared with their two neighbors could barely be called a yard. It was nothing compared to all this.

She closed her eyes a moment, holding her cup in her covered lap, letting herself sway easily. And then she heard the sound of tires on the dirt drive. Her eyes opened, and she stuck her toes to the deck to make the swing stop. A dark blue Prius pulled up to the house, stopping several feet away. Sam didn't recognize it and probably would have been all sorts of worried if it was a man behind the wheel. But it was a woman. A very, very beautiful woman.

She was wearing pretty form fitting jeans and a yellow button up sweater-shirt. Her hair was gloriously red, her lips painted even redder. And she had eyes that were nearly the same shade as Daryl's. She was smiling as she walked up to the house, looking through her keys as if she was trying to find the right one. Apparently, she hadn't seen Sam sitting there, or the fact that Sam's car was parked at the side of the cabin. The woman went right up to the door, and startled with a small scream when Sam cleared her throat.

"Oh my god!" She said, turning to see Sam sitting on the swing. She smiled nervously. "You scared the livin daylights outta me!" She said, a very country accent coming out of her pretty mouth. Sam smiled a little.

"Can I help you?" She asked, giving a friendly smile but feeling all sorts of confused. Who the hell was this woman?

"Oh, no. I was jus comin to surprise... um, Daryl...." but she paused a moment, looking at Sam in sudden confusion, eyes looking her up and down. "Wait, who are you?" She asked, her hands lowering to her sides, the keys jingling lightly. Sam raised a brow, pulled the blanket aside and stood up, not really caring that underneath that long t-shirt, she was completely naked.

"I'm Sam. Daryl's girlfriend." She said, stepping forward, half empty coffee cup in hand. "And you are?"

"You're his girlfriend?" She asked, almost disbelieving. She blinked, then smiled a little nervously. "Um... this is awkward." She said, letting out a quick laugh. "I'm Mia Calhoun. I, um... Daryl and I, ya know..." She cleared her throat. "Oh boy." Sam stared at her, brows furrowed. The other woman was taller than Sam, but she was pretty sure she could overpower her. Wait... why was she thinking like that? "Look, we were never anythin serious, or nothin. Just a friends with bennies type of thang, ya know?Whenever I'm around, I stop in, we have a roll and then I leave."

Sam could feel her hands tighten around the coffee mug almost painfully. She had to clear her throat before she could talk again. "When was the last time... you two... uh... hooked up?" She asked, feeling like her words were betraying her, a sudden doubt blossoming in her chest. Mia just shrugged.

"Bout a year, I think?" She switched her keys from one hand to the other nervously. "Look, I didn't mean to upset you... I hope you're not angry or nothin. It's never been anythin serious. And he's never really had a girlfriend before, least not while I've known him." She said, nodding a little like she was trying to affirm herself. "He always said he'd never be any good at it, ya know? The whole relationship thang. I'm glad, though." She smiled warmly then. "That he's got one now, a girlfriend, I mean." Sam was just very quiet, and still. Not sure what to say or what to do, even. Mia seemed to sense the tension was just getting too thick "I... yeah, I'm gonna go." She said, and turned, stepping off the porch toward her car. Then stopping like she'd remembered something. She turned around
again and searched through her keys once more, and then pulled one off the ring, reaching forward and setting it on the steps. "Should probably leave that... with you..." She said hurriedly, then waved a little and headed back to her car. She left so quickly, a spiral of dust was up in the air behind her Prius.

And Sam?

Well, she couldn't stop staring at that key on the step.

She wasn't stupid enough to think that Daryl had never had sex with anyone before her. He was a man, after all. A ridiculously wonderful, rugged, good looking man. They'd just never really talked about any of his previous relationships, or what passed for his sort of relationship before her. Mostly because he'd told her that every woman before her was never anything serious in his eyes. But wasn't a key serious? Giving a woman access to his home whenever she wanted, wasn't that serious? Sam crouched down and picked up the key, turning it in her fingers and trying to swallow down the sudden ache that was filling her throat. Mia was beautiful. Far more beautiful than Sam was, or so she thought. She shook her head at herself. "You can't think like that. Daryl loves you, you idiot." She said out loud, standing up and heading inside quietly, closing the screen door gently behind her.

After everything they'd been through, she trusted Daryl. She knew she did. And she knew he'd never hurt her. But she was jealous. She was jealous and she could admit that, right? She went to the kitchen feeling a little numb, sitting at the table and setting the key in front of her. Jealousy was bad, wasn't it? Especially since it was over someone from before her. She'd never felt the need to broach the subject of Daryl's past sexual encounters. But Mia and this key? Maybe it was time she did. "Shit." She said softly, Jasper jumping up onto the table and meowing at her as if chastising her for swearing. "Sorry." She said, reaching out and scratching the cat's one ear. "I'm being silly, right?" Jasper just laid down on the table top and purred lazily. "Right." Sam said, nodding at the feline.

But silly or not, as she got ready for her day, she couldn't shake the jealous and stubborn lump in her throat. By the time she left to meet Carol, that key practically burning a hole in her pocket, she was sure... she had to talk to Daryl. Hopefully, he'd explain it all away, and ease the strange emotions she wanted no part of.
"I found Sam."

"Man, just shut up already." Daryl growled out from his desk, pushing his chair back and standing up, moving toward the open doorway where the holding cells were. He stopped at the first one, hands on his hips. "I told ya, Willy, till you dry out, you ain't goin nowhere. So jus sit yer ass down and keep quiet."

"Aw, come on, Dixon. You know I didn't mean to pee on that hydrant. I jus really had to go, man." Said Willy Ket, a usual fixture in the holding cells. Daryl just shook his head at him.

"Yer lucky we're not charging you with indecent exposure. But if you keep up the bullshit, I will. Now shut up and let me get my work done." Daryl growled out. Willy just frowned deeply at him, sitting down heavily on the cot behind him and sighing. Daryl turned around, just in time to hear the front doors open.

"Shit, Mia." He said, smiling warmly when he saw the red-headed woman walk through the door. "I'll be damned." He said. It had been, what... almost a year, maybe longer since he'd seen the hairstylist? She was an Athen's native, beauty pageant queen and a typical home town girl who always came back from the quarter to visit her family, and occasionally hook up with Daryl. It had never been anything but sex between them. He respected her enough, and found her attractive. But as far as personalities went, she was shallow as a swimming pool. It was all about looks and money with her. And getting her rocks off, which was why sleeping with her had been easy considering Daryl didn't want anything serious. And being a guy, getting his rocks off was easy to do with a woman like her. He'd also never wanted any commitment, nothing serious with anyone. Before Sam, anyway.

He made his way around the counter, opening the little door and stepping up to her. She smiled brightly, hugging him tightly almost instantly. "How you been, Daryl?" She asked before pulling back, looking him up and down. "Look good as ever." She wagged her brows at him and he just smirked.

"Don't look so bad yourself. Haven't seen you in awhile, been keepin busy at the salon?" He asked, slipping his hands into his pockets and leaning his rear against the counter that separated the waiting area from the bullpen.

"Would you believe I own half the salon now?" She said, grinning widely, flipping her hair a little. "Reggie moved to Florida with his little blond girlfriend and now Fanny and I run the place ourselves." She said, sounding as proud as ever about that fact. She wasn't terribly ambitious, never had been. She was content with her life, and Daryl supposed that was a good thing. "Speaking of girlfriends..." She paused, making a bit of a wince. "I sort of ran into yours."

"Sam? When?" He asked, furrowing his brows a little. He'd only been at the office for two hours. Mia shrugged a little.

"I sort of went to your cabin." She made an innocent look. "Still had a key, thought I'd... well, surprise you with the new lacy underwear I picked up." She said, grinning unabashedly. Well, shit. He clenched his jaw a little. It had been so long since he'd seen Mia, and so much had happened since then, he'd forgotten he'd given her a key for when she came back into town. "I think I upset her a little. I really didn't mean to, Daryl. I had no idea you were serious with someone." He was quiet for a moment. Mia may have been shallow, but she wasn't a mean sort. He nodded slightly.

"It's alright. I'll talk to her later. I should probably get that key back, though." He said, feeling a little
uneasy for no other reason than it was just a strange situation. He didn't have any reason to feel bad. Mia was before Sam's time, and he had no plans on being with her again. Ever.

"I left it with... what's her name, Sam, right? Yeah. I left it with her." Mia said, tilting her head a little. "So why the change, though? You always said relationships were never your deal." He gave her a light smile.

"I found Sam." Was his answer. And it was true. Sam was the one, and he knew it. Mia smiled lightly at the look on his face, then nodded.

"Well damn. She's a lucky lady. Pretty little thing, too." She said, then she moved into him, her fingers grazing his sides lightly as she kissed his cheek. When she stepped back, she smiled at him. "I'll be in town for a few days, visitin Mum and Daddy. So, if yer relationship goes up in flames, you know where to find me." She said, then laughed a little. He just shook his head at her.

"It's good to see you, Mia." Which was true. He didn't harbor any ill feelings toward her. They may never have been anything but physical with each other, but that was no reason to part unkindly. She winked at him, still smiling, and headed out the door the same time as Rick was coming in. And the look on Rick's face when he saw Mia was less than pleased, a touch confused and a whole lot of stern.

"Before you say anythin," Daryl said, pushing away from the counter, "She jus came by to say hello and tell me she ran into Sam." He said, Rick coming right up to him and narrowing his gaze.

"When'd she run in to Sam?" He asked, and then Rick flicked Daryl's cheek lightly. "And what's with the lipstick?" Daryl raised a brow, and wiped at his face.

"She stopped by the cabin this mornin, after I left for work. And this was jus a goodbye kiss." He said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his red handkerchief to wipe at it. "Ain't nothin, man. You know that." He watched as Rick slowly smiled, then nodded.

"Yeah, I know that. But does Sam?" He asked, turning to head for his office. Daryl followed behind him, tucking the cloth back into his pocket. He stopped at the door, leaning against the frame, watching Rick hang his hat up and move to sit behind his desk.

"She will. I'm meetin her for lunch. Which reminds me, there's somethin I wanted to talk to you about." He said, Rick looking back at him with softly furrowed brows.

"If you want advice on how to get outta the doghouse, you're asking the wrong man, brother." He said in soft humor. "When Michonne gets mad at me, I grovel till I taste dirt." He said, opening up a folder. Daryl smirked lightly, stepping further into the room and plopping down in one of the chairs on the opposite side of Rick's desk.

"Naw, ain't that. Though I'd love to see you grovel." He said, Rick just shook his head, starting to fill out a form. "I know Sam and I ain't been together long. But we've been through a lot together already. And honestly, man..." he shook his head a little, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I love her. She's the one, and I know it. I'd be an idiot if I didn't act on that." Rick paused writing, lowering his pen, a growing smile stretching across his lips. "I wanna marry her. And I wanted to ask for yer blessing." Daryl couldn't explain why his palms suddenly felt sweaty. Rick was her brother, she didn't have anyone else to ask blessings from. But he was also Daryl's best friend, his unofficial brother. His blessing meant more to him than he'd probably ever be able to express. For a moment, Rick just sat there smiling. Then he pushed his chair up and stood, coming around the desk. Daryl stood, too.
"Man..." he said, his smile turning to a grin, and he pulled Daryl in for a hug, "I couldn't be prouder to have you as a real brother." He said, patting Daryl's back, an intense relief overtaking him. He had to laugh a little, smiling like an idiot when Rick pulled away. "There isn't anyone in the world I'd give my blessing to but you." Daryl nodded, speechless but happy. How did he say thank you to words like that? Rick put his hands on his hips. "You got a ring already?"

"I'm pickin it up from the shop before I meet Sam for lunch. Had to get it sized. They called last night to say it was ready." He said, crossing his arms like he usually did, more out of being relaxed than anything else.

"Know how you're going to ask her?" Rick asked, still smiling warmly at Daryl, who nodded.

"I've got an idea. Need to set a few things up, but planning on doin it this Saturday." He said, practically ecstatic despite how outwardly quiet he was. "Kinda nervous, actually." He met Rick's gaze. "We never really talked about it, ya know? Not sure if she even wants to be married again. Wasn't sure I ever wanted to. Till her." Rick reached forward and gripped his shoulder.

"She loves you, and she's never been happier. I've never seen her more content. Even if she says no, she isn't going anywhere. You know that, right?" Rick asked him. Daryl had thought as much. He had mentally prepared himself for any answer she might give. And he wouldn't hold a 'no' against her. He wouldn't let it change anything between them. either.

"Yeah. I know. Still nervous, though." He cracked a light smile. Rick squeezed his shoulder lightly and then moved back around his desk.

"I get that. Should've seen me ask Michonne. I sweat right through my shirt, dropped the ring. Twice." He chuckled. "Surprised as hell she said yes after that." Daryl heard his phone ringing in the bullpen and he took a step back. "Go on. And, really... I couldn't be happier about this. It's all gonna work out, man," Rick said before sitting. Daryl nodded, gave a small smile and jogged to his phone.

"Cooke County Sheriff's Department, Deputy Dixon." He said when he answered it. There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Hello?" He asked.

"It's Sam." He heard her voice softly on the other end and couldn't help but smile.

"Hey, sweetheart." He said, sitting down in his chair, scooting it closer to his desk. "What's up?" He knew she was probably calling about Mia. But he wasn't going to bring it up over the phone. That was the sort of thing they should talk about in person.

"I'm gonna cancel lunch today." She said quietly, her voice sounding... well, not as energetic as he was used to.

"Everythin okay?" He asked, staring down at his keyboard for a moment.

"Yeah, just going to be busier at the studio than I thought and... yeah." She said. And somehow he didn't quite believe it.

"Sam, is this about Mia?" He asked, letting his gaze roam around. "Cause she stopped by and told me about what happened." There was a long pause, and then the sound of Sam exhaling. "We can talk about it. Jus don't cancel lunch, okay? I wanna see you." He said softly, urging her.

"I saw her through the window of the office. I was walking to the diner to meet Carol and... I saw her kiss you." Sam said. And Daryl closed his eyes, moving the phone away from his face for a moment and whispering, "Fuck."
"She was jus sayin goodbye. That's all. She and I haven't been together since before I met you. You know that, right?" He asked, feeling suddenly a little agitated. He'd never given Sam a reason not to trust him, never gave her reason to doubt him.

"I know, Daryl. I know that." She paused again, the sound of dishes clanking in the background. She must've been at the diner. "I just... I guess I feel jealous. She sort of blindsided me, she's so pretty and she... she had a key. And I dunno, I guess that seemed like a serious thing to me."

"Jealous." Daryl said, shaking his head a little. "Ain't no reason to feel jealous. She don't hold a candle to you, Sam." He sighed. "And I told you, I never had any real relationships before you. You know why. With Mia, it was only ever jus sex." It sounded crude, saying it out loud. But it was the truth. Why sugar coat it?

"Carol's here." Sam said after a moment, silence stretching on again afterward.

"Meet me for lunch, please?" He asked her. "I'll tell ya anythin you wanna know. Jus... don't stress, okay?"

"Okay. See you at twelve thirty." And she hung up the phone. No goodbye, no 'I love you.' Just hung up, leaving him staring at the receiver in his hand before putting it back on the cradle. Sam and Daryl had their moments, little arguments or disagreements they always worked out and moved past. Never anything rip roaring serious. But something about all this felt different to him. He was already angry. Mia was his past. Sam was his present, his future. She had to know that, right? What did it matter who he used to have sex with? So he gave Mia a key, why was that a big deal? It was just a key. And it wasn't like Mia was a prowler or thief. If it had been so serious, he wouldn't have completely forgotten he'd given it to her.

Daryl knew the only experience with relationships Sam had before him was Liam. And, as far as Daryl was concerned, that made them even. Because, before each other, they'd never had a real, healthy, good and committed relationship. They were each other's firsts in a lot of ways. But he was no virgin. Far from it. And neither was she. So why the weirdness? Sure, it must have been a little unnerving, Mia just showing up the way she did. But if Sam trusted him, why would she be jealous? The whole thing confused him. Made him feel frustrated and uneasy.

It was going to be a long several hours before he met up with Sam. Hopefully, he'd figure out what to say between now and then. Or else, he had a feeling this was going to drag on far longer than either one of them would want...
She tried to be as positive as she could while having breakfast. But by the time she and Carol parted ways and she went to the post office, she felt numb and completely dreading lunch with Daryl. When she’d seen Mia step up to him, touching his sides, kissing his cheek so slowly, it had sent her raging almost instantly. She'd never felt anger like that before. And then she'd just felt hurt, and hurried on down the street as quickly as her feet could take her.

It didn't occur to her till after their conversation over the phone that Daryl hadn't kissed Mia back, or even touched her, for that matter. He'd just stood there, completely uninterested in reciprocating. Knowing that now made Sam feel more than a little stupid. She could only imagine how bad she'd made Daryl feel. She'd heard the controlled anger in his voice when she'd talked to him. And she couldn't blame him. If there was anyone in the world she trusted never to cheat on her, it was Daryl Dixon.

Still, by the time she got back to the studio, she couldn't seem to stop feeling miserable. She'd acted like a jealous little school girl. She should have known better. Daryl was a man. He was very sexually experienced, which she'd learned first hand. So it shouldn't have been a surprise to her that an old partner might come out of the wood works. She owed Daryl the biggest apology ever. She just hoped he was willing to hear it.

"I have to admit, the pink is quite charming." Leonard Abbott said from the corner of the studio, sitting on the piano bench, watching her. She nearly jumped out of her skin, so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't even seen him.

"How... how did you get in here?" She asked. She'd had the place locked up tight, having to unlock the door to get in. He just smiled a little. And she shook her head. "Never mind. Don't tell me. I don't want to know." She said, moving toward her little office and setting her purse and the package of guitar strings on her desk before coming back out. He hadn't moved. "What are you doing here?"

"Straight to business, I see." He said, and he stood. He was wearing a suit that looked almost exactly the same as the last one she'd seen him in. Only he had his coat on this time and his tie was firmly in place. "I wanted to bring you something." She narrowed her gaze on him, putting her hands on her hips.

"Bring me what?" She asked suspiciously. He walked up to her, pulling his phone out of his pocket. And he pressed a button or two, then turned the screen toward her. A video began to play.

"Say your name." She heard Leonard's voice. He must have been the one holding the phone, videoing. A man lifted his head. And she knew... she knew right away who it was. Her hands went immediately to her mouth, her breath coming quick.

"Liam Forester." He said, his voice strained. His face was covered in bruises, cuts. Like he'd been hit repeatedly. He coughed a little. Leonard spoke again in the video.
"Say what you just told me. Every word." Leonard ordered. Liam clenched his jaw, staring at the camera. Then he let out a breath, his nostrils flaring. She could see he was tied to a chair as the camera backed up a little.

"I tried to have Daryl Dixon killed. Twice. And when those attempts failed..." he paused, eyes darting up momentarily, supposedly to Leonard's face, before moving back to the camera. "I hired another hitman. Who is on his way to Georgia. To finish the job, and to kidnap Sam to bring her back... to me." He ground his teeth together, coughing again. He looked terrible. In pain. Part of her couldn't help but be happy about that. But the rest of her was terrified. That terror turned into horror when she saw Liam's eyes go wide, the barrel of a hand gun coming into view, and the sound of a gun going off, loud and terrible. She watched Liam's head whip back, a spray of blood going everywhere, then nothing. Just the sound of blood dripping and Liam's dead eyes staring up at the sky. The video stopped. She was so stunned and shocked, she started shaking.

"You..." she blinked, tears fleeing her eyes, her feet moving back a few steps, putting distance between herself and Leonard. "You killed him. You killed Liam." Her voice was a disbelieving whisper. Leonard nodded, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

"I told you, Miss Grimes, that I planned on doing so. I also promised you that you would have nothing to worry about as far as Liam was concerned. But it turns out, the man was crafty and hired someone with far fewer morals than I." He turned around, going back to the piano bench and sitting. She found herself reaching blindly for one of the folding chairs she knew was behind her. She sat in it, not able to keep her legs from shaking. She wiped at her face. Why was she crying for Liam? The bastard deserved the beating he got. But killing him? She'd never wanted that. Though she knew Leonard had made the choice without her.

"So... someone else is after us?" She asked after a moment, her voice shaken and thick. Leonard nodded. "Can't you just tell him that Liam is dead? Won't that end whatever contract they had?"

Leonard smiled a little.

"Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Once money exchanges hands, there is rarely if ever any contact until the job is finished. There is no way for your pursuer to know that Liam is dead. And honestly, even if he did I doubt he would stop. Most men such as this will carry out a contract once paid, no matter what." He relaxed slightly back against the closed piano lid. "That being said, I know the man in question. I did some research and found the money trail leading to him. We've crossed paths in the past, and I'm hopeful I may be able to pay him not to kill Daryl and to leave you alone."

"H-how much money... would that take?" She asked, rubbing her suddenly sweaty hands on her black cargo pants. He shrugged.

"About seventy thousand American dollars, which is about twenty thousand more than Liam paid him."

"Seventy thousand?!" She exclaimed, eyes going wide. "We don't have that kind of money!" She felt panic spread throughout every vein, every muscle, every nerve. Leonard just smiled warmly at her.

"I said I would pay him, not you." He motioned lightly at her. "I made a promise. I intend to keep it. Whatever the means." For a long moment, they were both quiet after that, Sam trying to wrap her head around it all.

"Why?" She finally asked, standing up and moving toward him. It amazed her that she wasn't afraid of this man, especially after what he'd just shown her. He looked up at her.
"Simply? Because you and Daryl Dixon are good people. And though I may not be a shoe-in for heaven, I have my code. Living by it gives me hope. And hope is something that should not be lost." He stood then, towering over her. He extended a hand to her. "With any luck, this will be the last time we see each other, Miss Grimes. I hope you still have your panic button." She reached forward and shook his hand.

"I still have it." She said, swallowing a little when he let her hand go.

"Good. Now, perhaps you should tell your boyfriend all you know. I have already sent a copy of the video to your email, should he require proof. It is good to keep such things quiet. But he deserves the truth, don't you think?" Leonard said, moving toward the door.

"Leonard," she said, and he stopped to look at her, his hand on the door handle. "You're not as terrible as you think you are." She wasn't entirely sure why she wanted him to know that. But she did. She felt like it was important. After all, she barely knew this man and look at all he was doing for her and Daryl. His hand slid off the door handle as he looked at her, smiling a little sadly.

"Even after seeing the video, you believe that?" He asked, watching for her reaction. She nodded then, taking a few steps toward him.

"I think there are people who have to do the terrible and hard things, so other people don't have to. Like what Daryl had to do in Kandahar. They don't ask for it, they just... have to do it. Because no one else can. And others shouldn't. It doesn't make them evil." She shrugged a little. "I hope that makes sense." His smile grew and he nodded a little.

"I was married once, many years ago. Her name was Rita, and she was everything to me. In her eyes, I could see all the good I so wanted to strive for. I wanted nothing more than to be everything she deserved." He slipped one of his hands into his pocket, looking down at the ground. "Cancer took her from me. But the last thing she said before she died has always stuck with me." He lifted his eyes back to Sam's. "We are all broken, that's how the light gets in." He let out a slow sigh. "She loved Ernest Hemmingway." He reached for the door again, opening it. "Take care, Miss Grimes. And thank you." And he stepped outside, the door closing behind him, the little bells that hung from it jingling lightly as it shut.
"Don't."

The ring was burning a hole in his pocket.

Everything felt strained, the whole Mia thing stressing him out far more than he cared to admit. He felt like he'd done something wrong and yet knew he had nothing to apologize for. It was bullshit. And then there was the nervousness added to that about his plans to ask Sam to marry him. It wasn't a whim, far from it. He'd been thinking about it for weeks, pretty much since just before he'd left the hospital. There'd just been a moment with Sam that had burned the idea into his head and he knew, with every fiber of his being, that this was what he really wanted.

Of course, nothing could ever be simple. Nothing about the last several months had been simple. Having Sam in his life had turned everything upside down, in just about every way. And most of it he could deal with. Honestly, even being blown up didn't seem like that much of a big deal. He knew, for Sam, he'd jump in front of any bomb or bullet. Though that was hardly what happened. At any rate, now he was sitting in one of the fluffy chairs in her studio, waiting for her to finish up a voice lesson with a kid who had a decent voice but was probably in the middle of puberty, so his voice cracked every few minutes. She'd seemed happy to see him, but shy and far more quiet than usual. And he couldn't stop thinking about the ring in his pocket. He had to force himself not to keep checking to make sure it was still there.

The ring itself was far from fancy. It had three stones. The one in the middle was the biggest, or bigger than the other two. All three were round cut, the one in the middle 1.0 karat and the other two a half karat each. It was a white gold band. And hopefully perfect. He'd remembered the lengths he'd had to go to just to get the size right. She only ever wore rings on her right hand. And never on her ring finger. So he'd had Michonne help him out once he'd found the right one. She'd convinced Sam to sell her old engagement ring from Liam, which she'd kept to use for emergency cash. So Sam gave it to Michonne to get as much as she could for it. She had it sized and told Daryl that Sam was a 6. The whole thing was a little humorous because Michonne typically told Rick everything, but made a big deal out of promising Daryl she wouldn't spill a word. And she hadn't.

Finally, the kid finished his lesson and packed up his stuff. He left, giving Daryl a quick hello and leaving Sam and him alone in the studio. She went about putting the sheet music into a folder, and gave him a very small smile before going to her office and putting the folder in a file cabinet. Then she came out, and walked up to him, stopping just before him, looming. Her hands were sliding up and down her hips nervously, and she was about twenty shades of red, her rose petal pink lips set in an almost sad stretch.

"Daryl," She began, but he raised a hand, silencing her almost instantly. He stood up, facing her.

"Jus listen, okay?" He said quietly, but firmly. He had to get this out first before she said anything. "Before I met you, I didn't want nothin to do with gettin attached to anyone. Sex was fine because it wasn't that important to me. I could get off with someone and jus move on. Not sayin it was right, and I sure as hell ain't makin excuses." He took in a deep breath, letting it out very slowly. "I didn't want to saddle someone with my shit. Didn't think I deserved to be happy. Didn't even want to try."

He reached his hand up, caressing her cheek softly. "I'm sorry I forgot about Mia, that I gave her a key. Sorry that she jus showed up on you like that. And sorry I tried to write it off as nothin." He let his hand fall. "I ain't good at this. But I'm tryin, Sam. Yer the only one I ever wanted to try for."

She was listening intently, her face set in a sad and quiet expression. Then she moved into him wordlessly, wrapping her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. "I'm such an idiot." She mumbled against him. "I am so, so sorry. I overreacted and I just let my emotions get away from me.
I was jealous, but that was on me, not you. You have to know I trust you, more than anyone. I don't know why I felt the way I did. I just... please forgive me. I'm not good at this, either." She didn't lift her head, and he just let his arms engulf her.

"Why are we both apologizin?" He asked quietly, resting his chin on top of her head.

"I've been panicking all day." She mumbled some more. "I thought I really messed things up." He chuckled a little.

"Ain't no way that's possible. Yer stuck with me, woman." He said, and kissed the top of her head. She sighed, her breath warming his shirt. Then she lifted her head and kissed his lips tenderly.

"So... if you forgot about her, does that mean I'm just that good?" She asked then, grinning up at him a little. He smirked at her.

"I think I've created a monster." He replied, "And for the record, yer unforgettable." He kissed her once more. "Now go get yer stuff so we can eat. Lunch hour's runnin out." He said. But she didn't move away from him, not at first. Instead she averted her eyes a moment.

"Actually..." She stepped away from him, turning to her little receptionist stand. "We should probably talk about something first." She grabbed her cell phone, motioning for him to sit back down. She moved to the chair directly next to hers. And for a moment, all he could think was, *What the hell'd I do now?* But he sat, watching her. "Do you remember the man who warned you about Liam wanting to kill you?" She asked, meeting his gaze. She suddenly looked so wary, so exhausted, and yet somehow on edge. He furrowed his brows at her.

"Yeah." He said, sitting up a little straighter. "Why?" She swallowed, staring down at her cell phone. She started scrolling through something, clicked something. Then just held her phone in her lap. "Sam..." She lifted her eyes back to him.

"His name is Leonard Abbott. He came to see us when you were in the hospital. He... wanted to help." She began chewing on her lower lip a little, then cleared her throat. "He said he didn't like the fact that Liam misled him about you, and that he was going to make sure Liam didn't bother us anymore." Daryl sat there completely silent, staring at her like she'd just said the sky was actually shit brown. He clenched his jaw lightly, and she began to look more and more nervous, trying to avoid his steely gaze. "Say something." She said softly. And he shook his head a little, stepping away from her and the chairs. He began to pace lightly, then just turned to look at her.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" He demanded, his voice a little louder than he'd meant. "He could've been dangerous, he could've hurt you!" He vented out, then began pacing again. She scooted to the edge of her seat.

"I just... I didn't want you to be worried. You were going through so much. I mean, Daryl... you almost died. And he didn't hurt me! He was actually really kind!" She said firmly, watching him. He stopped, looking at her hard. "Besides, he wanted to help. He wanted to make it right." She stood up and crossed the floor to him, her expression wary of him. But she met him face to face. "He came to see me again, this morning." She said. And Daryl just stood there, feeling really pissed off. And she could see it. He could tell she was trying not to shy away from him. "He found Liam." She said, her voice barely above a whisper. And he froze. The tension and anger turned into a wide stiffness that encompassed every muscle. He was trying very hard to keep calm. He was mad because she hadn't told him sooner, and she'd put herself in danger. He got why she did it, and then again, he really didn't get it. They'd promised, no secrets.

"He found him... where?" He asked, his voice rough and quiet. She swallowed, glancing down at
the phone in her hands. She tapped the screen and turned it around, handing it to him as a video started up. All Daryl could do was watch and listen, and the more he watched and listened, the angrier he got. This Leonard Abbott not only committed murder, but had made Sam an accessory just by giving her this video, considering Daryl highly doubted she had plans of turning Abbott in for Liam's execution.

"Fuck, Sam..." he growled out when the video finished, feeling strangely uncaring about the fact that Liam was dead. He wasn't sure what that said about him, honestly. But he didn't give a shit right that moment. He couldn't hold his anger in anymore. He paced quickly away from her. "Do you know what this is?" He yelled. She cringed almost instantly. "I'm a fucking cop, Sam!" He nearly threw the phone across the room. It luckily hit one of the soft chairs and bounced off on to the floor. Sam jumped, startled. "Just showin me this, the fact you knew Abbott was going to do this?! Do you realize what you've done?!" He watched tears start to roll down her face and he turned away from her.

"Daryl..." she said, her voice shaken and tear filled. "I told Leonard, I said I didn't want Liam to die. He said he was going to kill him whether I wanted him to or not!" She exclaimed, hugging herself. Daryl turned to look at her, and shook his head quickly.

"You sat on it, Sam! You knew what he was gonna do, and you said nothin! Now you have this video?! This, all of this," he said, motioning toward her, "Makes you an accessory, and now it makes me one, too!" He practically roared at her. She blinked, still cringing, but looking momentarily confused.

"What?" She asked softly, staring at him. He let out a few deep breaths and walked up to her, looking her right in the face. She didn't move, to her credit.

"I tell anyone about this, you end up in jail." He said harshly, "And I ain't lettin that happen." He stepped back from her. "Fuck." He swore, turning around and pacing away, his mind racing. He had to think of a way to clean up this mess, to hide that video. "Where's Liam's body?" He demanded then, looking at her.

"I... I don't know." Her voice was so quiet, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. Did she even understand the gravity of all this? She'd put them both at jeopardy. If she'd just told him about all this from the start...

"Where's Abbott?" He demanded. She just shook her head.

"I don't know. I swear. He said... he was going to try to pay the guy off, the one Liam mentioned, so he'd leave us alone. He said, with any luck I'd never see him again." She stammered out quickly. "Daryl, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! I didn't know how bad... I didn't realize... God, Daryl, please!" She started sobbing, her whole body trembling. And he went completely still. "I was scared! You almost died! I had to sit there and see you all broken and unconscious, and I hated Liam for it! I still hate him!" She began to yell at him through her tears. And he let her. He stood there, still and quiet, and let her rage at him. "When Abbott told me what he wanted to do, I didn't want Liam dead. I hate him, but I never wanted this! And Abbott knew it! But now that Liam's dead, I'm glad!" She let her arms fall, and she moved over to pick her phone up off the floor, motioning it at Daryl. "Because now he can't ever hurt me! And he can't hurt you! And if that makes me a terrible person, then so be it! I'm sorry I was too stupid to realize that I could be legally implicated, and I never meant to put your job in jeopardy! Shit!"

After that, she let out an exasperated sob, crying as she stared at him.

He loved this woman, heart, body and soul. But in that moment, he couldn't bring himself to comfort
her. This was a mess he wasn't sure he could clean up. A mess he wasn't sure he could save either of them from. He moved up to her quietly, looking down at her. She seemed so unsure of his presence so close. He knew his yelling had scared her. But he couldn't take that back now. "Tell me how to contact Abbott." He demanded, his voice a quiet but angry stretch. She swallowed, sobbing again, then shook her head. She reached into her pocket and pulled her keys out, shoving them into Daryl's chest. He grabbed them.

"The flashlight is a panic button." She said, wiping angrily at her eyes. "He gave it to me at the hospital."

"What about the email?" He asked, looking at the flashlight, then practically ripping it off the key ring.

"It said no sender. I don't know why." She said, stepping back at him as he handed the keys back to her. He didn't say anything more, he just moved for the door. He felt her reach for him, grabbing his forearm.

"Daryl, wait!" She blurted out. He pulled his arm out of her grasp, staring at her hard.

"Don't." He said once, firmly, and walked out of the door to the sound of her sobbing once more. He didn't stop walking till he got to his truck. And then he peeled out into the street so fast, his tires left burn marks on the tar. He practically punched the dash as he drove, then steeled himself, heading away from town. He was going to find a quiet spot, and he was going to get this Abbott shithead to come to him. The two of them needed to talk. That fucker was going to clean up this mess, one way or another. Daryl was going to make sure of that...
"Sometimes bad is the only good we get."

Rick was stepping out of the office when he saw Daryl's truck speed past, literally running out into the road to see the truck turn the corner hard and disappear. Not even a breath later, he heard Sam yelling. "RICK!" He turned, seeing her sprinting toward him. Her face was covered in tears, she looked scared as shit, completely panicked.

"Sam?" He asked, meeting her halfway. She practically threw herself at him, clinging to his shirt, but not to hug him.

"You have to go after him!" She exclaimed, "He's so angry, I really... I messed up, Rick!" She choked out a sob, and Rick led her back to the sidewalk, holding her by the upper arms.

"What're you talking about, what the hell happened?" He demanded, searching her face. She took a few deep breaths trying to compose herself. She told him everything, as quickly and in as much detail as possible. And he couldn't blame Daryl for being pissed. After hearing all that? Shit, he was pissed, too. About all of it. But he knew Daryl well enough to know that his anger wasn't directed at Sam. She couldn't have known the legal implications or how much of a fucked up position this put Daryl in. Now Rick, too. "Where's he going, Sam?" He demanded then, watching her hug herself, her tears having stopped, replaced with just an intense worry.

"I don't know. He took the panic button and stormed out. He wants to get a hold of Abbott."

"What're you talking about, what the hell happened?" He demanded, searching her face. She took a few deep breaths trying to compose herself. She told him everything, as quickly and in as much detail as possible. And he couldn't blame Daryl for being pissed. After hearing all that? Shit, he was pissed, too. About all of it. But he knew Daryl well enough to know that his anger wasn't directed at Sam. She couldn't have known the legal implications or how much of a fucked up position this put Daryl in. Now Rick, too. "Where's he going, Sam?" He demanded then, watching her hug herself, her tears having stopped, replaced with just an intense worry.

"I don't know. He took the panic button and stormed out. He wants to get a hold of Abbott." She said, and Rick paced for a moment, then stopped, hands on his hips. He had to think like Daryl. He'd want to go somewhere secluded, and open. Someplace easy enough to get to and leave without drawing attention. He glanced at Sam. "Go home and stay there till you hear from me." He told her, and stepped over to his own truck, getting in. She followed close behind him.

"But Rick I should come, I can talk to him!" She said, but Rick just stared at her.

"No, Sam. I'll handle it. Just do as I say." And he closed the door, starting up the engine. He pulled out, leaving her standing on the sidewalk. He sped out of town, headed for Farmer's Junction. This time of year, the wide open fair fields and stables would be empty. No one would be there. And it would be the perfect place to confront anyone. Knowing Daryl, that would be exactly where he'd go.

"Don't do nothin stupid, Daryl..." he muttered, turning the corner, getting on the highway as fast as he could. He could only hope there was a delay in response to that panic button, and that Rick would get there before this Abbott man did.

* * *

Farmer's Junction was like a ghost town.

The fair stalls and games were completely abandoned. The track was empty and hadn't been used in weeks. The barns were bare and wide open. The whole of the place was his. Daryl chose to park beside one of the bigger barns, the same one Vagrant had been in. He got out, walking inside. The air was cool and still. It had been completely cleaned out. Not even a lick of hay was left behind. He walked it up and down, pacing, thinking.

He didn't want to hurt this guy Abbott. The man had tried to warn him, after all. And he'd done both him and Sam a serious favor by taking care of Liam. But this guy needed to know what he'd done, what sort of shit storm he'd thrown them into by involving Sam. Daryl loved his job. It was the whole reason his life hadn't spiraled out of control after the Army. He took pride in it, did it well, did
his duty. But for the first time since Rick had pinned that badge on him, Daryl was going to break the law. He was going to sweep a murder under the rug and let the guy who did it go free, as long as the guy would do what Daryl asked.

It was a little strange, thinking a guy who worked for the UN was also a freelance assassin. But if he was connected, if he was as good as he seemed, then he could erase the tech trail of the email he'd sent Sam. He could make that video disappear, and he sure as hell could make sure Liam's body would never see the light of day, if he hadn't already.

It wasn't the smartest idea he'd ever had, confronting a trained killer. But this was his life. This was Sam's life. He couldn't just sit there knowing there was a trail out there that led from Liam and Abbott to her. He pulled the flashlight out of his pocket, stepping outside of the barn and staring out into an open and empty field.

And he pressed the button.

There was no sound to let him know it had worked, nothing to trigger a response. So now, he supposed, it was just a waiting game. And wait he would, for as long as he had to. He slipped the light back into his pocket. He took off his deputy shirt, folding it and sticking it in the truck before untucking his white t-shirt. And he lowered the tailgate, hopping up on it and sitting quietly for a moment. But a moment was all it took for him to hear an engine. He hopped off almost instantly, gripping his sidearm in its holster. Until he saw the source of the sound was Rick's truck.

"Fuck." He muttered. Sam must have told him. "Dammit, Sam." He growled out, letting his hand fall away from the sidearm. How many people was she going to put in the shitstorm? Rick parked right next to Daryl's truck, getting out immediately, glancing around and walking right up to him. "Don't say it." Daryl said firmly, Rick shaking his head. They just stared at each other, Rick shifting on his feet, then he turned his gaze away, jaw clenching.

"This whole thing is fucked up, man." He finally said. And Daryl just watched him. "What's the plan?" Rick asked, looking back at Daryl, who just raised a brow. Then nodded. He hadn't expected that. He'd expected Rick to try to stop him.

"No real plan. Jus get my point across, hope Abbott gets the big picture." Daryl said, then let out a sigh. "I gotta protect her, man." He said, crossing his arms over his chest, palms flat on his ribs like usual. "I get why Abbott did what he did. But he had to know sending her that video puts her in a hell of a position she should never have been in."

"We don't know everything, Daryl. Maybe he's already cleared the trail. She said the email had no sender. Maybe there's no way to trace it back to her."

"That ain't the point. This guy literally told her he was gonna kill someone, and she didn't say anythin. If Liam's body shows up, that makes her an accessory and us just as responsible. What're we supposed to do? Just sit on it? Man, it's a fucking murder." Daryl shook his head. "I get it, why she didn't say anythin. And I ain't gonna waste any sleep on Liam bein dead. But all these years I been workin for you, man... this is goes against everythin I worked for, everythin you taught me." He growled out, moving slightly away.

"We're the good guys. But sometimes..." Rick said, catching Daryl's gaze, "Sometimes bad is the only good we get." They both were just quiet after that, letting the Fall air surround them. "What Liam did to Sam, he deserved what he got. Not sayin it's right. It just is what it is. And Sam keeping that from us... maybe she was just trying to protect us, trying to go on with her life. Which is all she's wanted since she got back to Georgia. You gotta forgive her for that, man." Daryl nodded, rolling his shoulders a little and letting his hands fall.
"I pressed the panic button." He explained calmly, then. Rick nodded.

"We wait, then." He moved up to Daryl, gripping his shoulder. "And we handle this together."

Daryl nodded once. In the whole of things, Liam being dead was good. Fuck it if that made Daryl a bad person. He didn't care. As long as his body never showed up, he'd just still be considered missing and on the run. That would make this whole mess just one big terrible damn secret that they'd have to keep for the rest of their lives.

That was the part that was really eating at him, the part that angered him the most.

He thought he'd been done with secrets, with ghosts and the dead taking up too much of his life. He had hoped that was all behind him, that he could move on with Sam and just live for a change. Now he felt like he was right back to square one in a way. He could live with Liam being dead, and he would never stop loving Sam no matter what she may have inadvertently done. It was the voice bouncing around in his head he wasn't sure he could live with.

"This ain't you, neither. I know you, little brother. Yer tryin so hard to fit in, to be one of them, but yer not some pissant cop!" Merle had told him. For the first time, he wondered if Merle was right. Because Daryl was about to break the law big time. He was going to help make sure a murder was never discovered. And he was going to willingly drag his best friend right into it with him, just to protect the woman he loves. It didn't even matter to him that he probably had no right to even consider doing that to Rick. Mostly because Rick had already made up his own mind to be there by Daryl's side. Shit, Daryl would happily do the same thing for Rick. That and Daryl was just tired of it all. He wanted his life back. He wanted Sam safe. He wanted this damn spy novel shit to be over. And he wasn't sure what it said about him, but he'd do whatever it took to make that happen.
"Just like that"

When he'd first met Daryl, it was shortly after he'd arrested Merle. The younger Dixon had only been back in Georgia for a few days, and already he was bailing his brother out. But when he saw Daryl, Rick didn't see a dirtbag like Merle. He saw a haunted man, who'd survived far too much, and yet somehow was still standing tall. He saw the kind of man who needed the chance to have a life better than the one that had been thrust upon him. And even though the smart thing to do would have been to leave things well enough alone, Rick was drawn to Daryl. He hired him only two days later.

It had been a difficult adjustment for Daryl, and not just because he'd been on the opposite side of the law more than a few times when he was younger. What happened to him overseas had ripped him apart. He was angry, he was volatile, he was dangerous. And Rick knew it, he'd read the entire file on what had transpired. But he also knew that Daryl was capable and a good man. He saw it in the small ways, the things that he did to make other people's lives easier. He saw it in the way he treated children, the elderly, even animals. He saw it when he'd saved Carol and her little girl. He saw it in Daryl's eagerness to learn, to make himself better, to repair the damage that had been done to his spirit.

As time went on, Rick found himself thinking of Daryl as less of an employee and person to help, and more like a friend, a man he could count on more than most. That friendship turned into brotherhood. When Lori died, Daryl really stepped up. He was a rock for Rick, he helped keep the department together, and more importantly, he proved just how much a part of Rick's family that Daryl really was. Daryl was his brother. Rick would gladly die for him. They'd never fought on a battlefield or been through the shit storm of war. But they'd been through enough for Rick to know that they always have each other's backs. Which was why Rick was standing right there beside him, willing to risk his entire career.

Sure, a lot of that was about Sam, too. She was his baby sister. And he'd neglected to protect her all those years she'd been with Liam. He hadn't known what was happening with her, which honestly wasn't his fault. But he still felt guilty. He'd protected Sam from their parents while they were growing up, as much as he was able. And when he moved out, he took Sam with him. He fought his parents on it. They tried hard to get her back. But then they just gave up, writing her off as a disappointment and then disowning both of their children. Rick made sure Sam finished school and got into college. But when she moved to New York, it was like she became a different person. She pushed him away. They were lucky if they spoke once a year. He hadn't known then what he knew now, that it was Liam's doing.

When she came home, Rick saw it as a chance to make up for all the time he hadn't been there to help her. He hadn't even considered that she and Daryl would fall for each other. It couldn't have been a more perfect situation, or a more fragile one. Yet the two of them somehow made it work. Somehow, they were perfect for each other. They needed each other, they made each other whole in a way he hadn't witnessed in either of them before. He couldn't let this whole mess with Liam destroy that, not after everything they'd been through. If anyone in this messed up world deserved happiness and peace, it was Daryl and Sam, two of the people Rick loved most.

Hours had passed since Daryl had pressed the panic button. They'd talked quite a bit, about everything. Daryl had never been much of a talker. He was blunt, and he could be rather curt at times. But he'd found the two of them could always carry on a decent conversation. Whether it was serious things or not, they managed to keep each other's attention. At the moment, however, they were both just quiet. The sun had burned away on the horizon, twilight beginning to paint splashes of stars overhead. They were leaning on the open barn doors, watching a murder of crows out in the
trampled field just beyond the barn itself. He was seriously beginning to wonder if this Abbott guy was even going to show. Wasn't the point of a panic button to get help quickly? What if it had been Sam who'd pushed it? Maybe the button was just a placebo. Maybe it didn't even work. He was about to suggest as such when a voice suddenly met their ears, coming from behind them in the barn. "Quiet here." Leonard Abbott said, "An interesting choice."

Both Daryl and Rick spun around quickly, both drawing their weapons and aiming them at the man in the tailored suit. He just smiled at them, raising his empty hands. Rick and Daryl exchanged glances. They never saw or heard a vehicle, and they sure as hell hadn't heard Abbott approach.

"Are you Leonard Abbott?" Rick demanded, feeling a tension flood every muscle, ready to pull the trigger at any moment. But the man didn't seem in the least bit worried about the fact that two men were pointing guns at him. He just dropped his hands, slipping them into his pockets.

"I am." He said, "I do apologize for making you wait. But I had business to deal with."

"Business." Daryl said, lowering his gun but not holstering it. "Some panic button." Abbott smiled lightly at that.

"I knew it was not Miss Grimes who'd pushed it. I know she is currently at your cabin, safe and sound and worried. And I know that you summoned me here because you wish to discuss Liam Forester. I take it your conversation with Miss Grimes did not go very well?" He asked, pacing a little toward them. Rick finally lowered his gun, but, like Daryl, didn't put it away.

"You could say that. Do you realize what you've done?" Daryl demanded, glaring at the English man. Rick stepped a little closer to Daryl. He understood the anger, but they needed Abbott's cooperation. He hoped Daryl could keep it in check. "Where's Liam?" Daryl asked then, shifting a little on his feet.

"You saw the video. I think perhaps it speaks for itself. Mr. Forester is currently very dead." Abbott replied, glancing from one man to the other.

"That's not what I meant. Where's his body?" Daryl growled out. Abbott paused a moment, then nodded slowly.

"I see. You're worried that if Mr. Forester's body is discovered, you will have no choice but to have Miss Grimes deny any knowledge of the events leading to his murder. And should any evidence come forth, connecting her to his death, such as," He pulled his phone out of his pocket, showing it to both Rick and Daryl, "Perhaps a very incriminating video in an e-mail, it would make her culpable in his demise. As well as the two of you. Correct?"

Daryl and Rick exchanged glances. Who the fuck was this guy? Abbott simply started pressing buttons on his phone, still talking.

"Let me put your minds at ease. Mr. Forester has been burned and his ashes spread over a corn field to fertilize it. Waste not, want not." He cracked a light smile, then slipped his phone back into his pocket, meeting Daryl's gaze. "As for any digital trail, there is now none. The e-mail I sent Miss Grimes no longer exists and the video, even if saved, is completely corrupted and no longer usable. You'll also be glad to know that the second man Mr. Forester hired to kill you is no longer interested. It cost a fair bit more than I'd planned, but he has been successfully deterred."

"That's it... just like that?" Rick asked, feeling seriously like he was in some sort of James Bond movie. He could tell Daryl was just as weirded out.
"Just like that." He said, offering a light smile. "I am a professional, after all." Rick heard Daryl holster his weapon, then watched him take a step toward Abbott.

"Why?" He asked firmly, his gruff voice aimed solely at Abbott. "Why do all this? Why warn me to begin with and why kill Liam after?" Daryl demanded. "You don't know me or Sam. You don't owe us shit. So why?" Abbott paused, seemingly thinking about what his response should be. Then he nodded, pacing lazily away toward the open bar doors.

"We met once, during your first tour in Afghanistan. I doubt you remember. To be honest, I didn't recognize you or your name till I did more research on who my target was." He looked back at Daryl who just seemed thoroughly confused. Rick went up to Daryl's side, holstering his weapon. He put a hand on Daryl's shoulder, feeling strangely protective all of a sudden. Talking about Afghanistan never ended well for Daryl. "My team and I went off the road right in a danger zone. Our hummer lost a tire and we landed in a ditch, with no possible way out and no backup for an hour in either direction. Your unit and you, Sergeant Dixon, saw to it that our tire was changed, our vehicle put back on the road, and my team sent safely on its way." He looked out at the field then, the only light now from the one lantern in the barn that Rick had lit earlier.

"When I realized who you were, I looked up your military records. I learned all that you went through. And then I learned all you'd done to better yourself since, to not become the monster that war makes out of most men. A monster like me." He turned back around and walked back up to Daryl and Rick. "You're a good man, an honorable one. I don't kill good men." He said firmly. "And I owed you a debt for that day. A debt that has now been paid in full." He smiled a little. Then he walked away back toward the other end of the barn where he'd come in from. He paused, just before turning a corner to the back service entrance. "I never intended for Miss Grimes to ever be indicated. She's a good woman. She has a big heart. You're a lucky man, Daryl Dixon." He gave both men one more smile, then disappeared as quickly and efficiently as he'd arrived.

Rick just stood there, staring at the other end of the empty barn feeling... well, relieved. And more than a little unsure. It all seemed so clean and tidy, especially after all the headaches before this point. And looking at him now, Rick could tell Daryl wasn't happy, either. Shit, they both should have been elated. But he knew why they weren't. In some ways, he and Daryl thought very much alike. And having to live with the secret of a man's murder? Well, it was a burden neither one of them wanted, but both would carry without complaint. For Sam. For each other. "Sometimes bad is the only good you get." Daryl said, giving Rick's own words back to him, breaking the silence. They looked at each other.

"Let's go home." Rick said then, patting Daryl on the shoulder. He snuffed out the lantern and they headed to their trucks without another word. There wasn't anything else to say. And as they drove home in the dark, heading in separate directions on the main road, he knew he had a hell of a story to tell Michonne. He could only wish that Daryl and Sam would be able to patch things up. Daryl was scary as shit when he was angry. But Rick knew he was a good man, worth hanging in there for. He just hoped Sam knew that, too. "Good luck, brother." He said in the quiet of his cab, and watched Daryl's tail lights disappear in his rear view mirror.
"See you later."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Rough sex, violence, rapey tones.)

This chapter was rough to write. But it gives insight into the type of man Dusty really is.

Dusty was sitting in front of the 609. He hadn't been to Georgia in weeks. Not since Daryl's Jeep exploded. He'd pulled everything out of Georgia, managing to convince the Old Man to leave the state out of the business, saying that the heat from the troopers was getting to be too much and too many people had been caught with Spinners. More than a few of which had described Dusty to the authorities. It was still a relatively new product, still being tweaked and perfected. If it lost its momentum because of an overzealous investigation, they'd lose millions.

He also told the Old Man about Daryl. About who he was, and what he'd done for Dusty overseas. The Old Man may have been a drug kingpin, but he was from a long line of Navy men. And he understood the loyalty. He knew Dusty would never betray the Old Man, but he also knew that Dusty would never hurt Daryl. And if Daryl was hunting down Spinners, that was a huge conflict for Dusty.

For awhile, Georgia became a no-go zone. And Dusty couldn't have been more grateful. He'd kept tabs on Daryl, heard he'd recovered entirely. The whole thing had been so fucked up. To get blown up on American soil? Shit. As soon as he heard the Jeep explode, he'd turned around and ran right back, looking for Daryl. He'd found him first. And it was like reliving Kandahar. Daryl was a bloody mess. Shortly after, the black woman who'd served them at the diner joined him. And they did everything they could to keep Daryl from bleeding out until the ambulance got there. It was insane. He never did find out why someone had tried to kill him. But it didn't really matter anymore. Daryl was alive, and that was all that mattered.

Now, though, Dusty was back in Georgia to clean up a mess.

Word had gotten out that someone had seen Dusty kill Merle Dixon. And that someone wanted money to keep their mouth shut. Of course, he didn't plan on paying a cent. He just planned on killing the witness and disposing of the body. He'd been careless, he could admit it. Killing Merle in a public parking lot and just leaving him there had been stupid. But he'd been so pissed about what the older Dixon had planned on doing to Daryl that he'd just reacted. He wasn't stupid enough to leave evidence. But apparently he'd been distracted enough not to realize he'd been seen.

It caused all sorts of complications. If he was turned in, there'd be a manhunt. And the Old Man would have to have him killed just to save face. Dusty didn't plan on dying any time soon, so he promised the Old Man he'd clean up the mess and make sure nothing could be traced back to the Company. There was also the fact that if Daryl found out that Dusty had killed his brother, he'd hunt Dusty down. Daryl had his code, his loyalties. He may not have been a fan of Merle, but the asshole had still been his brother. Battle buddies or not, there was no way in hell that Daryl would just let that go. After everything Dusty had done to protect him, he would really hate to have to kill Daryl.

He watched from the parking lot, sitting on the bumper of his truck, as the bar tender, Alise, came out. She was one of Dusty's informants, sort of. They'd had some really good fucks in that very
parking lot when he came through, and in return she'd give him whatever information he asked for. Best deal for sex he'd ever had. And she was a whorish thing, too. Breasts he could drown himself in and a ridiculously tight pussy. Not to mention she had no qualms about taking it up the ass. She also didn't care if he was as hard or as rough as he wanted to be. She liked pain. It put her in his top ten of good fucks.

She walked right up to him, wearing a red painted smile, a seriously tight mini jean skirt and an even tighter tank top, with no bra. "Sight for sore eyes." She said to him, gliding right up to him and settling herself against him. "That's what you are." And then she covered his mouth in a kiss that tasted like cigarettes and whiskey, grabbing his dick. Sure, he could fuck her before he got the name she'd called him about. Why the hell not.

He broke the kiss quickly, turning her over hard and slamming her down on the hood of his truck. He pressed himself up against her, reaching up and grabbing her tits hard, pulling them out of the tank top. She gasped, grinding her ass into him, pleading for him to fuck her. He simply undid his belt, pulling his dick out. He reached under her skirt and yanked her panties down. He pumped himself a few times getting himself nice and hard while he used his other hand to drive his fingers in and out of her pussy, getting her as wet as he could. Then he simply rammed himself in. He fucked her hard against that truck, making her cry out in ragged, nearly screeching tones, not giving a single shit who heard or saw them.

He squeezed her tits, slamming himself in so hard over and over again that he was grunting and sweating slightly with the effort, the sound of their flesh slapping loud around them. She started crying, but he didn't care. He just kept going. She'd asked for this, and she was going to take it till he was good and done. She cried out over and over again. And he took himself out of her, picking her up and bringing her around to the back of the truck, nearly throwing her into the bed of it. He came down on top of her, ignoring the tears on her face as he drove himself into her again. He sucked at her tit, bit her nipple. If anyone saw, they might think he was raping her. But she responded, gripping his hair, wrapping her legs hard around him. She was a fucking messed up woman. She loved the pain, and he loved to give it. He bit down on the flesh of her breast, leaving a very nasty mark. She cried out, writhing beneath him, demanding more. Okay, then. He'd give her more.

He flipped her over again, and then opened her ass cheeks. She whimpered, she pushed herself toward him. He jammed his hand into her pussy, wiping her slick cum over her asshole, and then drove himself into her. She screamed, ragged and breathy, crying like it hurt like fucking hell, nearly collapsing into the truck bed. And he just rode and her rode her till he came in a long, hard and pulsing orgasm. He pulled out, half way through, pumping himself with his hand and squirting half of his ejaculation onto her back, the rest of it leaking out of her asshole. He caught his breath, then pushed himself off her, hopping off the back of the truck and pulling his pants up, belting it in place. "Name." He said then, his voice deep and husky. She was crying, curling in on herself, but reaching for him. She wanted more. Fucking whore. He just stepped away from her hand. He was done. She whimpered, then let out a shuddering breath, sitting up slow, not bothering to cover herself up.

"Marcus Wedge." She said, staring at him, the tears slowly stopping. She licked her lips a little, reaching down between her legs, rubbing herself. He shook his head at her and just stayed there, watching as she got herself off. He had to admit, she was an artist when it came to that. When she finally orgasmed, he grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her out of the truck bed. Then he kissed her, hard and rough, teeth grinding against teeth, his tongue assaulting her mouth. She pressed herself to him, grabbing his dick, rolling his balls through the material of his pants. He then pushed her away, wiping his mouth.

"See you later." He said plainly. Then got in his truck and drove away. He could see her shakily fixing her skirt, her top, in his rear view. Dusty had never claimed to be a good man. And that
woman made it easy not to be. She was a hell of a fuck, quelling certain urges he had to take what he wanted from unwilling women. And she always came through with good information. But that was all she was good for. He had no problem hurting her physically and leaving. He'd be back to do it again before he left Georgia. But for now, he had to find Marcus Wedge, and put him in the ground...
"I was gonna wait. Had a whole thing planned."

Sam was sitting on the floor of the living room, hugging her knees to her chest, staring at the same spot on the coffee table she'd been staring at for about an hour. She'd gotten tired of pacing, of going back and forth to the door, of looking at her phone. She'd been too afraid to text Daryl, too afraid to call. Rick said to wait. So... she waited. And waited. And worried herself sick. Literally. She'd thrown up at one point, not quite making it to the toilet. Which meant she was cleaning up her own puke for a good few minutes. She could feel herself getting tired, the silence in the cabin making her ears ring. Normally, she would have put on music to calm herself, to get her mind off things. But she was so stuck in her own head, she hadn't even gone near her stereo.

It was exactly 9:41 when she heard an engine and saw headlights. She froze in place. Part of her wanted to jump up and run to the door, fling it open and see who it was. But the rest of her suddenly felt scared and far more nervous than she wanted. A moment later, the lights disappeared. Then she heard boots on the porch. And she listened as a key went into the handle, and the door opened, revealing Daryl.

All the air went out of her at once, she let her hands fall from her legs, her body relaxing back completely against the chair she'd been sitting against. And she felt her face crumple, tears escaping her eyes before she could stop them. But she didn't get up, she didn't say anything. She just watched Daryl close the door, hang his keys up on the hook, and turn to look at her. For a moment, he just stared at her. She couldn't read his expression. Then he walked toward her. He wasn't wearing his deputy shirt. And he unclipped his holster from his belt, setting the gun down on the coffee table when he got close enough.

Then wordlessly, he sat in front of her, one leg stretched out. "It's over." He said softly. "Abbott took care of everythin. Yer safe. We all are." He said, and he sounded exhausted, emotionally drained. He was watching her, his bluer than blue eyes blinking lightly. "I'm sorry Sam." He said, and she reached up and wiped her face, silent. She wasn't sure what to say, at least not yet. "I shouldn't've yelled at you like that." He clenched his jaw, his gaze going to the floor. "I scared you, I know I did." He cleared his throat a little, scratching his leg softly. "I told you before, my temper... it's awful." He looked at her then. "I never wanted you to see it." She could see the shame in his eyes, deep and unrelenting. "Ain't gonna ask you to forgive me. No reason why you should." His voice cracked a little, and he sighed, shaking his head. "I'm... gonna sleep on the couch tonight. Give you space." He muttered then, and stood up, putting distance in between them.

She should've said something, but she just watched him grab his holster and head toward the bedroom. Sam had known how hard Daryl was on himself. And she knew the anger she'd seen earlier was nothing compared to what it could be like. Rick had told her stories. He'd kept himself in check for her, and that had to have been hard considering how awful his anger could get. But seeing that shame in his eyes, the exhaustion on his face... did he really think so little of himself? Did he really believe he wasn't worth forgiving? Besides, hadn't she been the one to start this whole mess?

She got up then, wiping her face some more, and walked softly toward the bedroom. What she saw was Daryl sitting on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. And she could see a fine tremble in his shoulders. He swallowed and went to him, touching each of his shoulders. He let his hands fall, looking up at her. God, there was just so much pain in his eyes. Pain she'd caused. She knelt before him, holding his sides, staring up at him from in between his legs. "I'm so sorry." She whispered. "This was all my fault." She felt more tears roll silently down her cheeks. "You didn't do anything wrong, Daryl. I did this. All of this." He furrowed his brows, reaching up and wiping one of her tears with his thumb.
"The hell you did." He said firmly. "Liam started all this, not you. I never shoulda yelled at you. I was jus..." he shook his head then, letting his hand fall. "No excuse. There was no excuse for doin that to you." She shook her head then, swallowing down a sob.

"God, everything is so messed up." She put her head into his chest, just kneeling there, tears falling down. "You don't deserve this. Everything that's happened to you since you met me, it's all my fault." She slipped away from him then, stepping back, her hands going to her face a moment, then she let them fall. He was staring at her like he didn't believe a single word coming out of her mouth, and damn if she didn't fall in love with him all over again because of it. She was about to tell him she should just leave, that he'd be better off without her and her messed up past. But he stood up, and grabbed her upper arms gently, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"I love you, Sam. You hear me?" He said, his eyes impossibly blue. "You wanna know what's happened to me since I met you?" He let go of her with one hand, reaching into his pocket and pulling something out. "You've made my life worth livin. You've made me better. You've given me everythin." His voice began to shake a little, and she felt confused. Emotional, drowning in his words, but confused. How could he feel all that? Being with her had nearly gotten him killed. "I was ready to be alone for the rest of my life, to just spend my time runnin from nightmares and ghosts. But you... you saved me by lovin me." He said then, and she watched as he let go of her other arm and got down on one knee.

And then... oh... oh, oh, oh. She saw what he'd pulled out of his pocket. He opened the little black box, revealing the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen in her life. And she let out a sob, her hands going back to her face in disbelief. "I was gonna wait. Had a whole thing planned." He said, wiping at a tear on his own face. "But after everythin, I can't lose you. I know we haven't been together long, but dammit Sam..." his voice shook, and he stared up at her. "I can't live this life without you anymore. I can't promise it'll be perfect, or that I'll ever be the guy you really deserve. But I'll never stop tryin." He swallowed, and let out a shaken breath, pulling the ring out of the box and setting the box down. "Marry me, Sam." He whispered. "Please, marry me."

She sobbed again. Her heart was exploding. Her head was reeling. Was this really happening? Was she dreaming? She could see his eyes pleading at her. And she swallowed, biting at her lower lip. He wanted to marry her? This incredible, good, courageous, strong and perfect man wanted to marry her. She'd be an idiot to say no. She let out a half tear filled laugh, letting her hands fall, holding her left one out to him, her fingers shaking. He looked like he was in awe, like he hadn't actually believed she'd want to marry him. He slipped the ring onto her finger, and then she just went down to her knees and threw her arms around him, crying happily. He held onto her, and she could feel the shaking in his body. "So, is this a yes?" He asked quietly, and she laughed, pulling apart enough to see his face.

"Yes. It's a yes." She said, smiling. She watched his face light up, and he kissed her with such joy and passion that she could have burst with the intensity of it. After all the hell they'd been through, and all the bad luck, it amazed her that here they were, still together. They were still fighting for each other, holding on for dear life. They were both broken, still picking up the pieces. But they were doing it together, with each other, for each other. She knew they hadn't been together long. And some people would see this as moving way too fast. But marrying Daryl Dixon? That couldn't come soon enough for her. It was almost strange. She hadn't even considered it. They'd never even talked about it. But it felt so right.

And that night, they made love like it was the first time. She lost herself in him over and over again, until they were both tangled in each other, exhausted both mentally and physically, but emotionally calmed and peaceful. She fell asleep with his arms and body around her, looking at her ring, watching how it sparkled softly in the moonlight that filtered in through their bedroom window. And
she knew, this was her happily ever after. This man, this life. And no matter what hell came their way, they'd survive it just like they'd survived everything else.
Daryl loved Autumn.

It was one of the only times of year where, even though the world was technically dying in preparation for winter, Daryl felt the most alive. The crispness in the air, the smell of wet earth and a perpetually gray sky all offered a dense chill he equated with the river, with peace. Vagrant seemed to like it as much as he did. They could ride for hours, through fields and woods, and never get bored with it.

He'd taken Vagrant out for a particularly long ride today. He needed to be away from people for awhile, away from the town and work. He just... needed to be. The intensity of the loss he was feeling couldn't seem to be quelled. No matter how Sam tried to comfort him, no matter how much he tried to comfort everyone else. It was just there, deep and settled and refusing to budge.

Mama D had been one of the first people in town to just accept Daryl for who and what he was. She was a veritable force to be reckoned with, dealing him no bullshit and refusing to let him shy away from her mothering attitude. To think a woman like her, so strong and sure and full of life, had been harboring such a terrible illness right under all their noses was heartbreaking. He kept telling himself he should have seen the signs. But she'd kept it from everyone.

And then one day, she was just gone.

The cancer she'd been secretly fighting for over a decade finally took its toll. And Mama D passed away, in her sleep, alone in her apartment. It was Maggie who'd found her. Daryl had been the only one at the office, that early in the morning. And he could still feel how hard Maggie cried against him when she ran to report it, how much her grief just spilled out over into everyone in ear shot.

Mama D had no family to contact. She'd never married, never had kids. And she'd always said she was good with it, because Athens was her family and they all were her kids. Daryl hadn't really understood the concept at first. But he knew how true it was now.

The whole town was in mourning. Her apartment was still untouched and would probably be that way for a long time till they figured out what her wishes would have been. The flower shop hadn't opened its doors since she passed. And the roof garden had more visitors in the last four days than it ever had before. No one quite knew what to do with themselves. The town had lost a piece of history, a family member, a friend. And Daryl had lost pretty much the only mother figure he'd had.

It was strange to say, really, considering how late in his life she'd come along. Daryl remembered his birth mother. He remembered how she used to chain smoke and drink herself into oblivion just so she didn't have to deal with his father. He remembered her burning the house down, and herself along with it. He'd loved her, like any kid loved their mother. But he didn't miss her. There was just nothing to miss. Mama D, however? He missed her like she'd been gone a hundred years.

He couldn't fathom not seeing her every day, even in passing. He couldn't picture a world without
her brilliant smile or amazing cooking. He couldn't understand how something so awful could happen to someone so decent. And instead of dealing with that confusion and grief like everyone else, Daryl chose to be the rock for many. And pretend he wasn't hurting.

Hence the ride, alone, out in the hillsides where the grass stretched on for miles and no one would bother him. He could almost hear Mama D chastising him. *Deputy Daryl, you get your sweet ass back to that town and let them help you heal!* Thinking about that made him crack a small smile, slowing Vagrant down to a stop just near a cattle fence, peering out over at a herd in the distance.

Truth was, he'd never been talented at healing. Shit, he could heal up physically pretty damn well. But emotionally, mentally? That was a whole other spit can. He had to admit, though, being with Sam seemed to make it easier. She didn't push him, didn't tell him how to grieve, didn't demand he open up and let it all out. She was there for him, and that's really all he needed. It was good to know she was willing. And he was there for her, too.

He could still remember Mama's reaction when she found out about their engagement. She just about sang a song and tore down the heavens with her laughter and joy. Word had spread pretty quickly that Daryl had popped the question and Sam had said yes. And to his surprise, no one questioned it. No one said they were moving too fast or that it was a bad idea. They all just accepted it for what it was and more than a few were ridiculously happy for them. It felt like coming home all over again. And Sam was walking around with a smile on her face that never seemed to waver. He'd often catch her looking at the ring, admiring it, her eyes sparkling more than the diamonds.

He'd asked her why she loved the ring so much. After all, in comparison to the ring she'd gotten from Liam, it was pretty meager. He didn't have thousands of dollars to spend. Deputy pay wasn't the greatest. But she'd just smiled at him and said it was perfect because it had come from Daryl. She said she would have been happy with a five cent ring from a gumball machine. It just made him love her more. Hell, he loved her more all the time.

It had been three weeks since Sam had said yes. And until Mama's death, he'd been on cloud nine himself. Life couldn't be better. The shit with Liam was far behind them. And though he still had a bit of a problem keeping the secret of a murder between them, there was simply nothing anyone could do about it. It was better to just move on, and live, than stay stuck in that mess.

Work had been pretty steady. The usual stuff kept him busy. There'd been a few robberies that he and Rick and the other deputies had just wrapped up. He had to testify in court in a few more weeks. But in the grand scheme of things, it was like life in Cooke County had become as slow as the cold. And for a change, he didn't mind. Not one bit. He was content. And that was saying something. He wondered if that was why he couldn't quite get himself to feel the enormity of his grief.

How do you say goodbye to such an incredible energy like Mama D? The simple answer he'd come up with was... you just didn't. She was too much a part of all of them to say goodbye to.

There was going to be a celebration of life for Mama D. She didn't want a sappy, boring and tear ridden funeral. She wanted music, laughter, love. And the plans had been set in motion to make it happen. In two days, everyone -literally- would be taking up the space at Doc Greene's farm. And there was going to be one hell of a memorial party for one hell of an unforgettable woman. For someone who didn't like crowds or parties, Daryl was actually looking forward to it. Mostly because he needed that joviality as much as everyone else.

He edged Vagrant forward, the horse having taken to munching some dry sweet grass near the edge of the fence. He protested at first, but moved on, stepping closer to a well worn riding path. Daryl set him out into a pretty decent trot. If there was one thing Vagrant loved to do, it was run. He could probably compete if Daryl let him. But he was a country horse. And Daryl was not a show man. The
two were such an unlikely pair. But he adored the pain in the ass equine, and the horse adored him.

About two minutes up the path, however, Vagrant suddenly reared, whinnying in fear, bucking back, a shit ton of crows suddenly flying up out of the long grass in fright. It took everything Daryl had to hold on, startled and swearing. But Vagrant was so spooked, he just kept at it. Eventually, Daryl fell right off, hitting the ground hard while Vagrant ran off into the field beside the path, speeding away for dear life. For a moment, Daryl just lay there, holding his chest lightly, attempting just to breathe. "Stupid horse..." he muttered, then sat up, rubbing his sternal. He may have healed from the explosion, but he could still irritate the shit out of his old wound if he wasn't careful.

He looked to see Vagrant had stopped near the tree line, so far off that Daryl was going to give that bastard a talking to when he finally caught up. But first, he needed to get off the ground.

As he got to his feet, a breeze blew the stench into his face.

It was a very familiar, very disgusting smell that Daryl instantly covered his nose from. Even in the chill, it was strong. He stepped forward slowly, in the direction that he and Vagrant had originally been going. A few feet off, he saw a leg... or what was left of a leg. It was sticking out of the tall grass. Shit.

He moved closer, crouching down and pulling the grass blades aside near the edge of the path. And he grit his teeth, using one sleeve of his long sleeved shirt to cover his mouth and nose. What he saw was the partially eaten corpse of what appeared to be a teenage boy. "Fuck." He stood up quickly, stepping back, turning around to get the view out of his sight. The body was well past the beginning of decay. Maybe a week or so. And it looked like quite a few critters had gotten to it in that time. The face and hands had been ravaged, most likely by coyotes and crows. The rest of the body had only recently been picked at.

Daryl turned back around, steeling himself and crouching again, spreading the grass as far back as he could to get a better view. Not that he would really be able to tell with the body in the state it was, but he didn't recognize this kid. Didn't recognize the clothes. They looked like private school attire, and pinned beneath the kid's back was a black backpack, the straps digging into the shoulders. The skull looked caved in, just to the front above the right eyebrow. Whatever had happened to the boy, it wasn't good. A blow like that to the head? That would kill anyone.

"What happened to you, kid?" He asked, letting out a sigh, trying to ignore the smell. Kids were hard. Death was something he was used to, and something he had no problems dealing with. But even losing Mama D was preferable to this. When kids were hurt or killed, it was just something he couldn't get past. He never would. And never wanted to. The day a kid died and it didn't bother him would be the day he'd go straight to hell.

He stood then, fishing his cell phone out of his pocket. No bars. Great. He couldn't just leave the body. But he needed to call this in, get the crew down here. It wasn't every day this happened in Cooke County. But it looked like the Sheriff's Department had a murder on their hands...
"I have so many ideas.

"Wait, what now?" Carol asked Samantha, setting the last set of plates she'd washed on the rack on the large shelf where the diner kept all its dishes. Sam was sitting on one of the metal counters swinging her legs back and forth, munching on an apple.

"Seriously. He said, and I quote, 'It's all you.'" She said, chewing thoughtfully. "He really doesn't care how we get married or where. He wants me to do whatever I want with the plans. Which could be slightly dangerous." She grinned a little, turning the apple over to find another good spot to bite. "I have so many ideas." She wiggled her brows, then bit down. Carol wiped her hands on the towel hanging from her apron, turning with a smile of her own before crossing her arms and relaxing against the sink.

"What's your budget like?" Carol asked, watching Samantha thoughtfully. Sam kept swinging her legs.

"Well, I've still got a few thousand left over from the studio renovations, and Daryl has some savings of his own. But we're going to be waiting about a year, anyway. So we'll have time to save up for whatever we need." She inspected the apple a moment and then met Carol's gaze. "Honestly, I don't want a big fancy church wedding. I want something country and light hearted, and filled with all our family and friends. Like a big party, with a crap ton of flowers and pastel colors." She grinned and Carol laughed lightly.

"Can you picture Daryl wearing pastel?" The older woman asked. Both women paused, and then burst out laughing.

"I don't think I could do that to him, dear lord what a mess that would be!" Sam said, hopping off the counter and throwing the apple core in the trash. Then she grabbed her bag off the counter. It was a bright pink messenger bag, covered in black star bursts. She adored it. She pulled out a magazine she'd found at a gas station and flipped to a page near the middle. "I was actually thinking about this." She said, showing Carol a photo of a male model in a navy blue, tuxedo suit, with a silky black shawl lapel, a three button matching vest, a white shirt beneath, and a black silky tie. It was form fitting, though the pants were just loose enough to be comfortable. In Sam's mind, it had 'Daryl' written all over it. Just manly enough to pass. A small smile spread on Carol's lips.

"Ya know, I've never actually seen Daryl in a full suit. He wears his nice vests and shirts sometimes, but always with jeans. I think he'd look damn good in that, though." She said, tapping the page softly. "But what about you? Any dress ideas yet?" Sam shrugged a little.

"I'm not sure, actually. Everything I've seen so far is just way too fancy and frilly for me. I mean, I like fancy and frilly. But not on wedding dresses. I just... I want something sleek and lovely." She flipped through the magazine pages idly. Carol was watching, like she was thinking about something.

"I have an idea." She said, touching Sam's arm lightly, smiling and taking her apron off. She went to her jacket, hanging on a hook by the back door of the kitchen. And she pulled out her phone, walking toward her and thumbing through something. "When Maggie and Glenn got engaged, she had me help her with the big dress hunt. Poor girl didn't make up her mind till almost two week before the big day." She smirked a little. "I remember seeing this one dress... ah, here it is. See?" She turned the phone around, showing her in image she pulled up on the internet. And oh, it was amazing.
It was an A line dress with a fitted bodice, a simple light pastel pink ribbon around the waist. The dress itself was white, and the whole thing was made out of silk. The skirts were simple and softly layered, flowing down in unbroken straight lines without making it look like a princess dress. The bodice was the same material, but fit to be snug in all the right places without being overtly sexy. The back buttoned up with soft round buttons up to just below the shoulderblades, and soft four inch straps for the shoulders made up the rest. Light enough for Georgia weather, and so delicate that the model's body was completely flattered. There was nothing flashy about it, and yet... it was just brilliantly beautiful.

"Oh, Carol, you're a genius!" Sam exclaimed gleefully. "It's perfect! And it even has pink!" Sam couldn't quite help the excitement in her voice, practically jumping up and down.

"I'll write down the web address for you, so you can look it up later. Maybe they have one at that bridal shop in the quarter, and even if they don't, I'm sure they can order it." She reached for the phone, Sam letting it go reluctantly. She just didn't want to stop looking at the dress. She followed Carol back out to the front of the diner, grabbing an empty mug and pouring herself some coffee. Besides a pair of strangers passing through town, there was no one else inside but Bob Stookey, who was very busily humming away while he whipped up a batch of corn bread.

She couldn't help the slight frown that came over her face after a moment. The town seemed to be at a standstill since Mama D passed. Like people couldn't quite catch up with the reality that she was gone, or maybe they just didn't want to. She couldn't blame them. She wasn't quite willing to believe it, either. Ever since Daryl had introduced her to Mama D, Sam had seen her almost every day that she was in town. She'd walk past the flower shop all the time. And Mama always had a smile and a good conversation.

"What's that look for?" Carol asked, seeing Sam with the coffee poised halfway to her mouth. Sam had to blink, then shrug a little.

"I guess I feel bad that I'm so happy when Mama D is... well, she's gone, and here I am relentlessly happy. I feel awful, and I miss her." She said, staring down at the coffee. "And yet I'm still moving around like she didn't just die." Carol came up to her, touching Sam's shoulder softly.

"Honestly, I think that's what Mama would want. She was so thrilled for you and Daryl. She wouldn't want this to change that. In fact she'd probably bonk you upside the head for even thinking it." Carol smiled warmly. "It's okay to be happy about being engaged to the love of your life. After everything you've been through, everything you've done to get here? You deserve it, Sammy. You both do. Mama knows that."

Sam smiled softly, "I wish... I wish she could be here to see it. Is that selfish?" She asked, her voice cracking a little. Carol squeezed her shoulder, then let her hand slip off.

"Not even a little. We all wish she was here. All of us for different reasons. And none of us are wrong." Carol moved around the counter to go check on the couple in the booth near the door. Sam just watched her, sipping her coffee to keep from choking up.

Daryl wasn't handling the loss of Mama D very well. It was different than with Merle. The way he'd found out had put him instantly into the role of caretaker. Poor Maggie, Sam could only imagine how hard that had to have been. Daryl had to treat Mama's death like part of his job right from the start. And then after, it was like he refused to let himself feel it out loud. He was quiet, dark. And he spent his time doing everything he could to help other people deal. She didn't push him. She listened, she held him, she gave him all of her that she could. But he wouldn't let it out. He just rode it in waves, and seemed to keep himself completely apart.
When he'd told her early this morning that he was taking Vagrant out for a ride, and that he didn't know when he'd be back, something simply told her that it would help. He needed to be alone. And she could give him that. She'd give him anything just to heal his hurting heart.

After eating a sandwich, finishing her coffee, she started to head back to the studio but decided to drop in on Rick instead. Her brother had really gone above and beyond for her. And even though none of them dared talk about what happened with Liam any further, she was eternally grateful. Rick could have lost everything if things had worked out differently. Hell, they all could have lost everything. All because of her.

Yes, she knew no one blamed her. But still, she couldn't help but blame herself. Liam had nearly torn their lives apart. All because he couldn't let her go. He was dead, she knew it, seen it. But sometimes, she still had nightmares about Liam. Hurting her, destroying her brother's life, killing Daryl. She'd always wake up in Daryl's strong, safe arms, and knew it was all behind them.

When she was about to go into the Sheriff's office to say hi, Rick and two of his deputies nearly ran her over coming out of the door. Rick had to grab her to steady her. "Woah, you okay?" He asked hurriedly, the deputies stepping past him and getting into their Jeep.

"Yeah." She said sheepishly, stepping back. "What's the rush?" She asked, hooking her thumb into the strap of her bag.

"Have to meet up with Daryl in Oaken Field." He said, giving her a look she couldn't quite identify, but didn't like. She felt a sudden fear practically engulf her unchecked. But Rick stepped close to her. "He's fine. It's work related." He touched her shoulder lightly and then stepped away from her, quickly getting into his truck. The truck and jeep sped out of their spaces and headed down the rode, sirens blaring, leaving her standing there silent and stunned.

Sometimes, she forgot how dangerous a job Rick and Daryl had. They didn't really have a lot of terrible things happen in Cooke County, and with the Spinners epidemic dying out, their days were pretty calm and predictable. Rick said Daryl was fine. So she just swallowed the fear down and breathed, reminding herself that it was all no big deal, just work. But... Daryl had the day off... he was riding Vagrant. What had he come up on in the middle of nowhere?

It didn't matter. She knew Rick and Daryl couldn't say a damn thing to her involving ongoing cases. So she just took a deep breath and let it out slowly, moving back down the sidewalk toward the studio. That was when she saw Dusty Hendee walking up the same sidewalk toward her. For a moment, she paused, then raised her brows and gave a friendly smile when she saw her. "Miss Grimes!" He said, stopping just before her and extending a friendly hand. "It's good to see you again!" She shook his hand with a nod.

"Dusty, right?" She said, letting her hand fall. He looked pleasantly surprised.

"You remember me? Wasn't sure you would. We only met really briefly." He said, slipping his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"I remember everything from that day." She said, looking down slightly and shrugging.

"I don't doubt that." He said warmly. "I hear Daryl made a full recovery. I was hoping to see him but I just saw the Sheriff's vehicles drive off. Guessing he's busy." He glanced at the road. "Hopefully I'll be able to catch him before I leave again."

"How long are you in town for?" She asked, tilting her head a little. She wasn't sure what to think of the man. He had a very personable air to him, an easy going manner that seemed natural. And yet
there was just something about him that she couldn't put her finger on, as though she knew he was wearing a mask but she couldn't see the seams. She was confused by him, the strange vibe she felt flowing off him in waves.

"Hopefully not too long." He said, then smiled a little. "Not that this place isn't great. And I'll never pass up a chance to see Daryl for a beer. But I've got contracts all over that need my attention. It's a busy time of year." He said, and watching as she shoved some stray strands of hair out of her face. Then a pleasant look of surprise spread across his features and he motioned to her hand. "Well I'll be damned. You and Daryl are engaged?" He chuckled. "Shit, congratulations!" He seemed genuinely happy about that, and she beamed brightly, nodding, touching her ring.

"Yeah, it's been a few weeks now." She said, blushing softly. Dusty nodded, then motioned to her.

"Well, don't let me hold you up. I'm really happy for you, honest. When you see Daryl, can you tell him I said hey, and that I'll try to catch up later?" He asked, and she nodded.

"Sure. It was good to see you." She smiled and watched him touch the rim of his ball cap in a mock tilt, then he stepped past her and walked away. Sam stood there, watching him quietly. Then she let out a breath and headed back toward the studio. It wasn't till she got back inside, hung up her bag and went to her stereo that she froze. It suddenly dawned on her what that strange vibe had been. Had she been so stuck in her own bliss that she had forgotten what it felt like?

She turned quickly, looking out the wide windows of the store front, out at the vehicles parked on the side of the road, watching the black Ford truck drive past with Dusty behind the wheel. And she saw his eyes. That look of cruelty, the look of controlled anger she knew all too well. It was like watching a version of Liam come in and out of view. That was what she'd felt. That was what the mask had been hiding: Evil wearing the skin of a man.

She felt a terrible shiver go up and down her spine. She wanted nothing more than to run and find Daryl and tell him that she knew Dusty was not who Daryl thought he was. She didn't know how she knew, she just... knew.

Question was... would Daryl believe her?
Marcus Wedge had just turned fifteen. Not exactly a milestone, and not exactly all that much to celebrate. It wasn't like his parents were around to celebrate, either. Having their kid away in private school made it easy for them to forget, or -if he was lucky- send a birthday card with a couple hundred dollars in it. What better way to show they love their offspring than to shove money down his throat, right?

Not that he wanted or needed their money. He was perfectly capable of making his own. He was a smart kid, smartest in his class, actually. Being surrounded by other rich kids made it easy to bank when it came to doing other people's homework. He also had direct access to all test answers, thanks to Dean Hardwick's stolen access code. Any given month, Marcus was making about five grand. Pennies compared to what his parents graced him with.

He wasn't a bad kid, really. Just rebellious in the less harmful ways, or so he tried to convince himself. Where a lot of the kids he knew were getting drunk or high, skipping classes or having loads of sex, he was just in it for the quick buck. Which was why he'd agreed to meet Harley Powers in the parking lot of that dive bar off the local. Harley was eighteen, but dumb as a post. Marcus had been taking all AP classes, and Harley was barely getting by in regular classes. He paid Marcus out the ass to keep him from failing. This time, it was the answers to the calculus test. Two hundred bucks.

Money changed hands, and so did the answers. And Harley was off to finish screwing Darla McKinney, his on and off again girlfriend. Marcus recounted his money, slipped the cash back into his bag, and was about to hop on his bike when he heard two men in the parking lot. He'd been hidden behind the dumpster where the dishboys liked to smoke their weed. Normally, he wouldn't have cared about some random dudes. But then he saw the wad of cash the one handed guy was waving around. Money always caught his interest. He pulled out his video camera. It was a bit of a hobby, people watching. He enjoyed catching off guard moments on film, capturing embarrassment and possibly things to use against people. A little bit of video of the right person in the right circumstances could make a lot of money. He hit record. He couldn't really hear what was being said and was pretty sure the camera wouldn't pick up the sound, but he zoomed in and just watched.

Money wasn't what he got for watching, however.

Through the little screen of the camera, he saw the cleaner cut man with the black Ford kill the one handed man with a knife he'd pretty much produced out of nowhere. It was so quick and so brutal, it completely caught Marcus off guard. And all he could do was think, 'Oh, shit...' He'd reached for his phone almost instantly to call 911. He'd dialed the nine and then the one and stopped when he realized if he called the cops, he'd have to explain what he'd been doing there. He slowly put the phone away, watching the clean cut guy get in his truck. And then he realized something else. He knew that guy.

The Dowa Ledon School prided itself on the above par excellence of its students and faculties. Or that's what it told the outside world. It was really just a place of big grades, rebellious kids with rich parents, and teachers who enjoyed being assholes every chance they got. Drugs, alcohol, sex? That all happened, probably far more there than it did in public schools. And it was drugs that this guy was involved in.

Marcus had never done drugs. Never would. He had plans for his future, and none of them involved getting his body screwed up. But he'd seen the Athletic Director, Jack Pennington, buying some from this guy under the bleachers near the girl's soccer field. In fact, he'd heard the whole conversation. That if Pennington sold some at the school, this guy Hendee would give him a direct discount on all
product.

Hendee.

He had to remember that name.

Slowly, he walked his bike out into the parking lot, up to the body of the one handed man, camera still in hand, staring down at him. There was money just laying there. Maybe a couple hundred dollars. But Marcus wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to take it, and possibly leave evidence behind. No, he had other ideas. He needed to talk to Bella Farmington. She would know the ins and outs of how to get a hold of someone for drugs. He'd do his research and find this guy and then... extort him. No more hundreds of dollars for test scores. Not this time, anyway. He wanted thousands. And he'd get thousands, or this guy Hendee would go to jail for a very long time. After all, Marcus had it all on film. Dialogue or not, it would be very easy to prosecute Hendee with what he'd just caught on film.

Marcus Wedge rode back to school in the dark moments later, smiling to himself. He didn't even care what it said about him that he didn't think twice about the dead guy in the parking lot. He had his plan now, and that was all that mattered to him. Now he just had to set it into motion, and get what was coming to him...

* * *

Dusty made sure the kid got what was coming to him.

He had to admit, Marcus Wedge was smart for a teenager. Well, smart enough to track him down. Stupid for trying to extort him. That being said, he was also surprisingly tough. He beat the shit out of this kid, even cut off a few of his fingers. He simply spent the whole time crying and swearing, saying Hendee would pay for this. Eventually Marcus gave up the camera, and the digital card that went with it. But when Hendee picked up a hammer, the kid started laughing.

"I made a copy." He said, blood spilling out of his mouth. Then he started spasming. His whole body just started seizing. And Hendee got so enraged, he just brought the hammer down on the kid's head about four times before he realized... he'd just killed the kid before he had a chance to get the copy.

Fuck.

Dusty decided not to completely get rid of the body. Normally, he'd have burnt it to a crisp, erase all evidence and make it seem like just another missing person. But if there was an investigation... if he could weed his way into the process... maybe they'd lead him to who had the copy, or where it was hidden at least. Cleaning up the mess he'd made with Merle was turning into an even bigger disaster. But he'd promised the Old Man, he'd clean it up. And that was exactly what he'd do. Even if it meant starting a man hunt to do it.

He left the body in a field in the middle of nowhere. It would be a few days at least before anyone found it, and that would give Hendee time to do some digging of his own. Once the powers that be found the kid, then he'd contact Daryl. He didn't really like the idea of using Daryl. But it was Cooke County, and Daryl was a deputy. He was also the Sheriff's right hand man. If anyone would be investigating the murder of a kid in this hillbilly hole, it would be him.

So while he waited for the inevitable investigation, Dusty went back to the school. He poked around. He talked to that drug addled gym teacher, but the bastard didn't know much about Wedge. Only that he was a smart kid who everyone knew and no one bothered. The kid was far too much of a geeky, lanky thing not to get picked on. And yet, it appeared no one so much as touched him. Which meant
he was either being protected somehow, or found a way to protect himself.

Dusty couldn't exactly go around asking students. So he threatened the gym teacher to do it for him. Now it was just a waiting game to find out who Wedge's friends were, who he was closest to and who he may have given the copy to.

Dusty hated waiting.

Maybe he'd go find himself a hooker to fuck, to get the edge off. Or maybe he'd go back into Athens, see Daryl's fiancee. That news had been a bit of a surprise. He remembered how Daryl had talked about Samantha Grimes. Honestly, Dusty was stupidly happy for him. And fuck if Samantha wasn't a gorgeous woman. To think anyone could weed their way into that grizzled heart of Daryl Dixon's was a miracle, which probably made this woman a fucking angel.

Normally, Dusty had no need to get to know women beyond how their bodies felt beneath his hands and around his dick. But if she was good to Daryl, then he could be good to her. He could be friendly. And honestly, he'd like to know more about who Daryl was now. Especially if he was going to be doing his damndest to use Daryl for information. Might as well get what he could from the girl first. She seemed friendly enough, peppy and bright, if a little shy at times.

In the morning, he'd head back to that bright pink studio of hers, strike up a conversation, see where it led him. But for now, he had energy to get rid of. He decided to head back to the quarter, and stir himself up some sex. He had money for the willing. And hopefully, his tastes would be satisfied...
"I'll tell ya everythin I can."

Marcus Wedge had been officially missing for nearly a week, but not with the Sheriff's Department. The school had notified the parents first, talking to the father. The father's reaction? To just shrug it off, saying their son was 'probably running wild and would crawl back when he was thoroughly satisfied.' That had been his exact words. Seriously, what the fuck. Daryl couldn't have been more confused or angry if he'd tried. Who the hell just brushes off their kid like that? Yeah, his own parents hadn't been that great. But they had been on the opposite end of the spectrum. Marcus' parents had money out the ass, Daryl's parents had been poor as shit. Just proof that bad parenting was an all inclusive club.

Notifying them had been interesting as well. Rick had spent an hour on the phone with the Wedge's lawyer explaining that they needed to come down to the station because the information they needed to receive wasn't something that could be done over the phone. Then, when they'd arrived, they spent twenty minutes just complaining about the fact they'd had to drive three hours to get there. After Rick and Daryl had finally managed to tell them that their son had been murdered, there was an almost strange blankness to them both.

Then the mother cried. The father sat there. And they both blamed each other for the next half hour. They ended up screaming at each other, and had to be separated. Their high priced, expensive suit wearing lawyer just sat there typing things into his blackberry.

Now Daryl was trapped in one of the small interrogation rooms with Salia Wedge, watching her go through her fiftieth tissue. She hadn't said a word since he'd brought her in there. Daryl was almost glad. He wasn't good with grieving mothers. Never had been. Wasn't sure he ever would be.

"I want to see him." She finally said, lifting her countryside green eyes to his face. She was pretty, in an unrealistic way. Everything was perfectly manicured, every hair in place, makeup ridiculously on point like she'd just stepped out of a magazine. She was pushing thirty, but still managed to look like she was in her early twenties. Her clothes were all expensive name brand. Her purse was one of those Gucci things that Daryl never understood the appeal of. Even the diamonds hanging from her ears probably cost more than everything Daryl owned. But when he looked at her eyes, he didn't see a rich woman. He saw... exhaustion, a woman much older than her years.

He saw a woman who had been living a life she may not have intended to live, following rules and guidelines of a rich society most likely to please her much older husband. And in so doing lost her son long before he'd died.

"Ma'am, that's not... I don't think that's a very good idea." Daryl said, folding his hands on the metal and gray table between them. "You don't want to remember him the way I found him. Trust me on that." She furrowed her brows at him, meeting his gaze with a steady strength he hadn't quite thought she'd be capable of.

"I wasn't there for him. My husband..." She said that with disdain, like the word 'husband' was caustic. "He wanted Marcus to go to that school. He wanted him to have the benefits of growing up before his time. And now he's dead." She closed the clasp of her purse. Apparently, she was done with the tissues, done with crying. "Marcus never wanted to go. But I didn't listen. And I let Paul send him to that place."

Paul Wedge, fifty three years old, owned three quarters of Symbol Oil, one of the largest fossil fuel companies in the United States. He was richer than anyone Daryl had ever come across. And a real dick, to boot. He'd barely batted an eye when he first heard Marcus was dead.
"Whatever state he's in... whatever he looks like, I... I can handle it." She said, her voice softening. "I know people think I can't handle things, that I'm just a trophy wife. But I can. I can." She repeated, as though she were trying to convince herself as much as Daryl. He let out a slow and steady breath.

"Mrs. Wedge, I don't doubt that. But I don't think Marcus would want you to see him this way. He'd been out in that field for days. And... he'd been pretty beat up before that. I know you want to see him. I know you want closure. I can promise you, we'll do everythin we can to find whoever did this to him. But seein him? That's not goin to give you closure. That's jus goin to give you more pain." He watched her face crumple momentarily, her delicate hands squeezing her bag tightly for a moment before she let out a long breath and relaxed.

"Tell me, then. Tell me what he looks like, what was done to him. All of it." She demanded, then suddenly reached across and grabbed both of Daryl's clasped hands in both of her own. "I need to know, Deputy. He's my son."

Daryl found himself in a battle of wills at that point, locked on her gaze and stilled by her hands covering his own. He shouldn't tell her anything. He should just... let her grieve with an image of her perfect kid. But he slowly nodded. He knew how it was, to need answers and not have them. He still had no idea who'd killed Merle. He probably never would.

"He'd been dead for about a week." He began, her eyes never wavering. "Probably out in that field for the bulk of it. He'd been... picked at, pretty well, by coyotes, crows, vermin." He tried to keep his voice neutral, but inside he was hating himself a little. And hating the images this was conjuring in his head. "There was evidence that he'd been tortured, and that he was killed by several blows to the head by a blunt object." With each word he said, it was like her hands grew tighter and tighter around his. But her expression never changed. After a moment of silence, she let him go, relaxing back into her chair, still watching him.

"I know... that this is an ongoing investigation. And that normally you cannot reveal much. But please, tell me what you can." He voice was shaken, but she was holding strong. Daryl pulled his hands beneath the table, rubbing his thighs absently. He cleared his throat a little. They'd already ruled the parents out as suspects. Neither one had the motive, really. Or the opportunity. Yeah, there was a hefty life insurance policy on the kid. But the wife's life insurance policy was about two times more. And the husband had documents that proved he was grooming the boy to be a part of the family business. There was just no clear reason why either one would want Marcus Wedge dead. So telling them things wouldn't be a violation of the case.

"I'll tell ya everythin I can." He said, narrowing his gaze a little. "But I need you to answer some questions for me first." For a moment, she just stared at him, then nodded firmly.

"You have my complete cooperation, Deputy." She said, crossing one leg over the other and settling in her chair like she was ready to sit there for hours if need be. Daryl nodded. If notifying parents was bad, questioning grieving parents was just as bad. If not worse. But this was his job. This was what he'd signed up for. And he'd found that kid for a reason. Now, he just had to make sure that boy got the justice he deserved, and that this woman sitting before him got the closure that Daryl would never have.
"Camera... what camera?"

Salia Wedge didn't know who her son's friends were, why anyone would have wanted to kill him, or what her son was doing with nearly seven thousand dollars in cash made up of mostly small bills hidden in the folds of his backpack. Paul Wedge wanted to know if it was an act against his family. Apparently being rich made them a target. But Rick had tried to explain to the over privileged man that because Marcus had died the same day he was tortured, chances were it wasn't a typical kidnapping. After all, it wouldn't be in a kidnapper's best interests to kill what they were ransoming. Still, they had to look at every angle. Running all known associates and threats against the Wedge's was time consuming, and delegated to two of the deputies.

Talking to kids at the school didn't provide much insight until a few students finally admitted that they'd paid Marcus to do school work for them. After several dozen interviews, they'd figured out that Marcus had a pretty lucrative business on his hands. It explained the money in the backpack, but if they did their math correctly, he should have had nearly ten thousand more if he hadn't spent any, which it seemed he hadn't. Searching his room proved that he lived pretty modestly for a rich kid, and his roommate even said he'd rather eat the school gruel than go out and eat. He was saving his money for something. Problem was, there was no clue as to where he could have hidden the rest of his earnings.

Marcus Wedge himself was very smart, and very earnest in his willingness to go above and beyond the educational bar. He didn't date, didn't drink and there were no signs of any sort of drug abuse. He didn't even smoke weed. Whatever the kid's plans were, it all had to do with making as much money as possible.

"Who told you I paid him for answers?" Harley Powers demanded. The senior student looked agitated, nervous, and not at all happy about being cornered by Rick and Daryl in the school parking lot.

"Darla McKinney. Your girlfriend." Rick said, hands resting lazily on his hips. They'd gone through a wide list of students in four days. None had much to offer except that about a quarter of the students paid Marcus at one time or another for him to do projects, school work or give them test answers. Including Powers.

"Fuck." Harley swore, running a hand through his shaggy, short cropped hair. He was athletic, and seemed like the sort of kid who wouldn't mind pummeling anyone who pissed him off. "Look, Darla's got a big mouth. She talks a lot of shit. And... I know my rights, ya know. My Dad's a criminal lawyer. You can't talk to me without my parents and attorney present." He dropped his hand, suddenly seeming smug and crossing his arms over his chest. Rick let out a breath.

"Actually, you're eighteen. I don't need your parent's permission. And I doubt they'll pay for your lawyer when we explain to them that you've been cheating your way through the school they've paid out the ass for." Rick gave a slight smirk, "But if you cooperate, answer our questions, I won't say a damn thing." Of course, Powers didn't know the school was already taking action against all the students who had been cheating with Marcus' aid. After about a minute of clenching his jaw and pacing, he finally nodded, facing Daryl and Rick warily. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"When was the last time you saw Marcus Wedge?" Daryl asked, relaxing against an SUV directly behind him. Rick watched Powers' reaction. He shrugged a little.

"See him all the time. I mean, it's not exactly a big school. But the last time we had... business... with each other was like over four months ago, I guess. Was meeting Darla for a date, stopped at the 609
to get some test answers. Paid him, he gave me what I needed, and I left."

Both Daryl and Rick reacted to that. "Do you remember what day?" Daryl demanded almost instantly, pushing away from the vehicle. Powers made an annoyed face.

"I dunno, man. That was a long ass time ago." The teen said, furrowing his brows. "What the hell does it matter what day?"

"Because around that time," Rick said, touching Daryl's shoulder lightly, "There was a murder in the parking lot of the 609." Powers looked honestly surprised at that, both brows shooting up.

"Wait... you don't mean Marcus cause he just... hey, I don't know anything about any murder, okay? I was just there buying test answers and drinking beer with Darla. Marcus gave me what I wanted and I left him behind the dumpster. There was no one else, I swear it! Look," he stepped forward a little, "If anyone saw anything, it was Marcus. That kid was always hanging around, waving his camera in everyone's faces. The only reason he didn't get beat downs for being such a freak was because everyone needed his brain."

"Camera... what camera?" Rick demanded. He could feel the tension flowing off Daryl in waves.

"His video camera. A hand held thing. I don't know what kind, man. Just... it was a fucking camera." Powers was anxious. Apparently the idea of being anywhere near a murder had unnerved him. "What happened to him sucks, seriously. But I didn't have anything to do with what happened to him or with whatever happened at the bar, okay? So... can I go?" He looked warily from one man to the other. Rick just nodded and Powers couldn't take off quick enough. Powers had no reason to want Marcus dead. And if they needed more questions answered, they knew where to find him.

"There was no camera in his room or his bag." Daryl said as soon as Powers was out of earshot. "If what Powers says is true, Marcus could have seen who killed my brother, he might have filmed it. And maybe..."

"Maybe someone found out and killed him for it." Rick completed for Daryl. It was the first real theory they had as to why the kid had been tortured and murdered. It made more sense than a ransom kidnapping gone bad, that was for sure. And no one else had any motive or need to kill someone who was flying so far under the radar that the school had no idea what he'd been doing the whole time he'd been a student.

"We need to find that camera." Daryl said firmly. Rick nodded quietly. He was in violent agreement, but still... this was all just a theory. They didn't have any evidence to back any of this up. And without anyone else to confirm what Powers had said, they'd be running on more questions than answers. Questions like how did anyone figure out the kid was there in the first place? If he'd been seen that night, why wait so long to get rid of him? And why not dispose completely of the body? Why leave a trail to follow? And Why hadn't Marcus just turned the footage, if it was real, into the police? Why had he sat on such incriminating evidence?

"We need to tread carefully here, man." Rick said, meeting Daryl face to face. "We need to see if we can confirm what Powers said. We need to verify that Marcus really did use a camera all the time and find out if there's any way we can place him and Powers there that night. If we just run off half cocked on this, we're going to hit walls we won't get over."

They spent the rest of the afternoon re-talking to students, finding out Marcus really was an avid videographer. According to Marcus' roommate, he kept all his videos on a portable hard drive. But it was nowhere in his room, and the roommate said he recently never left without it. Like he was afraid people would try to look at what was on it. He'd never cared before. It wasn't till around the time
he'd met with Powers that Marcus started to become even more secretive than usual, according to the roommate and a few other students who spent the most time with him.

As the days passed and the investigation continued, they were able to confirm that Marcus Wedge had met Powers at the bar on the same day and around the time that Merle was murdered. With no sign of his camera, or his hard drive, it was becoming more and more of a solid idea that the kid probably saw something he shouldn't have. What they couldn't figure out was how anyone had discovered what Wedge had seen. And they were beginning to hit those walls that Rick had worried about. It didn't help that Paul Wedge was being a royal pain in the ass, in an uproar that his son was being 'villainized'. Apparently, he didn't want word that his son had been helping people cheat to get out. And he insisted vehemently that they were looking in the wrong direction, that 'no son of his' would ever be looming around a dive bar to sell test answers.

Salia Wedge, on the other hand, was willing to accept whatever they discovered. And she was far more willing to be cooperative than her soon to be ex husband. She'd filed for a divorce the day after she'd found out about Marcus' death. Apparently, she'd been stuck in a loveless marriage for her son's sake. And she couldn't forgive herself for failing Marcus over and over. Her words. The woman was grieving, but she was strong. And despite whatever she found out about her son, she wanted the right kind of justice. Not the sort of justice her husband could pay for.

She'd told them she'd bought Marcus several hand held cameras over the years. He often would write to her about a new model or new sort of camera he wanted, and she would mail it to him at the school. She found the latest camera purchase, a Sony handcam that was nearly five thousand dollars. Seriously... who paid that much for a camera? According to the receipt, Marcus had only had it for about seven months. Any other cameras he'd had previously he'd sold on e-bay, the money going into a closed bank account Salia had set up for him that he wouldn't be able to access till his eighteenth birthday.

So the camera was a reality, and it was missing. The hard drive had been seen by more than just the roommate, and was also missing. There was a huge chunk of cash unaccounted for. The kid had to have a hiding place, somewhere he'd keep things he didn't want anyone else to find. They'd gotten a search warrant for the school, but found absolutely nothing. Which meant the kid was hiding his stuff elsewhere, and that was just... severely problematic. Cooke County was a big place, and they had no way of knowing where the kid went on that bike of his when no one was paying attention, which was apparently a great deal of the time.

Rick couldn't help but feel like they'd stumbled upon something terrible and huge, but had reached a dead end. Without that camera and hard drive, they had nowhere else to go. And even if they found those items, there was no saying there would even be anything to see. It was all a theory, that this kid witnessed and video taped a murder and was tortured and killed for it. A theory they couldn't prove yet.

And there were still the questions of, if the theory was true, how did anyone find out about Marcus? And why wait so long to get him?

There was also the idea that all this was connected to Merle, which had thrown Daryl for a loop. He'd finally begun to move on, to forgive himself for all the things he shouldn't have blamed himself for in the first place. And now he was back to square one, feeling like he should have done more. Not only was Daryl blaming himself for Merle all over again, but he was blaming himself for Marcus Wedge, too. "If I'd worked harder on finding Merle's killer, that kid wouldn't be dead right now."

He'd said, practically punching a wall afterward. A huge part of Rick wanted this whole theory to be wrong for Daryl's sake. But every instinct he had, all the years of working law enforcement told him they were on the right track. Albeit, a track that was getting harder and harder to navigate.
If there was one thing Rick hated the most about cases like this, it was having more questions than answers. The only ones who could possibly tell them all they needed to know were dead. And the dead had no voice. Rick remembered a quote he’d seen once, a quote that had stuck with him over the years. *The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is the duty of the living to do so for them.*

He knew Daryl enough to know that his guilt would not let this go. And Rick felt just as guilty as Daryl did. He felt like he’d let Daryl down. That he should have been the one to push harder on Merle’s murder, not Daryl. Yes, they’d reached a hell of a dead end those months ago. There had been no evidence and no witnesses. Till, possibly, now. All he could do was hope they found that camera and hard drive, found the footage they were practically wishing into existence, and then catch the person responsible for so much grief.
"I can't believe I get to love you."

Daryl had been practically living at the office since he'd found that poor boy's body. Sam barely saw him. He'd come home at night, at very late hours, and practically collapse into bed. Then he'd be up at the crack of dawn and back to work, sometimes before she even woke up. It had been six days, but it felt like so much longer. She might have been angry, if she didn't know that Rick was pretty much doing the same thing Daryl was.

Neither one of them could really tell her much about the investigation. But when she did see Daryl, he acted subdued. It reminded her so much of when Merle had died, how he'd pulled away and put distance between himself and just about everyone else. Except he couldn't push her away. She lived with him now. Also, he didn't seem to be actively trying to keep her at a distance. So at least there was that. But she wanted so badly for him to talk to her, to let her in, to let her help. She knew how hard that was for him, and that eventually he would come to her when he was ready. It was the waiting that was wrecking her.

Tonight, though, she was pleasantly surprised to come home and find Daryl on the porch swing. He was still in his deputy shirt, but he'd unbuttoned it, the white under shirt peaking out beneath. He was wearing his leather jacket over it against the cold night, swinging lazily with a mostly empty beer bottle in one hand. She hadn't left the studio till almost nine. It was taking her forever to fix the piano, and she was seriously beginning to think she should just pay someone to do it for her. "Heya stranger." She said, climbing the short steps to the porch, lowering her messenger bag against the rail before coming over to him and plopping down beside him on the swing. She smiled at him warmly.

In the dim light, she could see the calm but restrained expression on his face.

Sam reached a hand up and touched the stubble on his chin before kissing him softly, briefly. She felt his hand rest warmly against her thigh and she scooted closer to him, resting her head against his shoulder. "I've missed you." She said tenderly, closing her eyes as she curled her hands around his bicep, the leather creaking slightly beneath her fingers. She felt his thumb begin to casually caress her thigh as he took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm sorry. I know I haven't been round much." His voice sounded raspy and gruff, like he'd been using it a lot. She felt his face turn toward her head, and he breathed her in before placing a soft kiss on her forehead. "I've missed you, too." He said against her skin. She smiled, eyes still closed. "It's why I'm here." She lifted her head at that, meeting his gaze. He smiled a little, an almost sad stretch of his lips, before taking the last sip of his beer and setting the bottle down on the little wicker outdoor table and turning to her. "Is it selfish that... I don't know any other way to feel better than bein near you?"

She felt a delicate but palpable tug at her heart. And she smiled warmly at him, shaking her head a little. "Not even a little." She reached up and moved some of his bangs out of his eyes. She wanted to see those bluer than blues. "I know you can't talk about the case. But I also know that you're really pushing yourself. You and Rick both are." She let her fingers glide down his face, her hand resting on his shoulder near the crook of his neck. "You can't exhaust yourself so soon into it, right?" She
watched his eyes roam her face, heard him sigh lightly. "Let me help." She said then, and he met her gaze. "Not with the case. I know I can't help with that. But you don't have to carry all this weight alone." She said, nodding firmly. "You're always such a rock for me. I want to do the same for you. That's what a soon to be husband and wife are supposed to do, right?"

For a moment, it felt far too quiet around them. He grew so still, he could have been a statue. Then she watched a look come over him. Like he was seeing her for the first time all over again, and what he saw awed him so much, as though he couldn't quite accept that she was real. It stilled everything in her, made her heart ache in a terribly good way. "Sometimes..." he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "I can't believe I get to love you." His hand moved up from her thigh, and he stood up, turning to face her. He held both hands out to her. She couldn't help the edge of tears she felt out of nowhere, but she swallowed them down and stood, slipping both hands into his, completely speechless and lovingly subdued by his spontaneous words.

He led her to their bedroom, surrounded by a calm quiet neither one of them had experienced for awhile. Once there, neither one of them spoke. He trailed his fingers along her face, following every curve like he could remember her form by touch alone. And slowly he began to undress her. He never took his eyes off hers, shedding piece after piece of her clothing till she stood before him entirely nude. She couldn't explain how amazing it had felt, to be disrobed so delicately. But she could show him. And so she did the same to him. There was something strangely serene about the feel of his skin beneath her fingers. As though she knew all of him belonged to all of her, and yet there would never be a moment she wouldn't be drawn to discover him all over again.

It wasn't till they were both naked that he stepped into her, holding her face in his hands. When they kissed, it was sensuous and so surprisingly comforting that she felt a slow burning peace flow throughout her body. They needed this moment, this quiet intimacy that had nothing to do with need or sexual hunger, and everything to do with just being. He needed to know she was there, a constant presence that loved him despite all he thought was wrong with himself. And she needed to know he was still hers, willing to love her even though she would always be broken.

What passed between them was a conversation held entirely with bodies, not a single word spoken. She pulled him to the bed, laying them both down side by side, his thigh slipping between her legs, his arms holding her so firmly and tenderly, her hands searching his scars for every curve and divot they had to offer. There was a storm brewing between them, but it was more like a thunderstorm in the distance, the weight of stillness in the air, broken by only the breeze of their breaths and the subtle calm of rolling thunder in their throats.

She tasted his skin first, her mouth working his flesh, her lips trailing lines of quivering kisses that had him watching her with an adoration she would never see in anyone else's eyes. She pressed herself against him as he lay on his back, her lips lowering ever more to his groin and back again. His hands curled into her hair, he kissed her as deep as he ever had. And again, there was no hunger. Just comfort, just longing to be close, to be loved and to love in return. When the kiss ended, he gently turned her over, taking his turn to taste her flesh. His stubble sent goosebumps along the entirety of her body. She closed her eyes and breathed in and out, feeling a deep calm fill her up over and over again.

When his mouth made its way back to hers, he settled on top of her, his arms to either side holding him aloft as she opened her legs for him. And he slid himself into her sex in a smooth and warm motion. They found a rhythm almost immediately, one that seemed to flow from the way their tongues danced, the way Sam's hands explored his body in soft touches, the way Daryl's hard member worked in and out of her in a nearly caressing way. It was probably the most gentle they had ever been with each other, and yet it was still so passionate in its own way. There was no speed to this, no need to rush themselves or vie for personal pleasure. It was all shared, and all encouraged. It
was a display of everything they were to each other, everything they had together, and everything they shared. It was all the love they couldn't express with words, and it was almost too much.

She met his eyes as he moved within her, his blues swarming dark and deep with so much he didn't know how to say. But he didn't have to. She understood. Sometimes she couldn't quite fathom that she'd ever lived as long as she had without the love of Daryl Dixon to keep her from fading. Just thinking about it in that moment made warm tears slide out of her eyes. Not tears of pain or heartache, but of a joy she couldn't put words to. She felt him shift one arm, putting all his weight on it, as he lifted his other hand to softly wipe away her tears. And he kissed her once more. A butterfly's flutter of lips, sweeping kisses along her cheeks, her mouth.

He then slid himself out of her, pulling her ever so gently with him off the bed. He lifted her up, turning around and sitting on the edge of the bed, lowering her to his lap. She put her legs to either side of him, knees leaning into the mattress. And he guided himself into her, letting her take control. He held on warmly to one hip, the other hand moving her thick hair out of her face, his eyes so focused on hers that she thought it would be almost possible for her to dive into the depths of his stare. She held onto his shoulders, pressing her forehead to his. She could already feel him hitting that certain spot inside of her that only he had ever been able to find. The pressure that began to build inside of her was unique, somehow. She'd orgasmed often with Daryl, but there was something different about it this time. It felt deeper, more intimate somehow. Her body was far less desperate as it built, and soon both his hands were on her face, fingers in her hair.

He kissed her with that tender passion that was marking every moment between them. And it was all it took to make her come completely, shuddering around him, sighing into his mouth as she deepened the kiss to speak his name without a voice. When she stopped pulsing, he stood, somehow managing to keep himself inside of her as his strong arms held her up. And he turned her back to the bed, lowering her to the mattress without so much as a shake in any of his muscles.

Again, they found their rhythm. And shortly after, Daryl spent himself inside of her, his mouth quivering against hers as he breathed out his release. Sam held him against her, feeling the twitching in both of their groins until his body became still, save for the steady and deep well of his breathing. "I love you." He said, finally lifting his head to stare at her eyes. All she could do was smile at him, feeling that beautiful ache in her heart tumble more warm tears down her face. He rolled slowly to the side, slipping out of her, putting her into him all at once. "Come here." He whispered, and she did. She folded into him, pressing their foreheads together, her hand smoothing over the line of his jaw.

"Don't ever leave me, Daryl." She whispered shakily, not sure why she even said it, just knowing she needed to. "Please." She closed her eyes, a few more tears escaping. She felt his lips on hers, the taste of his mouth urging her to open hers, the barest brush of their tongues sweeping together making her breathe deeply. Then he subtly pulled his lips away, catching her gaze as she opened her eyes.

"Not a chance in hell." He said, smiling that curve of lips he only ever did for her, his eyes so dark and deep, an endless blue ocean that she was going to spend the rest of her life drowning in happily. She sighed softly against his mouth, closing her eyes and relaxing completely into him. He'd said he couldn't believe he gets to love her. But if only he knew how much of a miracle he was to her. He'd saved her, in so many ways he would never know. Before she'd even called him her own, he'd saved her. Because he'd chosen her.

He'd seen her, really and truly seen her. Every last scar and horror and fear, and he'd reached for her anyway. The way he loved her changed who she was. And as she lay there in the quiet of their room, the warmth of their love making filling every muscle and bone, she fell safely and calmly to
sleep, engulfed in the truth that she could never love anyone as much as she loved the man in her arms. Because she truly believed he was made for her. And she was made for him. And nothing could take that away from them. Just let the world try, and the world would fail.
"I believe you."

It was the knocking on the door that woke Daryl up.

He and Sam had fallen asleep so soundly that neither one had moved an inch throughout the night. And when he woke, it was with a soft jolt, his body complying with the sound that echoed down the hallway to their bedroom. He stretched, feeling Sam's body slip away from his momentarily. Shit. He didn't want to move. He just wanted to keep holding her. And he sure as hell didn't want to wake up. "Maybe they'll go away." He heard her mutter, reaching for him as he let his body relax again. But of course, there was more knocking.

"Fuck." He swore, the raspiness in his voice a little more gravelly than usual from sleep. He kissed her cheek softly, then slipped out of the bed, gathering up the sheets and blankets they hadn't even used and covering her form with them. "Stay in bed." He smoothed her hair out of her face as she sighed, eyes still closed, rolling onto her stomach. He smiled a little at the sight of her, then grabbed his jeans off the floor, tugging them back on just to hear someone knock again.

"Shit, hang on. Damn." He said after stepping into the hallway. He closed the bedroom door completely, stepping around the increasingly tubby Jasper as he buttoned his pants. When he finally got to the door, yanking it open in annoyance, he hadn't expected to see Dusty Hendee standing on his porch. It made him swallow down the barrage of swears he'd planned on throwing at the person who'd dared to wake them up at the ass crack of dawn.

"Morning." Dusty said, then raised a tray of coffee cups and a brown paper bag. "I come bearing gifts." He said, smiling with that charismatic grace of his. Daryl just raised a brow, then glanced at his watch.

"It's five fifteen, man." He finally said, his hand still on the door handle. "The hell you doin here?"

Dusty gave a slight grimace, then shrugged.

"I'm sorry about waking you, really. But I have some really important information to give you, and I'm in a bit of a time crunch." He lifted the coffee again, wiggling his brows. "Peace offerings abound, my friend. Just hear me out?" Daryl took in an enormous breath, stretching out his rib cage. Then he let it out the same time he stepped back, motioning with one hand for Dusty to come in. He closed the door behind him. Dusty moved toward the kitchen table, setting the coffee tray and bag down before turning to look at Daryl. Though his smile wavered slightly when he saw the ragged and recent scar on Daryl's torso.

Daryl blinked, wiping at his scar idly. "Hey, um... I heard that you helped Michonne keep me from bleeding out after the explosion." Daryl said, crossing his arms over his chest, palms flat like usual. "Never got to thank you for that."

"Yeah, man... you'd have done the same for me. I'm just glad you're okay. What the hell was that all about, anyway?" Dusty asked, pulling the three disposable coffee cups out of the tray and setting them one at a time onto the table.

"Long story." Daryl said, his eyes averted to the hallway when he heard the bedroom door open. He saw Sam come down the hallway, her bare feet and long legs in full view. But she'd put on that oversized t-shirt she liked so much, the gray one with the black ink spots all over it. It covered what was important at least. She was rubbing the sleep out of one eye when she finally got to his side, reaching for him with her free hand. When she saw Dusty standing there, she all but froze. Daryl could feel an instant wave of tension roll off of her, both her hands now holding onto his body as she
stared a little wide eyed at the other man. Daryl frowned, reaching one arm around her. He was about to ask if she was okay when Dusty spoke.

"Morning, Samantha." He said, smiling wide, putting on that boyish good-look smile of his. Daryl raised a brow.

"Samantha... you two know each other?" Daryl asked, stroking her back idly. Dusty shrugged.

"Not really. We met at the hospital after you were hurt, and I ran into her again a little over a week ago." He said, looking from one of them to other. Sam finally cleared her throat a little and spoke up.

"I'm... gonna go get dressed." She said very softly. Daryl turned toward her, smoothing her hair out of her face.

"You don't have to. Why don't you go back to sleep?" He offered, searching her eyes. She was trying very hard to keep whatever was going through her head hidden. But why? She blinked and shook her head a little, smiling.

"It's okay. I'll be back in a minute." She stood on tip toe and kissed him once, very briefly, before glancing at Dusty and heading back down the hall. Daryl watched her disappear into their room, feeling slightly confused and not awake enough to figure out why. He ruffled his hair a bit, then moved over to the table. He pulled out a chair, motioning for Dusty to sit before he sat himself. He didn't care that he was just wearing jeans. It was his house, after all. And it was just way too fucking early.

"Wasn't sure what you all took in your coffee, so I just got black for everyone." Dusty said after sitting, watching Daryl pop the lid off one of the cups. Daryl just glanced at him, taking a slow sip before setting the cup down and settling a bit more in his own seat.

"What do you need to tell me?" Daryl asked, almost demanding. Dusty grinned a little.

"Always straight to business. Some things never change." He pushed the brown bag toward the center of the table. "Blueberry muffins." Then he grabbed one of the coffee cups, popping his own lid and smelling it, watching Daryl every moment like he was trying to gauge Daryl's state of mind. "I've told you about my work. I do a shit ton of traveling, and I sell to all kinds of places. Pharmaceuticals is an unforgiving business, but I like it well enough to want to keep my job." He took a sip of his coffee, sighing a little afterward and setting the cup down on the table before folding his hands in his lap. "Because of what I sell, I also have to deal with all sorts of unruly characters. People trying to get their hands on prescription drugs for a quick fix or easy high. You know the type."

Daryl narrowed his eyes, setting his coffee on the table but still holding on to it. "What's that got to do with me?" He asked almost blandly, watching Dusty's eyes grow dark for a moment. It was a darkness that made Daryl wake up a whole lot quicker, recognizing it as something that was so out of place in the man sitting across from him. Daryl kept his face a practiced blank. But he suddenly felt on edge, aware, watching the darkness flee Dusty's eyes as he went back to just being the charismatic man Daryl had known.

"Nothing, in a personal way. But as far as your job goes? Quite a lot. You see... part of my job is knowing what hospitals, clinics and pharmacies to sell to. I have very legal product that I have to keep safe from people who might think about stealing it and using it for very illegal means. I literally get bonuses for turning these people into the feds. Because of that, I have certain people who tell me when someone may be looking for a quick prescrip fix. I meet with the druggie in question, and get all the info I can, turn them in and get my finder's fee." Dusty glanced down at the floor as Jasper
sauntered her way into the kitchen. Then he looked back at Daryl like the cat didn't even exist.

"You entrap druggies." Daryl said calmly, more than a little confused. "Still don't see where yer goin' with this." He knew about the deal the DEA had with most pharmaceutical reps. It was part of their 'ceasing prescription drug abuse initiative.' More than a few pharma reps had been arrested over the last ten years for selling their product to druggies and falsifying records so they could keep the proceeds without their bosses ever knowing the meds were missing. The DEA and the big companies came up with the whole 'we'll pay for heads' thing to try and nip the problem in the ass.

"I pay people to tell me when someone wants to buy. Like my very own informants. And one such person has recently told me that they have information pertaining to that dead boy the Sheriff's department is currently investigating."

Daryl froze for a moment, then he sat up straighter, staring dead straight at Dusty. "What information?" Daryl growled out. And Dusty raised a brow, smirking lightly.

"That's just it, I don't know yet. She only told me that she has information that could be valuable to your case, and that if the Sheriff's department wanted it, you and I would have to meet her alone by eight this morning, and we would have to pay her three times her normal fee." Dusty replied, picking up his cup again. "Which is about four thousand dollars." He grinned a little. "Didn't say my informants were the reputable sort."

"The County won't pay her squat. If she doesn't tell us, I can just hold her for interfering and withholding evidence in a police investigation." Daryl said, pushing his cup aside and standing up.

"You could definitely do that." Dusty said, still smiling like it was all a big game. Daryl couldn't help but feel slightly angry at the man. "Or I could just pay her. It's no big deal. And trust me, she'll be far more cooperative if I give her what she wants." Dusty stood then, still holding Daryl's gaze. "I'm trying to help, man. I know this case is a big deal. I mean, it's been all over the news. Don't you think it's worth a shot if it helps you catch whoever did this to that poor kid?"

Daryl clenched his jaw, hands balled softly into fists. He heard the bedroom door open again, but didn't look to see Sam walk back to the kitchen. He felt her fingers touch his back, just above the edge of his jeans. "Where does she want to meet?" He asked then, feeling Sam step even closer into him, just behind and to the side. Dusty nodded, grinning wider.

"There's a bar called the 609. She'll meet us in the back parking lot. If we're not there by eight, she'll be gone." Dusty said, glancing at Sam and giving her a bright smile that Daryl could feel her tense at. The 609... Daryl couldn't help but wonder, why was everything rounding back to that dive? Then Dusty grabbed his coffee cup, stepping toward the door. "And just you, Daryl." He said, pausing a moment. "Don't bring anyone else or she'll run. Trust me on this." And Dusty winked, reaching for the door, stepping out onto the porch, the screen door shutting tight behind him, leaving both Sam and Daryl standing in the kitchen.

Daryl took a deep breath, letting it out slow when Sam turned to stand in front of him, staring up at him with those gorgeous, but worried, brown eyes of hers. He furrowed his brows. "What's wrong?" He asked. She swallowed a little. She was wearing a pair of her pink sweatpants and one of his old Army sweatshirts, which hung loose around her frame.

"It's Dusty." She said, then bit her lip a little nervously. "He's not a good man, Daryl. I know... I know he's your friend, and you guys went through hell together. And I can't really explain it. But I know it. I saw it in his eyes. He's just... he's not safe to be around." Her voice was getting quieter and quieter as she spoke and he pulled her into him, his hands firmly on her hips. "Please believe me." She said, her hands resting flat on his bare chest. He searched her face, her eyes. She had no reason
to lie about what she was feeling or what she was thinking. And it was pretty clear, she really believed what she was saying about Dusty. Daryl nodded slowly.

"I believe you." He said, and he did. There was something about all this that was extremely unsettling to Daryl. Everything Dusty had said made sense. It was pretty cut and dry, really. But he'd seen the way Dusty's eyes grew momentarily dark. And it was a darkness Daryl recognized. A darkness he'd seen in people who usually did awful things that landed them in jail or dead by cop.

He slipped his hands into Sam's unruly hair, and he kissed her lips softly. "I have to call Rick, then I need to go to this meet up." When he stepped away from her, she grabbed his hand, stopping him.

"Please don't go alone. I don't trust him." She pleaded, moving to stand before him again. Daryl shook his head a little.

"I won't." He said. He had no plans on going without backup, hence the reason he was calling Rick. Dusty didn't need to know that Rick would be there. He could hide nearby, keep an eye out from a distance. "It'll be okay. Really." He kissed her softly, tasting her mouth warmly. She sighed afterward, pressing her forehead into his chest. He held onto her like that for a few quiet moments, face in her hair, breathing her in. Then he let her go. "Don't worry. Jus... go about yer day and I'll call you when I get back into town. I promise."

She smiled a little, but he could still see the worry in her eyes. Worry he was feeling a little himself. He didn't feel right about any of this. And about Dusty. He had thought the man hadn't changed much. But maybe he'd changed far more than Daryl could know. Time had a way of doing that. Of taking a man and turning him inside out. It had done it to Daryl, over and over. Hell, he'd changed again after meeting Sam. He was a far better man now.

After he called Rick and showered, staring at himself in the mirror for a moment, he couldn't help but wonder... who had Dusty Hendee changed into? Daryl could only hope that whoever the man was now, that he wasn't a product of the darkness both he and Sam had seen in the man's eyes. Because darkness like that had a way of spilling over, contaminating everyone and everything it came into contact with like a plague, taking no prisoners, showing no mercy, leaving only misery in its wake...
"Come on. Let's get you caffeinated."

It was cold by the river. Not a wintry cold. Not an Autumn cold, either. It was the type of cold that started out as goosebumps, and settled moment by moment into places she didn't know existed before. But Sam sat there, watching the tumbling, debris riddled current. Leaves and sticks and other products of Fall flowed through the rocks and bundled along the banks. She was sitting on the fallen tree that she and Daryl liked so much, an afghan under her butt to keep her pants from getting damp.

She remembered the first time she'd sat on the log without it, and Daryl had laughed at the wetness on her rear. God, she wished Daryl was right there with her. But he wasn't. He was off with Rick meeting a man she couldn't trust, simply because she'd seen what lay beneath the surface. Daryl said he'd believed her about Dusty. That had meant everything. But she understood why he had to go. Even if she didn't know the particulars of the case, she got it. This was his job. He was a deputy. And getting justice for that boy was far too important to pass up any opportunity to get information that could help.

She'd watched Daryl leave, standing on the porch. And she'd been standing there so long, she barely registered she was hungry. She didn't dare touch the coffee or muffins that Dusty had brought. Not that she thought they'd been poisoned. But still... she wasn't about to accept offerings from a devil. She grabbed a banana instead, filled her travel cup with freshly brewed coffee, and headed to the river. She couldn't stand the quiet in the house after Dusty's visit. And it was far too early to go to the studio. So the river seemed like the next best thing.

Sam got why Daryl loved it there so much. The tranquility of the place was nearly addictive. It didn't seem to matter what time of day or night or season or weather, the river just always seemed to be in its own state of immovable peace. Nothing could alter it. Nothing could stop it. And for right that moment, she breathed it in, let herself drift like the leaves that the current carried away. She was so lost in her own unfocused meditation that when she heard a voice say 'Hello?' behind her, she nearly jumped out of her skin, letting out a screech and dropping her travel mug as she spun around. She felt her footing give way almost instantly on the slick bank, and she knew she was going to get very wet very fast. But the splash never came.

She was suddenly being held firmly and easily by a pair of strong arms, staring up into forest green eyes and a handsome, startled and apologetic face. "I am so, so sorry." The man said, helping her right herself. She stepped back quickly, though was far more aware of what was beneath her feet as she did, pressing herself against a tree. The man was wearing a dark green wind breaker that said 'Georgia State Park Ranger Service'. He was wearing blue jeans, and a tan ranger shirt beneath the jacket that almost matched Daryl's deputy shirts. He had hiking boots, a hiking back pack, and a notebook covered in a plastic binding hanging from a cord that was strapped to his shoulder strap. "I didn't mean to scare you. I am so sorry, miss." He said, genuine regret on his face. "Are... are you okay?" He asked, hands empty at his sides as though he was trying not to give her a reason to be startled more. She took in a deep breath, letting it out.

"Yes... I'm," she cleared her throat a little, then smiled sheepishly, "I'm fine. I just didn't hear you." She put a hand over her heart momentarily, feeling it slow to a normal thudding. "I guess I was lost in my own little world." She knelt then, picking up her coffee, which happily hadn't spilled thanks to the travel seal. She wiped it off, looking up at the man who hooked his thumbs into his back pack straps. "It's easy to do that out here." She smiled again, standing, holding her coffee in both hands.

"I can see that. I've been surveying for two days now and I feel like I could spend forever by this
river." He said, smiling himself. That was about the moment she realized how handsome he actually was. He was rugged, like Daryl, but had clean cropped hair and no stubble. His green eyes were bright, almost impossibly so. And his smile lit up his face in very appealing ways. She had to blink against it, rolling her shoulder a little and looking away as she moved toward the afghan again. She sat down, glancing sideways at him.

She and Daryl had a conversation once, mostly in jest, about finding other people attractive. They'd both agreed that it was only normal and natural to find other people physically appealing, so it was okay to look. And to be honest, there were very few people she found more attractive than Daryl. After all, she knew what every inch of him looked like, and what every inch of him could do. Still, she couldn't help but find this guy moderately pleasing to the eyes.

That didn't stop the uneasiness she initially felt.

Even though Liam was long dead and she had been working so very hard on not being so shy and skiddish around men in general, there was still an underlying fear that crept up of its own will, usually leaving her wanting to run in the other direction.

"Surveying?" She asked, popping the lid on the coffee and taking a long, slow sip so she could give her hands something to do. He nodded, then lifted up the book that was attached to the cord and pulling a portable GPS out of his pocket.

"Yup." He moved toward her, but stopped a few feet away. "It's part of the Georgia State Park Expansion. I'm following the river, writing down animal trails, fish migrations and landmark coordinates. There's about a dozen other rangers over one hundred miles of Georgia backwoods doing similar things. We're trying to figure out where the best places are to create or expand state protected woods, to regulate hunting and fishing." He was flipping idly through his notebook, glancing at his GPS, and then plucked a pen out of his shirt pocket, writing a few things down before putting the pen and GPS back, the notebook hanging again. "We're about an hour out from the nearest road, if I remember right. Did you come out here all alone?"

"Yeah, but I know the way really well. Daryl and I, my fiancee, we come to the river all the time." She said, smiling a little at the word 'fiancee'. It always made her feel like a giddy school girl, just thinking about it. "Besides," She smirked up at the man, "You're out here alone." He chuckled a little at that.

"I guess you're right about that." He extended a hand toward her. "Name's Bill Geary. Ranger, park service, though I guess you got that part." She laughed lightly at him, then reached up and took his hand.

"Samantha Grimes. Voice teacher." She shook his hand, feeling the slight callouses and practiced strength in his grip. He let go of her hand and motioned to the log.

"May I? Been walking since about four this morning." He said, and she shrugged, scooting over and giving him plenty of space on the afghan. He slipped off his bag, sitting down beside her, but leaving about a foot between them. "It's a lovely spot, that's for sure." He said, gazing out at the water. "Fiancee, huh?" He asked then, glancing at her with a genuinely kind smile. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." She beamed, instinctively touching her ring. It still marveled her, how beautiful it was. Compared to some women's engagement rings, it was small. The stones weren't large. But damn if it didn't shine brilliantly, wherever she went, no matter the light. And the fact that Daryl had given it to her made all the difference. She loved the ring for all it was, because it was from Daryl.

"Said his name was Daryl?" He asked, then watched a questioning look come over his face. "As in
Dixon? That Deputy who got blown up?" She blinked, feeling an ache come over her. It always felt awful, deep down when people brought it up. Like there was a piece of her spirit that hadn't quite bounced back from almost losing Daryl. He motioned to her, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, that was insensitive."

"No, it's okay. Really." She shrugged a little. "And, yes, Daryl Dixon." She smiled slightly, looking out at the river momentarily, then clearing her throat a little. "Do you know him?"

"I know of him." Bill said, folding his hands and leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "It was kind of big news, the explosion. I'd only been in Athens for a week or so, but the story was everywhere." She knew he was right about that. It had made local, state and several other news avenues in the country. Not the sort of thing that really went unnoticed. "I take it he's doing alright?" Bill asked then, glancing at her with raised brows. She nodded.

"Yeah, full recovery." She smiled a little. "There's not much that can keep him down for long. He's good like that."

"Glad to hear it. That was a hell of a thing. They ever figure out what caused it?" He asked, watching the water tumble over the smooth round rocks. She watched him quietly, studying his features.

"Yeah. It's a closed case now." She said softly, not daring to elaborate. She had learned over the last several months that she had great instinct about people. Years of being under Liam's thumb had taught her how to find the hidden shadows in someone's visage. But watching Bill, she couldn't find any. He just felt like a genuinely good person to her. She watched him close his eyes, take in a deep breath and let it out slow. "You okay?" She asked, still watching him, moving a few stray strands out of her face that had come out of her ponytail. He opened his eyes and looked at her smiling a little.

"Yeah, sorry. Just tired. Been walking the woods for three days straight, camping along the way. I forgot to pack coffee, of all things. And I am so not a morning person." He chuckled a little, straightening up. "Speaking of which, I should probably keep moving. I'm way ahead of schedule, but if I sit for much longer, I might just take a nap." He stood up, picking up his pack and swinging it onto his back.

"Why don't you come back with me? I've got plenty of coffee." Aaaaand she blinked, feeling a little stunned by her own words. She wasn't sure why she'd offered, and she instantly felt stupid and wary. She couldn't just take it back, that would be rude as hell. He seemed to regard her for a moment, then glanced at the river.

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to impose." He shifted a little on his feet. "To be honest, though, it'd be nice to have company for a bit. These survey's don't offer much in the way of human interaction." He grinned a little. And she smiled, couldn't help it. He was so genuine, it was infectious. She stood up, reaching down and rolling up the afghan, tucking it beneath her arm, coffee in her other hand.

"Come on. Let's get you caffeinated." She said, motioning with her head. A moment later, they were walking back along the familiar path she and Daryl had walked a hundred times. It was nice to discover there were still good men in the world. Daryl, Rick, Glenn and a few others were at the top of the list, of course. But it was good to know they weren't the only ones. Maybe she'd just made a new friend? That would be fantastic, considering how hard it was to actually open up to people she didn't know. Not that she'd do much of that with Bill. But it was still a nice thought.

As they walked, talking casually, she couldn't help but let her thoughts linger back to Daryl and Dusty. The further she got from the river, the more she felt that terrible worry creep up. She realized
she didn't want to be alone, in case she ended up getting bad news or a terrible phone call. Not that she would. She had to be positive, right? She was glad Bill was there, at any rate. He might just be a good distraction...
"I've already paid, and I expect you to do your part."

Chapter Notes

(WARNING: Rough sex, rape, extreme violence. This leads up to something that's going to get Dusty into even more trouble than the Marcus Wedge issue has. I don't like writing about these sorts of things, but Dusty is just one awful, messed up, monstrous guy. And he's going to find out as time goes on that he's messing with the wrong people. So don't worry. He's going to get what's coming to him.)

Dusty was riding Alise, the bartender from the 609, the mattress in her trailer squeaking uncontrollably as she gripped the headboard for dear life. She was taking it in both holes. His dick in her pussy and a vibrator in her ass, and he wasn't gentle with either one. The sound of flesh slapping and slicker things was mingling with her shrill screams. There was even a little bit of blood foaming around her asshole. She didn't tell him to stop, though, and he had no plans on doing so. Not yet, anyway.

They had a half hour before they had to head to the 609 to meet with Daryl. And Dusty wasn't dumb enough to think that his old friend wasn't going to cover all his bases. He'd no doubt have a background check run on Dusty, and find precisely nothing of value. He'd learn that Dusty Hendee was a four year running reputable employee of Total Pharmaceuticals, a top five pharma company in the Midwest, owned by Beltrand Durrow, a millionaire with a pension for heavy business and land grabbing. What they wouldn't know was that Total Pharmaceuticals was also a leading illegal drug developer and distributor, the sole creator of Spinners, and the Old Man, a.k.a. Beltrand Durrow's brother Vincent, was vice president of the company and held about exactly one third of the company stock to play with.

All of that, however, was far away from Dusty's mind as he jammed the vibrator to its hilt but pulled himself out of her vagina, her whole body glistened with sweat and marks from his less than gentle kind of sex. He rammed the vibrator in a few more times before pulling it out and tossing it aside, grabbing her hard by the hair and pulling her up. She gasped out, body shaking uncontrollably as he turned her over. He got off the bed, standing, and pushed her face down towards his dick. She knew what to do right away, swallowing him whole. He closed his eyes, hands dug into her hair, feeling the motion of her bobbing over him, her muscles twitching everywhere. But she wasn't going deep enough for him. He pushed her down, guiding her by pulling and pushing at her head. She gagged, but kept at it. Her hands curled around his ass, holding on for dear life as he forced her to take all of him. It wasn't long till he climaxed, and held her down so hard on top of himself that he was practically choking her. She gagged, struggling, hand gripping him so tight she was leaving nail marks in his flesh.

He finally let her go, shoving her back hard onto the bed as she gagged, coughing, falling back, desperately trying to catch her breath. He watched her, breathing heavy. The sound of her choking had only urged him on. God, it was fucking sexy as hell to hear her gag around his cock. Even though he'd just spent himself in her throat, he wanted more. He could already feel his cock threatening to harden all over again. He climbed on top of her, kissing her hard, tasting his seed swirling around her tongue. She moaned into him, pushing her body against him. He reached down and slid his fingers inside her. Not just one or two. But four. Ramming, a slick and squelched sound floating around them as he broke their kiss, his mouth moving down her flesh, biting, nipping,
It wasn't long till he turned her over, running her cum over her asshole before driving himself in. She cried out in fevered pain, her ass still raw from the vibrator. But she took it, and she screamed into the mattress, arms and hands flailing along the now very stained sheets. And he yanked her back, pulling her hair, holding her as close to him as possible so he could get his hands around her throat. She was kneeling, and he was driving. And he squeezed. At first she just gasped, choked, her hands grasping at nothing. Then the longer her rode her, the longer he choked her, she began to claw at his hands, his arms, anything of his she could get her hands on. The sounds she made, fuck it was glorious. He could feel her heart beat stampeding. For the first time since she'd gone down this violent sexual road with him, she was afraid. And he fucking loved it.

He choked her till he felt her go limp.

Then he let her fall to the bed, and he rode her still, unconscious form for nearly ten minutes. He dragged his nails down her back, gouging out skin. He flipped her over and assaulted her breasts with his teeth and mouth, leaving terrible bruises and bite marks for him to muse over. He loved knowing he could leave abuses no one else would ever see. He kept using her asshole, too. It was tighter than her pussy, anyway. And the blood and other fluids he was getting from her ass was making it warm and slick in all the best ways. When he was finally ready to come, he pulled out and pulsed his seed all over her bare stomach, watching it spray in white on her flushed and battered flesh. And he stared at her, so very unconscious. So very at his mercy. He hovered over her, sliding his fingers through his cum, gliding them up her form, towards her mouth. He painted her lips with his seed, probably in the most tender act he'd ever had with her.

It occurred to him, then, he'd love to fuck her to death.

He'd always had a violent streak with women. He loved women, fucking adored them, and could treat a woman like a fucking queen. But when it came to sex, he wanted them to hurt. Wanted to hear their screams, and not from pleasure. He wanted them to feel real and unbridled pain. He got his pleasure from making them suffer. And oh, could he make them suffer. He'd always had to be careful, though. If he wasn't, a woman could say he raped them, abused them. He didn't need to land his ass in jail. It was why he went out of his way to find hookers who would literally take any form of sex for money. Or he'd find women like Alise. Fucking sick in the head women who adored pain in all its many splendors. If he could feel love, she'd probably be his equal. But he didn't love anyone or anything, really. Except dealing pain.

He laid by her side, studying all the damage he'd done to her, probing her bruises and wounds with his fingers, spreading her legs to examine her ruptured anus and swollen vagina. He examined her breasts, the forming welts and teeth shaped cuts. He wet her bruised throat with his cum, tracing the hand marks with delicate wonder. Finally, she began to wake. And she almost instantly began crying, curling in on herself, her body shaking in pain and shock. He'd never hurt her this badly before. In fact, he'd never gone this far with anyone. And he knew... he was already addicted. He needed more of this. He needed to hear that choking, to feel that blood around him, to see that pain so real and clear on a woman's face.

"You..." she gasped out, clutching at herself, as though for the first time she wasn't seeing just a hard man, but a real monster. "You almost... killed me..." her voice sounded grated, and she sobbed, a hand sliding behind her toward her ass, fingers coming back up shakily, slick with blood. "What did you do to me?!" She cried out, then buried her face in her pillow. He smiled, absolutely beside himself with heavy satisfaction.
"Everything I ever said I would." He stroked her back, letting his hands glide smoothly over the
gouge marks he'd made, feeling her twitch in even subtle pain. "And I'll pay you for it. Like I've paid
you to give that information to Daryl later. How's ten thousand sound?" She lifted her head, fear
filled eyes staring at him wide and wet.

"You don't actually... I can't... not now... not like this!" She blurted out. She sobbed. "I need a
doctor!" He chuckled a little, rolling off the bed and standing, stretching his strong, lean form.

"You don't need a doctor, baby. And you sure as hell will do that meet up. I've already paid, and I
expect you to do your part." He said, turning to look at her. "Shower. Get dressed. And pull your
shit together, Al." He said firmly, all the amusement and languor leaving his features. He let her see
the monster he was, there was no point in hiding it from her now. He crouched over her, smoothing
her sweat soaked hair out of her face. "Or I'll do more than choke you and fuck a new hole into
you." He pressed his mouth softly to hers, then stood, licking his cum off his lips before turning
away from her and heading to the bathroom. He heard her crying then, and not a pleasureful or sad
sound. It was grief and fear and pain, and it was music to his ears. He hummed to himself, creating a
tune in his head to match her sobs as he wiped himself down and got dressed. It was time to get his
plan in motion.

Later, he'd bring Alise back here. And he'd fuck her again. And this time he wouldn't worry about
how much he hurt her. He'd ride her till her lights went out. Only this time, she wouldn't be waking
up. He'd finally made up his mind to kill a woman during sex. He couldn't believe, actually, it had
taken him this long to do so. Too bad it was Alise who was going to be his first. He was almost
going to miss her. But like any diamond in the rough, there were others. He just had to look.

Sometimes he wondered what it was like to be normal, to not have homicidal tendencies and the
need to abuse and maim. For a moment, standing there, watching himself in the mirror as he buttoned
his shirt, he wondered what it was like for Daryl. And Samantha.

He had to admit, she was more than a little pleasing to look at. Seeing her earlier that morning in just
an oversized t-shirt had been what stirred his need to fuck Alise in the first place. He wondered how
well Daryl used her delicate body, those long legs and supple lips. He was sure Daryl wasn't rough
with her in the least. He was a hard man, and capable of some pretty strong and frightening things.
But Daryl wasn't an abuser. He was a protector. He probably treated Samantha like she was made of
glass.

Ah, but what Dusty would do to that woman? It made him smile to wonder.

He closed his eyes, fingers pausing at the last button, letting out a shuddered sigh just thinking about
it. Too bad she was already spoken for. Or else he might just break his own rule and go for a woman
who wanted nothing to do with pain. Well, not really. He liked his freedom. And he had no plans on
hurting Daryl, just using him. If anything happened to Samantha, Daryl would hunt Dusty to the
ends of the earth. He had no doubt about that.

That didn't mean he couldn't think about it, though. And as he went outside, smoking a cigarette,
waiting for Alise to get herself cleaned up, he daydreamed about what it would feel like to have
Samantha Grimes all to himself...
"Damn, man, you're always so serious."

Daryl was leaning against the hood of his truck, hands in his jean pockets. He was wearing his deputy shirt beneath his black leather jacket. No point in going in civvies since apparently whoever Dusty wanted him to meet already knew he was a deputy. He was aware he stood out like a sore thumb in that bar parking lot. But it was pretty much empty, except for a few vehicles that were covered in dew, probably left overnight by people too drunk to drive. He'd been there for ten minutes and hadn't seen a single soul. Cars passed by every now and then, but there was no sight of Dusty or any woman.

Rick was waiting, hiding behind the bus stop across the street, hidden from view by the dark windows and the unkempt bushes to either side of it. Yeah, Daryl said he'd come alone, but he wasn't stupid. Nothing about this felt right to him, Rick and even Samantha.

The idea that all this time Dusty had not been the man Daryl remembered seemed absurd to him. He had no proof that Dusty was anyone other than the guy Daryl had known in Afghanistan. And yet, he'd seen that shadow cross over the other man's features. That hint of darker things that promised grief and pain. Daryl knew damn well he had his own monster to tame. Every man did to some extent. But sometimes, a man could lose that struggle. A man could become a demon without realizing. He couldn't help but wonder, what had it been that had tipped the scales for Dusty?

Of course, there was the possibility that both he and Samantha were just imagining things.

The initial background check on Dusty had come up clean. His work history was exemplary. His military background wasn't outlandish, and he'd had an honorable discharge. He had a few arrests before the Army, but they were drunk and disorderly charges. Other than a tragic childhood event, where Dusty's father had raped and murdered Dusty's mother in front of him, there was really nothing noteworthy. So if Dusty really wasn't the man he seemed to be, he hid it really well.

It was nearly eight thirty by the time Dusty's truck pulled into the parking lot. A woman was in his passenger seat. She looked less than pleased, but determined and slightly timid all at once. Like a beaten dog who was trying to be loyal, but waiting eternally to be beaten again. Daryl recognized her. She was the bartender. Alise something. He couldn't remember her last name. He watched Dusty get out first, smiling broadly at Daryl and walking over to him. The woman didn't move, she just watched the two men through the truck window.

"Hey man, sorry we're late. Got a little occupied." Dusty said, reaching out a hand. Daryl took it with a blank expression, shaking firmly.

"It's eight thirty." He said blandly. And Dusty raised a brow, letting go of Daryl's hand. "Let's get this over with. I have an investigation to get back to." Dusty chuckled a little.

"Damn, man, you're always so serious." He clapped Daryl lightly on the shoulder. "Loosen up." He let his hand fall, looking over at Alise. He motioned for her to come out. When she finally made her way over to them, Daryl noticed she had a slight limp, and she was wearing loose clothes, which seemed strange to him. She'd always been the skin tight, revealing sort. He also noticed she didn't stand too close to Dusty, hugging her arms over her chest as though she were trying to protect herself.

"Alise." Daryl said calmly, catching her attention. She blinked at him, swallowing. "You could've just come to the station." Rick had arrested her once before. And he'd interviewed her after Merle died. It wasn't like she didn't know who Daryl was. He would have been happy to keep her as an
"You guys wouldn't have paid me for what I got to say. He did." She said, glancing sidewats at Dusty who just winked and smirked. "You're investigating that Wedge kid, right?" She asked, and Daryl nodded, furrowing his brows slightly. "There's this girl, Bella Farmington. Hangs out with the 'bad' kids at that fancy school. She's heavy into meth. Likes to dabble in other drugs, too." She cleared her throat a little, wincing as she let her arms fall. "She said that kid, Wedge, saw some drug dealer... kill your brother." She paused, then let out a quick breath. "Wedge videotaped the whole thing. Wanted to track the guy down, get money for the footage. So he had Bella ask around, to try to get the guy's name. She found the guy, came in after the kid was found dead, ranting and raving about how the guy had offed Wedge and now he'd be after her cause Wedge used her to find him. She also said some shit about a hard drive. But she was spooked as hell and ran off before I could find out more." She rubbed idly at her stomach, like she was sore or feeling sick. "I know where she hides out when she's on her benders."

Daryl felt... angry. It was great, all this info. It confirmed what he and Rick had been theorizing. Which was the best lead they’d had since this whole thing started. But this was all too... neat. He couldn't have said why he thought that. And he sure as hell wasn't going to trust all this. There was tension coming off Alise in waves, and he could see pain around her eyes. The subtle tightness that people had when they were trying to be strong, but felt like over medicating instead. Daryl walked up to her, grabbing her gently by the upper arm and pulling her a few feet away from Dusty. "Are you alright?" He asked her in a hushed tone, far enough away from Dusty that he couldn't hear him. Her eyes got a little wide, and she glanced at Dusty who was just standing there, pulling a cigarette out of his coat pocket, watching them as though he was happy as could be.

"I'm just... nervous. You're a cop." She said, but the words didn't quite ring true. There was emotion in her voice, squelched down as she hugged herself. Daryl let his hand fall from her. He saw it, then. Fear. It flashed in her eyes as she watched Dusty light his cigarette. Daryl turned, blocking Dusty from her view.

"Did he do somethin to you?" Daryl asked firmly. Her eyes grew wide, and her mouth opened like he'd just guessed something she hadn't even hinted at. She swallowed hard, then shook her head quickly.

"I'm fine. Just... I had a rough mornin. Look, do you wanna know where to find Bella or not? Cause I need to go get some sleep. I got the late shift tonight." She said, wiping angrily at a tear that escaped her eye out of nowhere. Daryl frowned, not knowing why but feeling the urge to deck Dusty on Alise's behalf.

"Where is she?" He asked softly, wanting nothing more than to get Alise into his truck and drive her away from Dusty. She pulled a piece of paper out of her back pocket, handing it out to him. He took it from her.

"That's all the places she likes to hide." Then she stepped away from him, heading back to Dusty's truck without another word. Dusty walked up to him, then, blowing out a puff of smoke from his cigarette before tossing the butt to the ground.

"Got what ya needed?" He asked, smiling lightly at Daryl. He stared at Dusty, narrowing his gaze, stepping closer. Dusty's smile faded almost instantly.

"What'd you do to her?" Daryl asked calmly, but there was steel on the edges of his voice he couldn't quite help. Dusty blinked, then slowly slipped his hands into his pockets.

"Dunno what you're talking about, man." He said easily, meeting Daryl's gaze without flinching.
"I don't know what's goin on, but whatever yer part is in all this, whatever yer hidin, you best pray I don't find out. And whatever you did to Alise," Daryl growled out low, "I better not find you doin it again." Dusty was still, and Daryl saw it again, that darkness, that edge of something terrible, slithering beneath the surface.

"Just trying to help, Daryl. I've always had your back, you know that." Dusty said. And for a moment, Daryl believed him. It had been true, once upon a time. But that had been a different Dusty. The man standing before him now was someone Daryl just didn't recognize.

"I'll be checkin on Alise later. She best be alright. Or I'll be lookin for you." He said, and stepped past Dusty, giving one last glance at Alise, who was sitting in the truck, hugging herself, watching them with wide eyes.

"Dixon." Dusty said, making him stop and turn slowly to look at the other man. "Whatever you think, whatever's made you suddenly not trust me, I've still got your back." There was complete sincerity there. It seemed so strange to Daryl. He just nodded once, and got into his own truck. He waited till Dusty and Alise drove off before turning his truck on. A moment later, Rick got into the passenger seat, setting down a pair of binoculars.

"So?" Rick asked, and Daryl glanced at him before handing over the paper Alise had given him.

"We've gotta find Bella Farmington." Daryl replied, then put the truck in gear, pulling out into the road, feeling like he had just went toe to toe with the devil, and he had no idea why...
"Shouldn't I be the one thanking you?"

She was laughing lightly, sitting across from Bill at the kitchen table. He'd shed his jacket and backpack, and they were both drinking coffee. "I mean it. I don't think I can ever look at a rabbit the same way again." He said, finishing off his story. She giggled a little, shaking her head and taking a sip of her coffee. She felt lighter than she had all morning. Dusty's visit had really thrown her for a loop, and worrying about Daryl had been eating at her. Having someone to laugh with was a nice distraction. And Bill was a pretty funny guy. He was sincere and intelligent, easy to talk to and easy to be around.

"So why a park ranger?" She asked, relaxing back in her seat a bit, watching him as he sipped his own coffee. He shrugged after a moment, setting the mug down.

"Honestly, it was a job." He said, smiling. "After college, it was a lot harder to find work in art history than I thought it would be. My uncle had been in the ranger service in California for ages. He hooked me up with his buddy in Atlanta. I took some tests, did a course, went to ranger school. And haven't looked back since." He glanced down at his mug. "It suits me, though. I mean, I would love to do more with art. And when I can, I head up to the cities or the quarter to visit the museums and art galleries. I try to stay up to date, and still indulge in buying a painting or two when I can. But I like being active, being outside. I like knowing I'm helping keep people and nature self. I make a difference, in a much bigger way than I ever could have doing art." He lifted his green eyes to hers, and she couldn't help but blush slightly. He looked at her like... she swallowed and looked away. He looked at her like Daryl did. "What about you? How long have you been teaching music?"

She cleared her throat a little, standing up and taking her cup with her to pour herself some more coffee. She needed a moment of not looking at Bill. "Not long, actually. I majored in music technology and education. But after college, I got married and my dreams of teaching sort of... fell to the wayside." She said, heaping sugar into her cup, stirring slowly, watching the creamer she'd already put in billow and form into a single tan color. She picked the cup up, setting the spoon aside and turning. She rested against the counter, not going back to the table. "After I... divorced," She looked back at Bill, "I came back to Athens and opened up my studio." She smiled then, couldn't help it. She was still so proud of how far she'd come. "It's been amazing." Bill smiled at her, turning slightly in his chair to look at her fully.

"So... wait, is your studio the one on Main?" He asked, motioning to her, then nodding with a smile. "Yeah, the all pink one with the purple sign and that weird pine cone door stop." He chuckled. "Brightest place in town." She raised both brows, chuckling.

"How do you know about my pine cone?" She moved back to the table, then, forgetting completely about her hesitations.

"I saw it holding the door open when I was walking to the diner a couple of weeks ago. I remember thinking the seeds off that thing, if it were real, would make some insanely big trees." He shook his head at himself, still smiling. "I guess being a ranger has turned me into somewhat of a nature nerd." She shook her head at him.

"No, it's nice." She said warmly. "It's good to be knowledgeable and proud of what you do."

"Ya know," He said, changing the subject a little, "My Dad was a police officer in Washington for like twenty five years. I have to ask, is it tough?" His smile faded and he shrugged a little. "Being with cop, I mean?" For a moment, she breathed in and then let it out slowly, then she shrugged, too.
"Daryl's good at what he does. He was in the Army for awhile, and really knows how to take care of himself. I try not to worry, cause I know he's a lot tougher than most people realize. But..." she glanced at Bill and gave a small smile, "I still worry. That's why I was at the river today. He's investigating that murdered boy's case. And it's not as safe as I wish it was. I went to the river cause it helps keep me calm. Is that silly?"

"Not at all." Bill said softly. "My Mom used to bake. She'd spend hours just baking cookies and pies and cakes. Anything and everything, whenever she thought my Dad was going to have a hard or dangerous day. It helped her keep her mind off things." Bill motioned to her. "You're a tough woman, being in a relationship like that. It's not easy. I hope Daryl realizes how lucky he is." And just like that, her phone rang. It was sitting on the table in front of her, and buzzed the table top. She let out a breath, and picked it up.

"It's Daryl." She said, smiling and hitting the answer button. "Hey, how'd it go?" She asked instantly.

"It was interestin. Got some info that might be useful. I think yer right about Dusty, though. Somethin's off about him. Jus... can't put my finger on it. Rick an I are headed back to town. You at the studio?" He asked and she raised both brows, glancing at her watch. It was nearly nine o'clock. She should have been at the studio already, getting things ready for the day.

"Damn, no. I got side tracked. I'm still at the house." She said, looking over at Bill who was watching her quietly.

"Want us to pick you up on the way?" Daryl asked and she shook her head, then realized he couldn't see it.

"No, that's okay. I'll drive over. I've got my keyboards in the back of the car. Meet me for lunch, though?" She asked, hopeful. She wanted to hear more about what had happened. And honestly, she just wanted to see Daryl again, soon. After the night they'd had, so close and intimate in ways she would never forget, she just wanted to be close to him again.

"Yeah, probably a little later, though. Like..." he paused, and she heard Rick say something in the background, "How bout two?" Daryl asked. And she smiled, letting out a soft sigh.

"Sounds great. I'll come to the office then. I love you." She said warmly.

"Love you, too, sweetheart." Daryl said. And then he hung up. She put the phone down and glanced at Bill who smiled over at her.

"I gotta get to work." She said, and he nodded. He drank down the last of his coffee and stood, grabbing his jacket off the back of the chair. She stood, too, watching him as she slipped her phone into her pocket. "Thanks for having coffee with me." She said, smiling brightly. And Bill, picking up his pack, smiled just as brightly back at her.

"Shouldn't I be the one thanking you?" He asked, then reached a hand out toward her. She took it and they shook hands, his touch lingering a moment longer than she'd realized. "It was really good to meet you, Samantha Grimes." Bill said, then stepped toward the door. "I hope we can have coffee again someday." He nodded once, still smiling, then opened the screen door and stepped outside, disappearing off the porch. She moved to the door and peered out, watching him walk steadily back toward the woods.

It had been good to meet him, too. It was nice to think she'd made a new friend on her own. All the friends she'd had now she'd made through Rick and Daryl. It was as though she'd leaped forward,
somehow. The idea that she could meet people and have friendships all on her own hadn't really occurred to her before. And now that it had, she wondered why she'd never tried to do so before. She smiled, closing the back door and locking it, heading to the bedroom to get her bag and grab a sweater. It wasn't till she got into her car that she paused, both hands on the wheel as she glanced at the woods in her rear view mirror.

Bill Geary had looked at her like Daryl looked at her. Like a piece of treasure, to be protected and worshiped and cared for no matter what. She'd never thought that look could be mirrored in anyone else's eyes. And honestly, she'd never wanted it to. Daryl was her everything, the love of her life. She never truly thought anyone else would even want to attempt to see her the way he does. After all, most men just looked at her like they were imagining how good she'd be in bed. Daryl only ever looked at her like a person, worthy of love and devotion. And for the few hours she'd been around him, so had Bill.

It didn't matter, right? Because she was with Daryl. She didn't want to be with anyone else. But that didn't stop the little voice in the back of her head telling her that maybe she was far more appealing than she'd thought. And maybe Daryl wasn't the only man in the world who could be good to her. "Shit." She swore at herself, meeting her own gaze in the mirror. Why would she even think that? She gripped the steering wheel tighter. She was attracted to Bill and she hadn't even really realized it till that moment. Not just physically, but mentally as well. Shit, shit, shit.

Bill had said, just before he left, that he hoped they could have coffee again someday. She was suddenly hoping the exact opposite. In fact, she was hoping she never saw Bill Geary ever again. And as she drove to work, she blared her music and tried very hard to only think about Daryl, not knowing that Bill Geary was going to end up being around far more often than either of them bargained for...
"I feel like we're chasing ghosts."

"What a dump." Rick said, putting the truck in park and shutting off the engine, peering through the windshield at the dilapidated barn that was barely standing at the edge of an old, abandoned property. The house had long been torn down. The barn itself was the last remnant of what had once been a thriving farm. It was half caved in, barely held together by weathered and rotten wood. There was a slump of roof where the hay loft would have been. And the only way in looked like a hastily hammered together door frame, held open and up by stacked up plastic milk cartons.

"Compared to the other places?" Daryl asked dryly, opening the door and stepping out of Rick's truck. The list that Alise had given them had been a bust so far. They'd been to seven other dumps a lot like this, this one the third one after lunch with Sam. And sure, multiple people frequented them. Used them for shelter, or a place to shoot up, or both. There were enough discarded needles and other items at about four of those places to make it pretty clear that someone had a hell of a habit. Rick got out of the truck, both men closing the doors at the same time.

"For once, I'd like to do a manhunt that doesn't involve the places that time forgot." Rick said, stepping to the front of the truck to stand beside Daryl, who smirked and motioned toward the barn.

"Ladies first." He said, giving Rick a sideways glance. Rick just glared lightly at him, making him chuckle. Then Rick pulled out his sidearm and moved toward the barn. Daryl followed suit, close on Rick's heels.

"Sheriff's Department!" Rick called out, peering into the haphazard opening. "Bella Farmington, if you're present, stand with your hands up!" And the two men went in. There was a lit lantern hanging from a slanted, termite chewed beam, offering a fair amount of light. And not the safe kind of lantern, either. If that thing fell over, this place would go up in flames. There wasn't much to look at. The place was so caved in that there was barely enough room to stand, and what space there was had dirty blankets, a pile of stained pillows, a milk crate filled with magazines and snack food, a bowl with what looked like rusty water in it, a bra hanging from a hook, a small campfire grill, and a pile of discarded needles. No sign of Bella, or anyone else for that matter.

"Lantern's really hot. Been lit for awhile, man." Daryl said, lowering his gun after touching the lamp. He holstered his weapon, watching Rick do the same. "Maybe she split, forgot she left it on." Which wouldn't be all that unusual. Meth heads barely functioned like people after time.

"I feel like we're chasing ghosts." Rick said, putting his hands on his hips and peering around. "Obviously, these places are drug hangouts. But that doesn't mean they're Bella's." He glanced at Daryl, and Daryl sighed lightly.

"You think she gave us the list to have us runnin round? What sense does that make?" Daryl asked, crouching down by the blankets and pillows, using a stick to turn things over.

"None, unless she's not the one the list came from." Rick said, and Daryl glanced at him.

"You think Dusty's behind the list?" Daryl asked, pausing before looking at the pile of needles. He and Rick had talked in length about Daryl's reservations toward Dusty. It was mutually agreed they couldn't trust him, and that they'd have to talk to him in length later. In the meantime, something seemed off about the pile of needles he was staring at. He couldn't quite put his finger on what. They'd have to confiscate them, either way. But he'd noticed something about all the needles they'd found during their search. "Rick, look at this..." he said, realizing what had been eating at him. Rick came over and crouched beside him. "They're in a neat pile. Like someone just dumped them out of a container."
"Which... doesn't happen with users. They just drop them where they sit or stand." Rick mused. "These were planted." Rick glanced at Daryl who nodded.

"They all were. We found plenty of needles and drugs, but they were all in piles like this. Someone's yankin our fuckin chain, man." Daryl stood up, looking around. "Whoever it is wants us searching these places, but not for Bella." Daryl tossed the stick he'd been using to poke around with. Both he and Rick were quiet for a moment, peering around. Then they went to work, in a wordless agreement that whatever it was they were looking for now had to be far more important than Bella Farmington.

They'd searched every place equally as well, but there was an urgency now. Like they were being watched and needed to figure out what the fuck was going on before something blew up in their faces. They spent nearly two hours, literally leaving nothing to chance. Daryl was seriously beginning to think this was all a huge waste of time when he heard Rick whistle at him from outside. He stepped out, coming around the back corner of the barn where he saw Rick near a wheel barrow missing its wheels. He had flipped it over, revealing a ratty and filthy bathmat that was laid flat over something that seemed squarish.

"Bet ya a hundred bucks there's a dead animal under there." Daryl said, and Rick chuckled. "No thanks. My luck, I'll end up owing you double." Rick replied, crouching down and reaching forward with a gloved hand to pull the bathmat back. "Shit. I should have bet." Rick said, looking up at Daryl. It was a half buried lock box. Water proof and sealed with a combination lock. They both dug it up together. It was about the size of a shoe box, but heavier. There was something sliding around on the inside. "Let's get the needles and bring this back to the station. Want to cover our bases while we open it." Rick said, standing with it in hand. Daryl made sure to check the hole one more time. They did one more once over, called in that they were headed back to the station and for Andrews to pull out the lock kit for when they got back. Then they put the needles and box in the back of the truck, inside Rick's long, steel padlock box.

"I wish I knew what Dusty's part is in all of this." Daryl said, one elbow leaned against his window as Rick drove. "Alise was scared shitless, man. And I'm tellin ya... something's really goin on with him. I don't like it. If he made Alise give us this list, then he's the one who sent us lookin for evidence that could incriminate him. I jus don't get it."

"Makes me wonder where Bella Farmington really is. When we get back to the station, update the APB. Wild goose chase or not, we need to find her." Rick said, one hand on the wheel, the other on his thigh. An old dump truck started coming down the long road in the opposite direction. And at first they didn't think anything of it, till it started to pick up speed. "What the hell?" Rick muttered.

And suddenly the truck veered toward them.

"Look out!" Daryl yelled, gripping the door and the seat beneath him. Rick yanked the wheel, his truck lurching sideways. But not in time. The bigger dump truck rammed right into the front left corner, causing Rick's truck to fishtail and suddenly flip, rolling four times and landing back on its tires in a ditch near a field on the opposite side of the road. It all happened so insanely fast. The crunching of metal, the shattering of glass, the sensation of being tumbled like clothes in a dryer, but harder and much faster.

Daryl was dazed. Everything hurt, and everything buzzed. He breathed heavily, blinking, bringing a hand up to wipe blood out of one eye. "Rick..." he muttered, turning to Rick who was just as battered as Daryl felt, but he was moving, just as slowly and dazed as Daryl was. They heard the sound of an engine, then the release of an air break as the dump truck stopped nearby. Daryl undid his seat belt, instantly feeling the release of pressure from his chest and nearly doubling over from the
loss of something holding him in place. Rick did the same.

"Someone's comin..." Rick breathed out, staring at the shattered pieces of the rear view mirror at a figure all in black with a ski mask in place. Rick tried his door, but it wouldn't budge, part of it caved in. Daryl's handle had bent inward and he couldn't pull it open. He then decided to knock out the rest of the glass that was left of his broken passenger window, using his elbow. Rick pulled his gun. But then there was a clanking sound, a hiss. And suddenly the cab was filled with gas. Daryl's lungs burned instantly, but more than that, he began to feel drowsy.

BZ gas? Seriously? Who the fuck used BZ gas outside of the military? Rick and Daryl tried fruitlessly to get out of the busted truck. But the gas took hold of them so quickly that Daryl ended up just slumping against the door, half hanging out the window. Rick slumped against the wheel, the sound of his horn blaring the last thing Daryl remembered before he woke up again.

* * *

He felt Rick shaking him. The horn was no longer blaring. Daryl's chest hurt from where he'd been leaning, his scar throbbing. "Fuck..." he muttered, straightening back out and taking in a deep breath, rubbing his torso. He took a good, long look at Rick. He had a blossoming bruise on the side of his face, and he had a cut on his neck. He was also cradling his left arm, and giving Daryl a good long look, too.

"The box is open." Rick said, motioning with his head to the bed of the truck. They both seemed to clench their jaws at the same time. Daryl crawled out of the truck first, through his busted window, then helped Rick do the same. They both ended up falling back onto the grass in the ditch, breathing heavily. "Shit..." Rick muttered, "Think I dislocated my shoulder." He said, sitting up but still cradling his arm. Daryl just laid there for a moment, staring up at the graying sky. He was rubbing his torso lightly. "You okay, brother?"

"Dunno." Daryl said, then sat up. "Ask me later." He used the busted truck to help him stand, then put a hand out to Rick, helping him up. They both went to the bed of the truck and found Rick's truck box completely open and empty. Not only were the drugs and needles they'd collected gone, but so was the lockbox they'd found. Daryl let out a sigh, then just sat down on the open tailgate, the whole truck protesting for a moment. Rick sat next to him. "Well... that was a hell of a plot twist." Daryl said plainly, wiping idly at the blood painting the side of his face, flowing from a gash over his brow. Rick just glanced at him, then smirked and shook his head.

"We should probably call this in." Rick said, plucking a piece of glass off his arm.

"Ladies first." Daryl said, just before laying down in the bed of the truck, his legs hanging off the tailgate. He sighed, holding his torso. Rick shook his head again. Then slid off the tailgate to go back toward the front of the truck. He picked the handheld radio off the seat and brought it back, sitting again. After calling it in, and requesting an ambulance, he laid down beside Daryl, legs hanging like his. "I think we're off our game, man. We totally just got our asses handed to us." Daryl said after a moment. He heard Rick sigh.

"This was all a set up. That asshole was probably following us the whole time, tracking the radio." Rick mused, and Daryl just blinked up at the sky.

"It was Dusty. Had to be." He said angrily, an edge of scratchiness to his tone.

"Why? What possible motive would he have for all this?" Rick asked, glancing sideways at Daryl who met his gaze unflinchingly.
"What if..." he paused, then looked back up at the sky. "What if he killed Merle, and Wedge caught it on film and the kid hid the evidence in that lockbox? What if Dusty sent us on this wild goose chase because he couldn't find it, and he knew we probably could?"

"If that's true, why let us live?" Rick furrowed his brows, bringing a hand up to touch the still bleeding cut on his neck. "He has to know we'd put two and two together, that we'll hunt his ass down."

"He owes me." Daryl said quietly, then let his hand fall away from his ribs. "Or he thinks he does." Everything felt sore, stiff. His head felt like it was filled with rocks, and his torso made things ache inside that he hadn't felt since he'd woken up in the hospital after the explosion.

After a few moments of silence, the distant sound of sirens could be heard heading in their direction. Rick looked at Daryl, then. "Why kill Merle in the first place?" Daryl turned his head, meeting his questioning stare.

"When we find him, that'll be the first thing I ask him." Daryl replied. A few moments later, a fire truck, an ambulance, two other deputies and a pair of troopers showed up, one after the other. As Rick gave orders and the paramedics tried to get both him and Daryl to cooperate with an examination, Daryl couldn't stop thinking about everything that had happened. All this time, it had been Dusty who'd killed his brother. So the new theory went, anyway. But it was all that made sense to him.

Question was, why? Why go through all this trouble? They never would have known to look for the lockbox if Dusty had just disposed of the boy's body in the first place. Was whatever evidence inside it really that important? And where was Bella Farmington? And what had Dusty done to Alise to make her go along with all of this? Again, there were far more questions than answers. And even less they could prove, especially now that whoever had been driving the dump truck had stolen the only possible evidence they'd had.

Daryl was not new to hard cases or tough times. But when this was all over, he was seriously considering just taking Samantha on vacation, somewhere far from Georgia, on a mountain or a beach, where all he had to worry about was making her happy, and sleeping in.

First thing's first, though. He was going to hunt Dusty down, get his answers, one way or another. Someone was going to pay for Merle and Marcus Wedge. Daryl, and Rick, would make damn sure of that...
"I need some air."

Five stitches over his eyebrow, bruises on top of bruises, and what the doctor called 'inflamed scar tissue', and Daryl looked like he’d gone ten rounds with Hercules. Rick wasn't any better. He'd dislocated his shoulder and needed stitches on his neck. Other than that, he was just as bruised and battered as Daryl was. Truthfully, they were both lucky to be alive. They'd survived a roll over, for goodness sake. And Sam? Well, she was angry.

Daryl hadn't called her. Neither had Rick. No one had told her what happened. She had to find out nearly four hours later when Daryl walked through their door, stiff and battered. "I ain't dead. And we still had work to do." He grumbled at her, staring her down. She had her arms crossed over her chest, fuming at him.

"This happened to you hours ago!" Sam blurted out, shaking her head at him. "Dammit, Daryl!" She huffed, letting her arms fall, motioning one hand at him. "You could have died! You both could have, and you didn't think it was important to, gee, I dunno, tell your fiancee you're still kicking?!" She nearly yelled. Daryl furrowed his brows.

"I didn't want to worry you. I know you, you woulda come runnin. And there was no point in it. We're both gonna be fine, and with everythin that's goin on we decided to jus keep workin." He tossed his jacket down on the couch, wincing ever so slightly. "Shit, you act like I committed a crime or somethin." He stepped past her, unbuttoning his blood stained deputy shirt, heading for the bedroom. She followed close on his heels.

"Is this how it's going to be?" She asked, her face hot with anger. "Am I going to have to worry every damn day and night that something has happened? Am I going to have to sit by a phone and wait for a call from some stranger saying you're in the hospital, or worse... that you aren't coming home?!" She demanded, her voice getting louder and louder, watching him peel his shirt off while she yelled. That was when she saw all the bruises beneath. His torso, where his valley of scars was, had grown purple and angry. And there was a strip of a bruise across his chest where the seat belt had been. "Oh my god..." she said, moving toward him, her hands going up to her own cheeks as she stared at the damage.

"It's fine, Sam. Doc says I jus need to take it easy for a few days." He said, his hands at his sides. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't call." His voice had grown softer, but there was still agitation on his features, mingled with confusion. "What's gotten into you?" She lifted her gaze from his bruise, staring at his blue eyes and letting her hands fall.

Wait... what had gotten into her?

"I have to ask, is it tough? Being with a cop, I mean?" She heard Bill's voice in her head, from their earlier conversation. She felt herself go still. Was that why she was so mad? Daryl was right, it wasn't life or death. He and Rick were both going to be fine. And not wanting her to worry was just Daryl trying to protect her. But that didn't settle the unease in her heart. Her stomach ached with the idea that Daryl could have died, that her brother could have. But it was more than that. She'd worried all morning till she had lunch with Daryl and he told her what he could about meeting with Dusty. Afterward, she'd felt better. But knowing that Daryl had been following a lead that Dusty had taken him to made her edgy. It wasn't till he'd come home a little after ten, all battered and bruised, that she realized how edgy it had made her.

Was this going to be her lot in this relationship? Worrying about the man she loved every single day for the rest of their lives? Was she going to have to come to terms with the fact that someday, Daryl
might not come home at all?

She shook her head a little, "I need some air." She said softly, and turned, leaving Daryl standing there alone. She went out to the porch, sitting on the swing immediately and just... breathing. She closed her eyes, clasping her hands together in her lap. That was three times now since she'd met Daryl that he'd been hurt badly. First it was the ax to his side. Then the explosion which really had nearly killed him. And now this? How many more times would she have to have her heart strangled by fear? She felt a tear escape her eye. Then another. And before she knew it, she was crying. She couldn't really stop it. And once it started, she didn't want to.

She heard the screen door open a moment later, and buried her face in her hands, hearing the sound of Daryl's boots on the deck. But he didn't touch her. She let her hands fall, wiping her cheeks as she did. She sobbed out a little, looking up at him. He had put a clean t-shirt on and was just standing there watching her, confusion and worry all over his face, his hands empty at his sides like he just didn't know what he was supposed to do. He shifted on his feet a little, as though he wanted to close the distance between them but wasn't sure she wanted him to. He looked so guilty, but at the same time like he had no idea why. She shook her head, mostly at herself.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, then laughed a little. Why was she sorry? The whole situation was just... damn confusing. She wiped her face with her sleeves, then lifted her feet, hugging her knees to her chest and staring up at him. "It's not supposed to be like this, ya know? Loving someone... it's not supposed to hurt. I'm not supposed to feel dread every day. You being a deputy, a cop..." she shook her head, "I guess I didn't realize it was going to be this hard.

Daryl became very still, the confusion on his face ebbing away to a sorrowed understanding. And he let his eyes drift away from her, slipping his hands into his jean pockets. "You knew what I did for work when you met me." He said, his voice a raspy softness that made her skin tingle in the chill night air. "We've talked about this, how it ain't always gonna be safe. I can't always be behind a desk." He looked back at her. "And I can't change jobs to somethin else." He searched her face. "Sam, this is what I do. It's what I'm good at. I make a difference. I would never expect you to be anythin but what you are. Don't ask me to change now, not after everythin." He faced her again, standing a few feet away. "I'd do jus about anythin for you." He swallowed a little. "But I can't do that."

Sam knew he was right. Becoming a Deputy had saved him, in more ways than one. It had given him purpose and a chance to be something so much more than what life wanted him to be. She couldn't ask him to give that up, not after he'd worked so hard to get to where he was. That would be beyond selfish, considering how much he supported her and encouraged her to follow her own path. And really, she would never even consider asking Daryl to quit the Sheriff's Department. "Daryl..." she met his gaze and felt more tears choke her voice. She let out a shaken breath. "God, I love you so much. The idea of something happening to you..." she shook her head, cracking a sad smile, "I don't think I could survive it. I'm just not that strong.

He let out a slow breath, pulling his hands from his pockets and moving toward her. He crouched stiffly in front of her, placing his hands to either side of her where she sat on the porch swing. "You've survived hell. Literally." He said firmly. "I can't promise you that somethin won't happen to me. Shit, I could slip on a damn banana peel tomorrow." He shook his head a little. "I know this ain't easy on you. And I'm sorry I left you in the dark. The fact you've been willin to stick with me this long, that's everythin." God, his face. The expression on it. So much love and so much pleading in his eyes. She let her hands fall from her knees, slipping her feet to the deck and moving her fingers to his cheeks. "Last thing I want is to hurt you, Sam." He brought a hand up, covering one of hers, leaning his cheek into her touch. "I'll never ask you to do somethin you don't think you can."
Shit. Why did he have to be so good and understanding? Why couldn't he just tell her she was being irrational and childish? She slipped out of the seat, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, feeling his arms enfolding her instantly. He held her, wordlessly, as she breathed, squeezing her eyes shut.

He'd do it. He'd let her leave if he thought that was what she needed. And he wouldn't try to stop her. He wouldn't keep her prisoner in something she didn't want. And knowing that? Well, it only made her love him so much more. If he could do that for her, do something that would ultimately hurt him horribly, then she could do this. She could deal with his work and the knowledge that he was in danger. And she could do it with her head held high, proud of who he was and the sacrifices made.

It wasn't going to be easy. If just this incident was any indication, it was going to be damn hard. But for him? She'd move mountains to make it happen.

"I love you." She said, holding him tighter. He didn't seem to care, he didn't act like she was hurting him. He just held her tighter, pressing his face to her neck and breathing her in. "I'm sorry." She pulled away after a moment, searching his eyes, holding his face in her hands. "Forgive me for being so stupidly scared?" She whispered. And he just furrowed his brows a little.

"Ain't nothin to forgive." He kissed her softly, then stood with her in his arms, getting them both to their feet. "Let's make a deal... I promise to make sure you know if I so much as get a paper cut on the job. And you promise not to keep all this locked up inside, that you'll talk to me about it so you don't end up feelin so trapped."

She took in a deep breath, feeling her lungs expand. "Promise." She said, and hugged him, pressing the side of her face to his chest to hear his heartbeat. It was always so steady and strong. Always so very real.

Sometimes she wondered if they'd moved too fast. Coming together, getting engaged, all in a relatively short amount of time. But then things like this happened, where they should be having a knock down drag out fight like a normal couple when instead they seemed to know exactly how to fix things. And she realized it didn't matter if they'd been together two weeks or fifty years, they'd still be perfect together. Because they listened, they understood, they compromised and talked. They loved each other more than anyone else, and had gotten so quickly and surely to the point where life wasn't life without each other.

He was her best friend, her rock, her lover. And even though they would continue to hit bumps in the road, have misunderstandings or even hurt each other along the way, she had no doubts they'd always find their way back to each other. They were connected in a way she couldn't explain, and didn't completely understand. And that was okay. She didn't need to understand why, just that it was. And as long as she was willing to fight for him, like he was for her, she would always be home. Right there in Daryl's arms.
"Oh, please, Daryl!"

Chapter Notes

(The lyrics in this are from the song Humble and Kind by Tim McGraw. Enjoy!)

Taking a day off to relax turned into babysitting his god-daughter. Not that he was complaining in the least. Maggie and Glenn had barely enough time for themselves these days between the baby and the farm. He could give them some much needed quiet time. It wasn't like he was doing anything else.

Both he and Rick felt like shit. The day after being rolled in a truck like a pair of pinballs had left them less than stellar. They both agreed they needed a day. Though Daryl was sure Michonne wouldn't have let Rick leave even if he'd wanted to. Sometimes both Daryl and Rick could get caught up in their work, so much so that they forgot to take care of themselves. They were lucky they had such amazing women in their lives.

Samantha was at her studio today. Work didn't stop for her. So it was just Daryl and little Anna Beth at the cabin, Jasper lazing around somewhere. The dark haired little princess was relaxing in Daryl's arms as he rocked her in the lounge chair in the living room. Daryl was sore as hell, but any chance to hold that little bug was not something he'd pass up.

There was no chance in hell that Daryl thought he'd be a good dad. He was just far too rough around the edges, and there was this ever present fear that he'd turn out like his own Dad in the end. No kid deserved that. But he could be a kick ass unofficial uncle and a kickass godfather.

Her dark little eyes were blinking up at him, heavy lidded, happily fed and content just to stare up at his scruffy face as she slowly worked her way into sleep. She was fighting it a little. "Come on now, bug. Go to sleep." He said, his raspy tone making her lift the corner of her mouth in a lazy half smile.

It was only around ten in the morning, but Maggie had made sure to tell him she would need a nap before noon.

Anna Beth raised her little hand, awkwardly grappling for Daryl's shirt. "None of that, kid." He said, grabbing her chubby little hand and slipping it back into her fuzzy pink and green blanket. "If Sam were here, she'd jus sing and you'd conk right out." Anna Beth gave a slight squeak at that, then yawned a little before making her hand escape again. "Hey, knock it off, you." He tucked her hand back in. Then sighed a little.

"How bout I sing to ya?" He asked, pausing the rocking and shifting her a little higher into his arms, crossing his ankle over the opposite knee before settling her again. "Can't promise it'll be great, cause I ain't no singer. What does your Momma sing to you?" He asked, running his fingers through her baby soft hair. "Probably some lullaby. Don't know any of those." He muttered, watching her heavy eyes blink at him. She was such a good baby. Hardly ever fussy. And she had a killer little smile. Every inch as pretty as Maggie, and just as good-natured as Glenn. Kid got the best of both. "How bout a country song?" He asked, thinking as he turned his gaze to watch Jasper saunter over to the still open porch door. It wasn't too cold out, and he was trying to let the house air out for a bit. "Let's try this one." He finally said, and started rocking again.

*You know there's a light that grows by the front door,*
don't forget the key's under the mat.
When childhood stars shine, always stay humble and kind.

Go to church cause your Momma says to,
Visit grandpa every chance that you can.
It won't be wasted time, always stay humble and kind.'

Anna Beth grew still in his arms, listening to him, eyes fighting the tired and yet completely focused on him. He just kept rocking, guessing she wasn't protesting the sound of his voice.

'Hold the door. Say please, say thank you.
Don't steal, don't cheat, don't lie.
I know you got mountains to climb, but always stay humble and kind.'

When the dreams you're dreamin come to you,
When the work you put in is realized,
let yourself feel the pride. But always stay humble and kind.'

She began to close her eyes, her breathing steady and comfortable. Her blinks were barely blinks at this point...

'Don't expect a free ride from no one,
Don't hold a grudge or a chip, and here's why:
Bitterness keeps you from flyin. Always stay humble and kind.

Know the difference between sleeping with someone
and sleeping with someone you love.
'I love you' ain't no pick up line. Always stay humble and kind.

When it's hot, eat a root beer popsicle.
Shut off the AC and roll the windows down.
Let the summer sun shine. Always stay humble and kind.

Don't take for granted the love this life gives you.
When you get where you're goin, don't forget to turn back around.
And help the next one in line. Always stay humble and kind...'

It wasn't till he'd finished the song that Anna Beth was well and truly asleep, the only sounds now were the little breaths she made and the slight creak of the chair rocking. When he looked up from her peaceful little face, that's when he saw Sam standing in the open doorway watching with the most beautiful expression. She met his gaze, smiling so warmly that he could feel it in his bones. She moved over to them, crouching down in front of him and gliding her fingers through Anna Beth's black hair. But her eyes were on Daryl, giving him a look that made his heart skip a few hundred beats.

"You're amazing." She said softly, her voice breaking the silence. He raised a brow at that, and she shook her head a little at him. "You always surprise me, Daryl Dixon."

"What'd I do now?" He asked, smiling lightly, his voice a gruff warm tone. She slipped her rear back onto the coffee table, sitting across from him, her eyes moving to the very asleep little girl in his arms.

"I've never heard you sing before." She said, slipping her messenger bag off her shoulder and letting it rest on the floor, plopping her keys down on top of it with a soft jingle.

"Yeah, that's cause I'm awful at it." He replied, glancing down at the baby who turned her head in
her sleep.

"She seemed to like it." Sam replied. He smirked at that.

"She's a bug. She don't know any better." He stood then, very carefully, and brought Anna Beth to the little travel bassinet that Maggie had dropped off with her. He laid her down carefully, tucking that stubborn little hand of hers back in and standing up, stretching his sore muscles a bit. He felt Sam's arms come around him from behind, her hands clasping just below his belly button.

"For the record, I like it, too." She said softly, pressing her cheek to his back. He slipped a hand over hers and stroked her fingers lightly. Then he turned, facing her, pulling her gently into him.

"Hope yer not goin tone deaf all of a sudden." He smirked at her, and she tilted her head at him, grinning a little. "Cause I sound like a dyin moose." She laughed a little at that. It was such a good sound. Her laugh always made him feel lighter. She stepped back, poking him in the arm and turned toward where her bag was.

"You don't give yourself enough credit." She said, picking her bag and keys up. "Besides, I'm the expert here and I think you sound... comfortably intoxicating." She looked at him, practically beaming. He cringed a little, slipping his hands into his pockets.

"Don't go tellin no one that. You'll ruin my reputation." He said, and she smiled again. "What're you doin home, anyway? Thought you had some meetin with that acapella group of yours." He said, moving slightly toward her as she rifled through her bag, dropping her keys in, pulling out her phone and then dropping the bag onto the chair he'd previously been in.

"I was supposed to, but the twins are sick and my only other soprano broke her arm this morning. So," She smiled at him, "I decided to take the rest of the day off to spend with you."

"Really?" He said, reaching up and smoothing some hair out of her face.

"Really." She said, and then tapped a few buttons on her phone. "And I also really wanted to show you this." She turned the screen toward him so he could see what was on it. Daryl raised both brows, then looked at her.

"It's... a poodle." He said blandly. And she nodded immediately, turning the phone back to look at the picture herself.

"Not just any poodle. This is Dilly. And one of the parents of the kids I teach is trying to find a home for her. Guess Dilly belonged to her mother but she's in hospice care and they just can't keep the poor dog. I met her this morning, and she's amazing! She's so well trained and sweet. And she's so pretty! Look at her face!" Sam said, turning the phone back toward him. He chuckled a little.

"I see that. And again... it's a poodle. We've already got a cat. And a horse." He said, watching her face. What the hell were they going to do with a dog? If you could call that white fluffy stick legged thing a dog.

"So what's one more animal?" She grinned at him. "Oh, please, Daryl!" She moved into him and gripped his shirt. "Pretty, pretty please?!" He let out a huff of a laugh.

"The thing will be home alone all the time. Not exactly like I can take it to work." Daryl replied. Sam nodded.

"Right, but I can! She can come to the studio with me every day." She got up on her tip toes then, meeting him face to face. "Please, Daryl! I promise she'll be amazing." He let out a deep sigh then,
and folded his arms around her, kissing her lightly.

"I hate that I can't say no to you." He said against her mouth. And she squealed, giddy as all heck, kissing him more firmly before practically bouncing away.

"I'm going to call right now!" She said, moving toward the kitchen and sitting down. He watched her warmly as she spoke on the phone, not moving from the spot she'd left him in. When she hung up, she turned to grin at him. "Her cousin is going to drop Dilly off around two. I'm so excited!" She said, hopping a bit in her seat.

"Well, we ain't shavin that thing like cotton candy on sticks. So don't be gettin yer hopes up about it bein all fancy." He said, coming to sit across from her. She giggled a little at him.

"She already is." She said. "But I promise we won't once her hair grows in."

"Can't believe I let you talk me into this." He said, relaxing back in the chair, rubbing his torso lightly.

"You'll love her, wait and see." She slipped her phone back into her pocket.

"I love you. That's all that matters." He said, watching her face light up for the billionth time in a matter of minutes. It never ceased to amaze him how much he was willing to do for Sam. He'd give her the world if he could. Seeing her happy? Seeing her smile? It was all he wanted. He'd kill for her, die for her. And it didn't scare him in the least. He wasn't sure what that said about him. But it didn't really matter. He'd live with a horde of poodles to make her life better.

Ugh, poodles. He nearly facepalmed himself. He was so not a poodle kind of guy. "And it better be a good guard dog at least, to make up for the floofiness." He added, and she laughed, filling the room with her joy.
"Catch you for some coffee later?"

The knock at the door made her squeal, Daryl sitting on the living room floor with the wiggly Anna Beth looked up and chuckled lightly as Sam sprang up and practically skidded for the door, nearly running over Jasper who was laying with her big belly splayed, completely uncaring. She practically yanked the door open, just too excited for words about Dilly.

But the moment she saw who was standing there with the dog, she froze.

"Hello, Samantha." Bill Geary said, holding a large dog crate in one hand and Dilly's leash in the other. Dilly was sitting on the porch patiently, wagging her stumpy tail up at Sam.

"Bill." She said, one word, letting her hand fall off the handle. "You're Willow Tomlin's cousin?"

Bill smiled warmly, scruffing Dilly's head slightly.

"Hell of a coincidence, huh?" He said, and then glanced over Sam's head. She knew instantly who he was looking at. "Deputy Dixon." Bill said, smiling and extending the hand that had the leash. Daryl reached past Sam, shaking firmly.

"You two know each other?" Daryl asked when their hands separated. Suddenly, Sam felt insanely awkward.

"We met at the river yesterday." Sam replied, glancing behind her at Daryl who had a quiet and unreadable expression on his face. Pretty much the same expression he always had when he met new people. "Let's get the dog in. Hi Dilly!" Sam said, needing to put her attention into something other than the beefcake sandwich she was standing in the middle of. She took the leash from Bill, leading Dilly in and unhooking the leash, petting and hugging the partially fluffy canine, who was all for the love, practically melding into her as she sat on the floor in the living room near Anna Beth. Daryl helped Bill with the crate, bringing it in and setting it near the couch.

"There're toys inside, dog food, bowls, treats and her blanket. She's crate trained so she'll sleep in there at night. And when she needs to go out, she rings a bell..." Bill opened the crate and pulled out a jingle bell that hung on a chain, "Have to hang it from your door handle." He said, smiling lightly, setting it on top of the crate. "Dog's better trained than most people."

"It looks like a package of pom-poms." Daryl said flatly, and Bill chuckled.

"Never understood the whole shaving a poodle to look like fluffy balloons thing." Bill replied, standing near Daryl's side, watching Sam pet Dilly. Then he looked at Anna Beth when she squealed, her little hands trying to grab at Dilly's tail. "And who's this?" He asked, smiling brightly. Sam cracked a light smile, having to look away.

"This is Anna Beth, Daryl's god-daughter." She said, reaching over and smoothing her hand over the baby's dark hair.

"She's beautiful. You're one lucky guy." Bill said, looking at Daryl who had his arms crossed over his chest in that way of his.

"I know it." He said in affirmation, smiling ever so slightly at Sam who just felt herself blush brightly. "So you two met at the river? What were you doin that deep in the woods?" He asked Bill casually.

"I work for the ranger service. We're doing surveys for the Georgia State Park Expansion. I was
following the river to track migrations and animal routes when I ran into Samantha." Bill replied, looking down at her. "Best cup of coffee I had in awhile. Thanks again for that." He said to her. She refused to look at him, feeling her heart thumping in her chest like a battering ram without having any idea why.

"Of course." She said, hugging the dog into her lap. Dilly just flopped into her, completely happy to have the attention.

"How's life in the rangers?" Daryl asked amicably. He didn't seem to have any problem with the fact that Sam had invited some strange man to their house for coffee. Liam would have beaten her for weeks if he'd found out. Did Daryl really trust her that much? She looked up at him, the expression on his face. It was still that calm blank, the one that said he didn't know this man but was willing to be friendly. The one that said he was comfortable in his own skin and whatever situation he was currently in. He was so sure about who and what he was, that he felt no threat whatsoever.

"It's got its finer points. Love being outside, so there's that. Not nearly as exciting as being a deputy, I'd imagine." He motioned to the fresh stitches on Daryl's forehead. "You okay?" Daryl raised a brow, like he'd forgotten all about the fact he was battered and bruised.

"Oh, yeah. No big. Just an accident." He said. Which wasn't exactly the truth, but he couldn't really elaborate. It was technically information pertaining to an ongoing investigation. Even Sam didn't know all the details. Just that someone had driven Daryl and Rick off the road. Bill nodded at Daryl.

"Well, glad you're okay." He smiled warmly. "I won't hold you folks up." He extended a hand to Daryl, who shook it firmly. Then he looked down at Sam. "Catch you for some coffee later?" He asked, and she blinked up at him, completely stunned that he'd just asked her that out loud, in front of Daryl.

"S-sure." She stuttered, then forced herself to smile.

"Great. Have a good afternoon everyone." He said, waving idly as he headed out the door. Daryl walked him out, leaving her sitting there with a dog in her arms and a baby wiggling on the floor and feeling all sorts of confused and speechless.

"Let's take a look at this dog." Daryl said, coming back to where she was, sitting on the floor near her. "Come here, mutt." He said, and Dilly, who didn't seem to register she was just called a name, sprang out of Sam's arms and straight into Daryl's. She curled up in Daryl's lap just like she'd done with Sam. "At least yer smart." Daryl said, cracking that half smile of his. Was he not going to mention anything about Bill? Was he really okay with the fact that Sam had made a friend with a man? Daryl held Dilly's face in his hands, staring at the canine. "You look like a package of cotton balls." He said gruffly. Dilly just wagged her tail.

"You're beautiful, don't listen to him." Sam smiled, despite herself, scooting closer and running her fingers down Dilly's back before reaching over and scooping up Anna Beth, sitting her gently in her lap. The baby sat there, wide eyed and babbling. Daryl let the dog go, and Dilly stood up, wandering over to Jasper who hadn't moved an inch. The cat peered up at the dog like a lint ball would have been far more entertaining. Sam watched Daryl rub his torso lightly. "You okay?" Sam asked, furrowing her brows in soft worry.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He said plainly. Daryl never complained. Even when he'd been half dead and in more pain than anyone could imagine, he hadn't complained. He just took whatever was ailing him in stride, and toughed his way through it.

"Why don't you ever whine like a normal person?" She asked then, grinning a little. Daryl met her
gaze and chuckled.

"No point. Don't do any good to bitch about somethin no one can change." He reached over and let Anna Beth grip his finger, which she instantly tried to put in her mouth. "Besides, what would that teach this bug?" He grinned a little, tugging his finger back, then tickling Anna Beth a bit. She giggled, nearly flopping over in Sam's hold.

"Are you... are you okay with me having coffee with Bill?" She asked then. She just needed to know. She felt guilty and had no real clue why. And as much as she'd convinced herself earlier that she shouldn't be friends with Bill Geary, she realized she really wanted to. She wanted to be able to make her own friends without going through other people. She wouldn't change her circle of friends and family for anything, but still... she wanted to know she was capable of making friends on her own. Daryl shrugged.

"Course." One word, and that was that. There was no hesitation, no awkwardness in his tone. He was just simply fine with it, as though it would never have occurred to him not to be. He looked at her, and raised a brow, seeing the once again stunned expression on her face. "Sam, I ain't gonna tell you who your friends should be. You wanna hang out with that Bill guy, then go ahead." She let out a breath, then shook her head a little.

"You really trust me that much?" She asked, her voice soft. Sometimes, she could forget the hell Liam had put her through. Daryl made it easy to forget, he was just so good to her. But every now and then, Liam's voice would assault her conscience.

"You bet yer pretty ass I do." Daryl said firmly. Then leaned forward and kissed her forehead before standing up. "Come on. What say we take this mutt for a walk?" He asked, holding a hand down to her with a smile. She stood, baby hooked in her arm, and she kissed him the moment she was on her feet. A sweet, loving kiss.

"I don't deserve you." She said when the kiss ended. And he smiled at her.

"Think you got that backwards." He said, winking at her. "I'll get the baby carrier." He said, then kissed her once more and went down the hall. She stood there, turning Anna Beth in her arms and holding her up against her shoulder. She hugged the little one, letting out a deep sigh. Dilly wandered back over to her, wagging her little stump of a tail.

"I don't think I do." She said to no one in particular, smiling brightly, feeling tingly and happy from head to toe. Life just couldn't get any better. She had Daryl, she had a dog, an amazing family and incredible friends, a business of her own and the peace of mind that her life was safe and secure like it had never been before she'd come back to Athens. She had no idea what she'd done to deserve such heaven. But she sure as hell wasn't going to waste a minute of it...
"And I think Dusty did it."

Chapter Notes

Warning: Blood, violence, death.

It was hard to imagine that the charred stack of ashen lumps he was staring at had once been human. If it hadn't been for a portion of the skull and a few other pieces of bone still being intact, the boy scouts who'd found the remains never would have thought twice about reporting it.

"Female." Denise Cloyd, lead at the County Coroner’s office, was crouched over the remnants behind the practically ancient rock wall in the middle of the woods. "See here?" She was pointing one gloved hand at a portion of intact pelvic bone. "The ilia is wider, and the sacrum tilted back." She looked up at Daryl and Rick, using the pen in her other hand to push her glasses higher up on her face. "Definitely female."

"Anything else you can tell us about her?" Rick asked, stepping a little around the pile of ash and bone. He had one arm in a sling, his shoulder long since reset but still tender. The bruise on his face was a blushed purple and gray hue. Denise shrugged.

"Not till I get the remains back. Honestly, though," She stood up, meeting Rick's gaze, "There's so little bone left. Whatever accelerant was used to do this, it did pretty thorough work. I may be able to get an ID from dental records, but that's going to take time. And as for a cause of death..." she looked down at the remains and sighed a little. "Right now, your guess is as good as mine. What's left of the bones is so degraded, any crack or split could just be a result of the intense heat. It's going to be hard as hell to determine if a fracture was caused by injury or caused by the burning process."

"Just do what you can. Consider this a priority. I'll get the judge to push it through if you catch any shit." Rick said, and Denise nodded, crouching again. Rick moved over to Daryl who'd stepped off to the side of the cleared area. Whoever had started the fire had made sure it wouldn't catch the surrounding area. All debris had been cleared, straight down to dirt. And the rock wall had been used to isolate the flames, the body set inside the corner where the old wall turned. They didn't want the fire to spread. They just wanted to dispose of the body. Asshole with a conscience? Or maybe they just wanted less of a chance that the body would be found? If those boy scouts hadn't been out hunting for mushrooms, this haphazard fiery burial might never have been discovered. "Tell me what you're thinking, brother." Rick said calmly beside him. Daryl looked at him, clenching his jaw a little.

"This couldn't have happened more than a day ago. There was rain before that, and everythin's dry." He crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head a little. "This all seem a little coincidental to you?" He asked, watching Rick's face. "We get our bells rung on the road, Alise goes missin, can't find Dusty anywhere, and now this?" Rick met Daryl's gaze quietly for a moment, then nodded.

"You think it's Alise." He stated. And Daryl nodded once.

"And I think Dusty did it." Daryl added. Rick let out a sigh.

"It's all theory, man. All of it. Dusty's involvement in your brother and Marcus' deaths. His coercing Alise into giving us that list. Him being the one who ran us off the road and stole the lock box. And
now this..." He looked over at the charred remains. "We can't prove any of it. We've got a lot of conjecture and not a lick of physical evidence."

"I get that, but Rick..." He let his hands fall, stepping closer to his friend, "My gut is tellin me, this is him. It's all him. I don't know why, or what the motives are, but it's him." He said in a harsh whisper. And Rick put a hand up on his shoulder.

"Then let's prove it. We know he's in pharmaceuticals. That's only a stones throw away from illegal drugs. What if he's not as clean as his record says? What if the company he's working for is paying to keep his crimes under wraps? It wouldn't be the first time." Rick offered. Daryl nodded, then slipped his hands into his pockets, Rick's hand falling from his shoulder.

"So we look into Total Pharmaceuticals, we do a thorough investigation. But that means gettin the feds involved. Without a better reason than my gut, you really think they'd take up that sort of overhaul?" Daryl asked. And Rick shrugged.

"I'll give Shane a call. He still owes me for that mess in Baltimore." Rick nudged Daryl. "We'll get him, man. It's just going to take time." Daryl watched as Rick walked away, ducking underneath the crime scene tape. It had only been over a day since they'd been rolled in the truck, but so much had happened and very quickly. He felt like they were leagues behind. Getting caught up was going to be a bitch.

Daryl watched as the CS techs and the various law enforcement personnel milled about. They were about forty minutes from any road, and a good hour from any residence. They were just within Cooke County, only a five minute walk to the border of Tift County. Though standing out here, it would be hard to tell if someone didn't know their lines. Backwoods Georgia had a way of just melting into one giant pot. It was why the ranger service was so vast, and constantly expanding their forests and protected hunting areas. He began walking away. There was very little to look for in the way of tracking. The boy scouts had mucked up the area long before law enforcement showed up. Whatever trails there would be to find were long since destroyed. But Daryl looked anyway.

Logically, he knew whoever had come all the way out here had used the old logging trails, dirt roads long since grown over but still easily passable by bigger or more rugged vehicles. Once they'd hit the dried creek bed, they'd have to go on foot for about twenty minutes to get here, unless they had an ATV, which was a possibility. But this was a hunter's haven, and ATV's were a norm. So there was no way to distinguish one set of ATV tracks from another. What he focused on, instead, were little things. A snapped twig here, a piece of thread, maybe an overturned rock... he kept his eyes peeled for everything and anything.

Tracking, for him, was second nature. As a kid, usually on his own and having to do more than most to fend for himself, he learned fast how to hunt and how to survive. Tracking was just another part of a hard past that turned out to be useful in present day life. Though at the moment he was wondering if it would even be worth it. Until...

He paused just near a rotting tree, about twenty feet from where the body had been found, crouching near the trunk. He touched a dark, wet spot, pulling his gloved finger back to see congealed red. Blood. Just a drop. But enough to make him think that whoever it was had carried the body through here. He stood and whistled high and shrill, motioning over the first CS tech who heard him. After the tech got to work putting down a mark, taking a photo and collecting a sample, Daryl kept looking.

Some ten feet more and he found vomit. Bloody, rank, full of bile and very little food. And suddenly the feet prints and path were clear. He called the tech over to mark the spot. As he stepped a little further along, he realized there were two sets of prints. One set larger and steadier than the other,
which was smaller and staggering. Nothing they could get an imprint of. But he paused, turning back to look at the vomit. The prints stopped there. As he followed the trail with his eyes back toward the blood, he realized whatever prints had gone after that point had been brushed away. But why?

It had also occurred to him that the smaller, staggering set of prints had to belong to the victim. Which meant she was alive when she was brought out here, and that was probably her vomit. She was going to die and she knew it. And there was nothing she could do about it. She was hurt, in pain, and so scared that she threw up.

But if her killer had burned her alive, why bother sweeping just this area clean? Why not brush away all the footprints? Why just the space between the body and the vomit?

The blood.

It wasn't the victim's. It was the killer's. She'd fought back. Cut him somehow, spilled enough blood to make him panic and try to clean up any drops that may have hit the ground before he could bandage it. But he'd missed one. Just one.

Daryl went back over to the tree and crouched again. If they could match the DNA from this blood sample to one in CODIS, the Combined DNA Index System, then they might have the evidence they needed to catch a killer.

To catch, if Daryl was right, Dusty Hendee.
"And then make a choice."

Dilly was sitting patiently on the sidewalk, watching Sam lock up the door to the studio. It was only around noon, but she didn't have anymore lessons for the day. She'd scheduled it so she could take a trip up to the quarter to do window shopping and pick up some more sheet music, as well as see a grass roots theater group perform Les Miserables. She'd heard great things about it, and had actually hoped Daryl would be able to come. But with the investigation still going on, he just couldn't get away. She could admit she was pretty disappointed. But she understood. He encouraged her to go anyway. She'd just have to enjoy the Victor Hugo classic turned musical all by herself.

"Samantha?" She heard a voice say and she jumped a little, squeaking and dropping her keys, turning to see Bill Geary. "Damn, I'm sorry," He chuckled a little, reaching down and picking her keys up. "You're jumpier than a kangaroo." He handed the keys out to her and she let out a sigh, smiling sheepishly.

"You really gotta stop sneaking up on me." She said. Sam tugged on the door to make sure it was well and truly locked, then slipped her keys into her bag, taking Dilly's leash back up in her hand.

"I didn't mean to, scouts honor." He smiled, then motioned to her, "Heading out already? I, uh... I was kind of hoping we could get that coffee."

"Oh, I..." she paused, feeling a lump in her throat she didn't quite understand, meeting his green eyes. She smiled a little. "I'm actually heading to the quarter to run some errands, catch a show." She replied, watching him nod.

"Day off, huh." He kept smiling. It seemed he was in a perpetually jovial mood whenever she saw him. Not that she'd seen much of him. "Me, too. And I'm no good at days off." He reached down easily, scratching near Dilly's ear. The poodle leaned into him, tongue slightly lolling. "I'm trying, but I'm not used to this whole small town thing."

"But... you're a park ranger." She said, furrowing her brows a little at him.

"Yeah, but even park rangers can live in the city." He chuckled a little. "Don't get me wrong. Athens is great. The people here are amazing and there's a charm to everything I can't quite explain. But..." he looked around a little, shrugging. "I guess you can't just take the city out of the boy."

"I know what you mean." She said, leaning a little against the door. "I lived in New York City for so long, sometimes I really miss it. There was always life to the city, a living-breathing soul, ya know? There was always something happening. Day or night, there were people and lights, shops and restaurants open, a whole world outside my door step whenever I wanted it." She sighed, smiling a little wistfully. "Don't really get that here. You have to travel to find anything resembling that. It's probably why I like going to the quarter."

What everyone called the quarter was really a smaller city called Bresbin. Not the kind with high rises, but one with a myriad of stores, a cultural center with museums and theaters, a performing arts college, restaurants, businesses, etc. It was like a minute version of most larger cities. And she loved it. She felt at home there, in her element. Not to get her wrong, she was really loving life in Athens. But part of her would always belong to the city and all it offered.

"I lived in Chicago for about four years. I can completely relate." He practically beamed at her and she couldn't help but beam back.
"Why don't you come with me to the quarter? We can make a day of it. I mean, if you'd like to. I plan on seeing a musical, hitting up the shops." She offered, tilting her head a little. Daryl had said he was fine with her being friends with Bill. And he'd meant it. She could tell. So she was going to try her hand at this friendship thing. Maybe she'd be better at it than she thought. Bill seemed to think for a moment, glancing down at Dilly.

"You know what... yeah, I think that'd be great." He said, nodding firmly.

"Really?" She asked, smiling brightly. "That's good!" She practically bounced a little in place, happy that he'd agreed to come. "So let me drop Dilly off with Carol and then I'll meet you at my car. Okay?" She asked, pointing at her bug. He glanced at it, then chuckled.

"Of course that's your car." He said, then nodded. "I'll wait." And he did. Sam walked Dilly to the diner, then came back and he was leaning against the passenger door of her car, hands in his pockets, watching a trail of ants work at an apple core. He glanced up when she came closer and smiled, pushing away from the car. "Ready when you are." He said, and off they went.

To say the least, the day was far more fun than she'd thought it would be. Having someone to go to the musical with, someone to walk around and just laugh with, was exactly the distraction she'd needed. And the more she talked with Bill, the more she found in common with him. And the more she realized how stable he was. The man didn't have a mean or gruff bone in his body, or any skeletons in his closet she could find. He didn't come from a bad past. He'd had a wonderful and loving upbringing. And he treated her kindly, respectfully, almost adoringly.

By the time they got back to Athens, it was nearly nine thirty at night, and any stress she'd had before was long since gone from her mind. She pulled up next to his Chrysler 300, parking in the empty spot next to it. It was an expensive car, to be sure. But he'd explained earlier that day that his family came from money. His dad may have been a cop, but his mother was rich. It amazed Sam to think the money hadn't gone to his head. He didn't act rich, or spoiled, or any of the other cliches. Probably his father's influence.

She got out of her car the same time he did, watching him walk around toward her. She leaned against her open door and smiled a little tiredly at him. She'd had a great day, but she was beat. She just wanted to go home and snuggle up to Daryl under the blankets.

"I had a really great day, Samantha." He said, standing about a foot away from her, the door between them. He always called her Samantha. Never Sam or Sammy. It was kind of nice, in a traditional sort of way.

"Me, too. I'm glad you could come." She said, then stifled a yawn, shaking her head a little after. "Sorry, guess I'm ready for some sleep." She smiled a little and he nodded. Then he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. She found herself blinking, stunned, suddenly surrounded by the smell of his aftershave. It was brief and not in any way intimate. But when he pulled back and smiled at her, she felt all sorts of confused. Her stomach flipped and she had to swallow down a knot.

"Goodnight, Samantha. Hopefully we can spend time together again soon." He stepped back, watching her, then winked lightly and turned, heading for the driver's side door of his car. She was still standing there, watching his tail lights disappear around the corner, feeling utterly strange, when she heard Carol.

"So... that was interesting." The older woman said, stepping off the curb and making Sam's heart leap right out of her chest. She suddenly felt guilty, like she was some little kid who'd been caught stealing bubble gum from a grocery store. And yet... she had no idea why.
"What was?" Sam asked, blinking and watching as Carol stepped into the now empty space where Bill's car had been.

"Your friend." Carol said, crossing her arms over her chest lightly. "He's just your friend, right?"
And suddenly Sam knew what Carol was getting at.

"Of course he's just my friend." She said, furrowing her brows and feeling defensive. And again, not having any clue why. Carol took a few steps toward her and then stopped, staring at her with an almost blank expression.

"Be careful, Sammy." She said softly, no anger or cruelty in her voice. Just... concern. "You may just be friends, but he doesn't look at you like a friend does. And you," She let her hands fall, "Didn't react like a friend does when he kissed your cheek." Sam instinctively reached for her cheek, touching the now cool skin and blinked. Carol let out a sigh. "You and Daryl haven't been together long. I get that. And Daryl... he's your first real relationship since Liam." Carol stepped forward, placing a hand on her car door. "But you're everything to him. Everything. You understand? If you have doubts, you better voice them, and sooner rather than later. Don't wait to break his heart."

"Carol..." she heard her voice come out as a whisper. How dare she imply that Sam would ever break Daryl's heart?! Didn't she know how much Daryl meant to her?! Didn't she know Sam was completely in love with him?! But she couldn't say the words... because there was a small truth in what Carol was saying, a truth Sam had thus far refused to take on... till that moment.

She'd had doubts. More than once. But not because of Daryl.

Daryl was as good as they came. He was honorable, and trustworthy, and loved her despite all her flaws and terrible past. But sometimes she was reminded of how little they had in common. Sometimes she was reminded that they had leaped into a relationship head first without really bracing themselves. Sometimes she wasn't sure if she'd given herself enough time. Everything that had happened with Liam and Daryl being hurt had pulled her in and left her little room for second guessing. But now that things had found a calmness, a rhythm that was easy and less fevered, she had to admit... sometimes she wondered... were they doing the right thing?

She and Daryl had been instantly drawn to each other. There was a pull she hadn't been able to deny, then or now. And she loved him, for all he'd done for her, all he was for her. But in the end, would it be enough? Would she be able to spend her life in this small town, the wife of a cop, never going farther than a county border, never knowing what else there might have been?

Carol nodded slowly. "Figure it out, Sam." She said firmly, but again with no anger. Just a steadfast honesty, an urging. "And then make a choice." Carol stepped away then without another word, her keys jingling as she pulled them out of her pocket, walking toward her station wagon.

Again, Sam watched a set of tail lights disappear. Only this time, it was with a feeling of dread and uncertainty.

What was she supposed to do now?
He was cleaning his gun when she got home. It was spread out in pieces on the kitchen table, the police issue 9mm expertly taken apart. He was cleaning piece by piece, inspecting everything as he went. It was quiet in the house. Jasper hadn't moved from her now seemingly favorite spot beneath the kitchen table and was resting heavily against one of his still booted feet. He and Rick had spent half the day cataloging evidence and trying to solidify the theories they had running through their heads.

It was going to take time for the dental records and forensic results to come back. The drops of blood they'd found were key, but only if CODIS popped out a match. Daryl had also spent time asking around again, looking for any information or leads on Alice's whereabouts. Of course, he knew that was Alice burnt to a crisp in the woods. Proving it was the hard part.

When Sam made her way into the kitchen, he set down the drop rag he'd been using and the slide, pushing his chair back and getting up to greet her. "How was the quarter?" he asked, closing the distance between them and kissing her lips softly before her answer. She had two bags in her hands, and probably a few more still in her car. She set them down to either side of her before wrapping her arms firmly around him, pressing her cheek to his chest and sighing so heavily that he could feel it in his own bones. "Hey..." He furrowed his brows, folding his arms around her, resting his chin gently atop her head. "What's wrong?"

She didn't respond at first. He could feel tension in her whole body, and then he felt the tension turn into trembling. "Sam, what's wrong? What happened?" He urged, gently pulling her back so he could see her face. He lifted her gaze toward him with one of his hands beneath her chin. When her eyes finally met him, she just shook her head and stepped away, burying her face in her hands momentarily before letting her hands fall and turning once more to look at him. She let out a shuddered breath.

"I'm afraid." She said, her voice a strained and shaken thing in his ears. He instantly felt the need to protect her. All his frustrations about the case and his agitation at the day in general disappeared. He wanted nothing more than to chase down and destroy whatever had brought those words out of her mouth, and he began to move toward her. But she put up her hand, shaking her head, stopping him without touching him. "No, Daryl." She almost whispered.

Confusion was instant and terrible. He stood there motionless and for some reason dreading whatever was about to happen. "What's goin on?" He asked then. His voice was oddly calm, his expression quietly perplexed. His worry only grew the longer she stood there staring at him. He watched her cross her arms over her chest, almost hugging herself, like she was cold.

"Are we doing the right thing?" She asked then, meeting his gaze with emotion riddled eyes. "If we get married, I mean... is that what we're supposed to do, so soon?"

And suddenly his heart was on the floor. He blinked at her and felt himself draw in a deep breath. "If..." he said, shaking his head slightly. She spoke more before he could say anything else.

"It's just that we've moved so fast, haven't we? What if... what if it doesn't work out, and it all blows up in our faces? Or what if we wake up one morning and realize that we were just... looking for comfort and not a relationship?" She was rambling, and his ears were almost ringing, like he didn't want to hear what was going on and his body knew it. He felt like he'd stood up and was blindsided in less than a minute. "I was with Liam for years. I never got the chance to be... who I wanted to be. To be me, by myself with no expectations and no demands." She turned, pacing slightly, her brows
furrowed in definitive thought. "And I never really got to decide what I wanted, what I needed for myself till I came back to Georgia. I mean, the studio? It's amazing. But what if I want more? What if I decide I want to move to the quarter or somewhere else entirely and further my career? I miss the city and the culture. If we get married, and I wanted to do that, I'd feel awful asking you to give up your life here." She paced in the other direction, words still coming out like friendly fire. "And if we get married, and we stay, what if you get hurt on the job again or worse? Am I supposed to live every day with the silent fear that you'll get killed?"

There was that word again. 'If'. She froze in place then, turning to look at him, eyes going wide as though she couldn't believe she'd spat all that out, hands going up to her face. And she shook her head ever so slightly. "Daryl..." she began, but then stopped again. All he could do was stare at her.

He'd gone from being happy to see her to being angry and frustrated and broken in less than a few minutes. It had to be some kind of record. And yet, he was just standing there like a dunce, staring at her, clenching his jaw when what he really wanted to do was run his fists through a wall. He swallowed, took in a deep breath and let it out.

"If." He said again. He reached his hands up and turned from her, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. "IF." He growled out, then turned back at her, practically throwing his hands back down. "Fuck, Sam!" He hissed. She cringed, but he didn't move near her. He just stared her down. "Do you realize... do you have any idea how much I..." he was so mad that he could barely complete a sentence. "How much I love you?! Shit, you think me bein with you, I was jus lookin for comfort?! You think I don't appreciate every damn thing you ever did for me? You think I'd ever ask you to be anythin other than who you are?!" It was his turn to pace. "If you wanted to do somethin else, I'd support you. I'd help move heaven an earth to make you happy. Shit!" He stopped beside the kitchen table, and then kicked the chair out of the overbuilding emotions boiling within him. The chair hit the cabinets, one of the legs snapping with a loud sound that made Jasper run away down the hall toward the bedroom. He looked back at her, uncaring he'd just broken the chair, pacing some more.

"Yer right." He stopped then, facing her. "It hasn't been long. But I don't need years to know how I feel about you, about us. There's no 'if' in it for me." He motioned angrily at her ring, "And there shouldn't be no fuckin 'if' for you while yer wearin that ring!" He moved toward her then, and he saw her flinch. He stopped just a foot away, looking down at her emotional and startled features. "I've given you everythin, I'd still give you everythin! You think I'd make you live a life you don't want?! I'm not that fucker Liam!" His voice cracked this time, with hurt and anger and all that he'd been subjected to lately. "And I don't wanna be yer 'if'." He said, shaking his head, a tear escaping one eye, which he ignored entirely. She sobbed a little, covering her mouth with her shaking fingers before letting out a long shaken breath.

"Daryl, god I am so sorry. I didn't mean..." She whispered. And his voice choked with the hurt, the tears of his own.

"Don't, don't you dare." He paced away from her. "You come in here and throw this at me and expect what? Huh?" He demanded, moving toward the table again. He began to hastily reassemble his gun, his back turned to her. "You think I'd jus be all understandin and let it roll right off my shoulders?!" He let out a strangled sound, getting the gun put back together so fast, it might have surprised him had he not been so grieved. He shoved it back into his holster, and grabbed his jacket off the back of the one remaining chair.

"Where are you going? Daryl, don't leave! Please talk to me!" She pleaded, then, coming toward him and grabbing his arm. "I had to say something. I had to tell you the truth, about how I feel, the doubts I have!" She cried. He stopped, looking down at her, clenching his jaw, tears rolling free of his eyes. He lifted a hand and smoothed a thumb over her cheek, wiping some of her tears.
"I don't have doubts." He nearly whispered. "And I ain't an if." He pulled his arm out of her grasp, letting his hand fall. "Figure out what you want. But don't expect me to stick round to wait for you to break my heart more than ya already have." And with that, he pushed past her, opening the kitchen door, stepping out and slamming it shut behind him.

He heard her call his name, but he didn't stop moving. He heard her open the door and run out to the porch, but he was already at his truck. He heard her feet hit the ground running, but he was already in the driver's seat, key in the ignition. And by the time she reached his truck, he was peeling backward, the dirt from his drive spraying out from the spinning tires. He was gone before she could stop him. And he was gone before he had any idea where it was he was going...
"Thanks, Bill."

She was on her knees, sobbing long after Daryl's truck tail lights faded into the darkness. The sounds of the chirping frogs in the marsh behind the cabin mingled with the crickets and her tears felt cold on her face in the chill of the Autumn air. It should have been a beautiful night, but it just felt terrible and dark. She stayed there in the driveway, right where Daryl left her, for a long while. It wasn't till the tears subsided and she was sure she could stand without wavering that she finally stood.

This wasn't how it was supposed to have gone. She was supposed to tell him everything she was thinking and they were supposed to talk about it. Not this. God, she was so stupid. She'd been so caught up in figuring out the next steps to take that she hadn't really thought about her words. She'd put him in a corner without warning, and he'd acted the only way he could have. She couldn't blame him for that.

But it didn't change the truth of her words. It didn't change the doubts she'd had. Twice now, she'd been told to figure it out. 'Make a choice.' Carol had said. Truth was, she didn't want to leave Daryl. But she needed to know that what they had was going to last, that whatever the future held, it wouldn't fall apart because she chose more things for herself than what he might want.

But hasn't he always been there for you? Hasn't he always encouraged you to follow your dreams? Always was a big word. They hadn't been together long to have an always. And there was also the way she'd felt when Bill had kissed her cheek. She'd thoroughly enjoyed spending the day with him. She'd connected with him. Sure, it wasn't anything near as powerful as her connection with Daryl.

But didn't it mean something that he'd stirred her emotions even a little? Or was she just stupid enough to think that a mild attraction may be a sign of something else?

She walked back inside, the quiet of the house painful to her ears. She glanced at the chair in the kitchen. It was of no use now, broken. Like she'd obviously broken Daryl's heart. Just like he said she had. She honestly hadn't counted on that. And never even thought it could have been a possibility. Everything running in her mind felt rational. So why did it also hurt so badly?

She left the broken chair where it was. Daryl would come back. He would come back and they'd talk and he'd fix the chair and they'd figure all this out together because that was what they did. Right?

But Daryl didn't come back.

A week went by. And Daryl never answered his phone. He never came to the cabin when she was there. She'd come home to find more of his clothes gone, his toiletries. She came home once and found the chair fixed. She came home once and found groceries in the fridge. But never Daryl.

She had to find out from Rick how he was doing, that Daryl was staying in the tiny studio apartment above Carol's barn. And when she begged Rick to try to convince Daryl to talk to her, her brother refused. "You're my sister. I love you, and I would do just about anything for you. But he's in a bad place right now. I'm not going to push him. He'll talk to you when he's ready." Rick had told her.

When she insisted that Rick tell Daryl to move back in and she would leave if that was what he wanted, Rick told her Daryl wouldn't want her to move out. That she should stay till she made up her mind. She knew her brother loved her. But she also knew how Rick felt about Daryl, and that Rick was angry at her for how she'd hurt him.

All Sam could do was take what Rick said and try to accept it.

In the meantime, she busied herself with work. With cleaning the cabin. Sometimes, she went to the
lake. Sometimes, she drove to the quarter. Anything to try to clear her head, to keep her mind on
track. She’d wanted to figure out her doubts and what it was she really wanted. Well, she had plenty
of time to do that now. And she hated it.

Bill had called her twice. The first time, she didn't answer the phone. The second time, she spoke
with him for hours without ever once bringing up Daryl. Not because she didn't want to talk about
him, but because it was nice to have something else take her attention.

But when she was alone, really alone, with nothing to do and no one to talk to, her heart ached like it
never had before. She’d taken to sleeping on the couch. She couldn't bare sleeping in the bed without
Daryl. And when Jasper had her kittens, she called him, wanting to tell him so badly about the four
little gray and white fluffball babies, but when she got his voicemail again, all the joy fell out of her
heart.

The days turned into weeks, turned into one month. And she had not seen or heard a single word
from him since the night he left. She was sitting at the kitchen table alone, eating a bowl of cereal for
dinner because there just wasn't any point in cooking for only herself, when there was a knock at the
door.

It startled her a little, because she wasn't expecting company. And then she nearly dropped her spoon
when she realized it could be Daryl. She practically leaped out of the chair, flying down the hall to
the front of the house and yanking the door wide open to reveal... Bill. Her expression went from
overjoyed to surprised in a heartbeat. Bill raised both brows, looking her up and down. That was
when she realized she was only in Daryl's oversized t-shirt, the one she loved so much, and a pair of
bed shorts. "Um... hi?" he said, half questioning.

He knew about Daryl. Of course he knew. It wasn't like it was a secret, that they'd fought and he
wasn't staying at the cabin anymore. But he'd always been the picture of civility, a real gentleman.
He never made advances toward her, never tried to push anything but a friendship with her. Though
every now and then, she could see a familiar affection in his eyes, a hunger for what could be. She
saw it then, when his eyes met hers. "Bill..." She said, stepping into the door frame, her hand still on
the door handle. "What're you doing here?" She asked, smiling lightly. He smiled back, motioning
toward her.

"I was hoping to catch you at the studio but a woman named Michonne, I think it was, told me you'd
left early. I tried calling, but you didn't answer your phone. Guess I was a bit worried, so I thought
I'd stop by and make sure you were okay." He said warmly. And she let out a little exasperated
chuckle.

"Oh, yeah. I'm okay. I'm just not really feeling like myself lately." She said calmly, then stepped
aside. "Come in, so I can close the door. It's cold out there." Her legs were getting chilly, standing
there in short-shorts with the door wide open. He nodded, stepping in past her. She closed the door.
"Hungry? I made raisin bran for dinner. It's a culinary masterpiece." She said, grinning. He chuckled
at her, letting her lead the way to the kitchen. She plopped back down in her chair, drawing her bowl
a little closer to her. He sat down across from her.

"You heathen." She said, grinned, then put the spoon in her mouth. He was quiet while she chewed,
staring at her like he was thinking about saying something, but was keeping his mouth shut. "What?"
She asked him, after she swallowed. He narrowed his eyes a little.

"I want to tell you something. And I just want you to listen, okay? No rambling on endlessly. Just...
"I don't ramble," she said firmly, pouting a little sheepishly. But he gave her an incredulous look and she chuckled. "Okay, so I ramble. Fine. Zipping the lip." She made a zipper motion over her mouth. "Go ahead." And she waited patiently for him to talk. He nodded.

"I'm attracted to you. Really, really attracted to you. You're brilliant and beautiful, funny and sexy as hell without trying. We have a lot in common and we get along effortlessly." He was watching her reaction as he spoke, and she was completely stunned. She wouldn't have been able to ramble even if she'd wanted to. She couldn't believe he was saying all that to her. "But we'd never make a good fit. And here's why." He relaxed back in his chair a little, motioning to her. "We're not meant to. Because you and I can never be you and Daryl." He smiled a little, not even sad at what he was saying. "I'm a realist, Sam. I can hang on to you and hope you'll come around and fall madly in love with me. And if you did, it would be great for awhile. Hell, it would probably be amazing. But then it wouldn't be anymore. We'd grow apart, and we'd never catch that fire again. But you and Daryl?" He nodded. "You had that fire before you two even met. You just didn't know it then."

She was... idiotically speechless. All she could do was keep staring at him like he'd grown a second head and was speaking alien.

"I know you aren't sure where you stand with him. But I can tell you, even though I don't know him very well, I know what I've seen. And that man loves you. Heart, mind, body and soul. Completely. For everything you are and aren't and want to be. He'd give up everything for you." He said, motioning around him. "This place, his life here, his job. All of it. I know he would. Because when he looks at you, he sees his entire world wrapped up in one person. He doesn't want or need anything else. He'll sacrifice who he is, but only," Bill pointed at Sam, "If you ask him to." He reached over and took one of her hands in his own.

"I'm no expert, Samantha Grimes. But I know what true love looks like. My parents had it their entire life together. And you two? You could have that, too. Sure, I could say screw him and make pass after pass till I got you to myself. But I'm not going to get in the way of a hurricane. I'll lose." He stood up then, coming around the table, bending over and placing a kiss on her lips. It was simple, and soft, and surprisingly had no affect on her whatsoever.

"My mother used to say that a real relationship is made up of two imperfect people in an imperfect situation unwilling to give up on one another. It's about time you got your head out of your ass and realized how lucky you are." He winked at her, then stepped around her, heading for the kitchen door. He paused with his hand on the handle. "I'll see you for coffee sometime next week, cause we're still friends. But make sure you have dinner with your man first." He smiled then, and left without another word.

And she just sat there.

She sat there till her cereal was overly soggy and tiredness seeped into her bones, her mind an unwritten novel of all the things she'd been doubting and thinking and not saying. A collection of all that Bill had just said to her painted on her brain.

She loved Daryl. That had never been the problem. And as she sat there, she began to wonder... what really had been the problem?

All those doubts and worries she had were a product of a stifled past that had nothing to do with Daryl, or even her anymore. She loved him. He loved her. Despite everything she'd put him through, he loved her. Despite all their differences, she loved him. That was enough. It had always been enough.
Always. Maybe they did have an always.

She looked down at her ring, the beautiful little diamonds shining in the kitchen lamp light. And she felt herself let out a half strangled laugh. Daryl wasn't an if. He was her everything. She was so stupid, so foolish, so ridiculously selfish and naive. She wanted to marry him. She wanted to be his wife and spend the rest of their lives together enjoying all their imperfectness. But first, she had to say sorry. She had to get Daryl to talk to her. She had to tell him how wrong she'd been, how idiotic she was. She'd grovel if she had to.

She stared at the now empty chair opposite her, wiping away a joyful tear that spilled from her eye. "Thanks, Bill." She whispered. It was time to get life back on track.
"Let's start with your brother... and why I killed him."

"This is it, man. This is the proof we were lookin for." Rick said, handing the paper to Daryl, hands moving to his hips as he smiled, watching Daryl's face as he read it over.

They'd long since confirmed that the body they had found had belonged to Alise. But what they'd been waiting on was the results from the blood Daryl had found. And what he had in his hand was confirmation. A match, to Dusty Hendee.

Sure, it didn't prove murder. But at blood to all the circumstantial evidence and witness testimony, and they had one hell of a compelling case. Juries would convict for less, these days.

Daryl should have been happy. Shit, he should have been ecstatic. It was exactly the break they'd been waiting on. And yet he just felt frustrated. "Don't know what good it'll do us. He's fallin off the map. We've already got all eyes out for him, and his company doesn't know shit bout where he is. If he hasn't turned up now, he might not ever turn up. Which makes this," He said, handing the paper back to Rick, "Useless."

"He'll slip up, we'll get him. Look, I know it's been a shitstorm. But we've got him now. All he has to do is make a mistake and he's ours." Rick clapped Daryl on the shoulder, "So let's get this filed, and go through the evidence again before lunch. We'll cross all our T's and dot the I's." He moved past Daryl, heading back out of the bullpen toward his office. It was just the two of them today.

Sunday's were typically pretty slow, and they could call in anyone if need be.

Daryl sighed, shaking his head before heading down the hall to the evidence lock up. It wasn't big. They weren't a large department to begin with. And each quarter, most of their closed files went to the County Clerk's office for keeping, while their evidence stockpile usually went to the State capital for storage. It helped keep the space clear, and their numbers on the plus side. It only took him a moment to find the boxes he was looking for. He'd been through them so many damn times already that he practically knew the contents by heart. There were five boxes in all. One had Dusty Hendee's name on it, another had Alise, another Marcus Wedge, and another his brother's name - Merle Dixon. To think this had all started because of his big brother was sometimes hard to swallow. It was all a big circle of coincidence that not so neatly led back to Daryl in a way he was extremely uncomfortable with but couldn't control.

The fifth box had files, paperwork, copies of search warrants, everything they'd accumulated since the investigations began. As much as he hated paperwork, he'd kept up with it. He wanted this over, once and for all. And he was going to make sure whatever charges they could get Dusty with would actually stick. He used the hand trolley to bring the boxes out to the bullpen, and then set them one on one on the large conference table near the back of the room. He'd just set the last box up when he heard the chimes on the door, turning around to see... Sam.

She took his breath away instantly. She was wearing a dark purple skirt that fell just above her knees, black tights and calf high black boots. Her hair was up in a mess of waves, tangled in a ponytail with flower hair clips to one side. She had on a black turtleneck to wrap it all up. And she looked just beautiful. Shit, she would have looked beautiful in that moment had she been wearing a paper sack. He felt his heart skip a few beats, then crash back down to the floor where it had been spending most of its time.

That night back in the cabin had crushed him in a way he would never admit out loud. She'd reached inside him and tore him to pieces and he'd just walked away instead of trying to figure it out, trying to make it work. He'd regretted it shortly afterward, but couldn't bring himself to go back, to talk to
her. She tried hard to get a hold of him, to get him to talk to her. But he kept his distance. He swallowed his pain and just wandered through the days, trying to get used to the loneliness he was sure was going to become permanent. She'd all but said she didn't want to marry him, after all.

"Hi Daryl." She said, stopping just before the counter, holding her messenger bag in front of her, clutching the strap for dear life. Her beautiful face was covered in an expression he hadn't seen in a long time, shy and unsure of herself like the day he'd first met her, right here in this very office. "You... you look..." she let out a breath and gave a lovely, shy smile. God, he missed her smile. "You look really good." She finally got out. He just turned a bit more, to face her fully, though still a full room's distance between them.

"So do you." He said, sounding calmer than he felt. He kept his face as blank as he could. He'd been preparing himself for this since he'd left, waiting for her to tell him that she'd come to a decision and she was going to give the ring back. The ring that, he realized then, was still on her finger. A silence stretched on between them, and it was suffocating.

"Can we talk? I mean, if you're not busy... do you have time?" She asked, watching him with those enchanting eyes of hers. What he wouldn't give to cross the bullpen, vault over that counter and wrap her in his arms. He swallowed lightly.

"I've got a few minutes." He replied, then slowly walked toward her. He rounded a few desks and stopped at the counter, but didn't dare go around it. He kept it between them. He was afraid if he was standing to close to her when she broke him completely that he might not have the strength to just let her go. And he needed to be able to let her go if he was going to be alright.

But alright wasn't something he'd had much of since he'd left her at the cabin. The nightmares had returned shortly after. Different than the ones that had plagued him from the war, but nightmares still the same. He was a mess, and he knew it. But he was dealing.

"Can we go somewhere else? Somewhere... private?" She asked, looking nervous and like she was feeling cornered. But he just raised a brow at her.

"Ain't no one else here. Rick's in his office. Jus... say what you gotta say." He said firmly. He watched her mouth open and close, twice. Then she nodded, but more like she was nodding at herself.

"Okay so..." she cleared her throat a little. "I can't take back what I said. I said it, and I hurt you. And I wish I'd never done it. All those doubts and fears I had, they had nothing to do with us and everything to do with my past. And I am so sorry I let that get in the way of our future." She was rambling. He missed that, too. The way she'd carry on and on when she was excited or really had something to say. "More than that... I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I hurt us. Daryl," she shook her head, then smiled brightly, half in exasperation, "I love you. Everything about you. And I love our life. I love the lazy days and the way you look at me when I sing. I love how you fix everything by yourself and always seem to know what I need even without me saying it. I love that you have never tried to change me and accept all the quirky things about me that drive most people crazy. I love all the million little things you say and do and never get recognition for." She let her hands fall from the strap of her bag. "And you're right. You're not an if. You never were. I want to marry you, I want to spend the rest of my life you. I want to figure out every bump in the road with you. And I know I don't deserve it, Daryl. I know I don't. But please..." Her smile had grown sad and pleading, her eyes growing wet with unshed tears. "Please forgive me. Please come home." Her voice finally cracked.

When she'd said all she needed to say, he just kept staring at her. What did he say to all of that? He couldn't deny anything she'd said. And deep down, he still ached from what had happened. But here was this woman... this incredible, intelligent, talented, beautiful, loving woman, standing in front of
him, professing her love for him, practically begging him to love her back. How could he say no?

He watched her face falter at his lack of reaction. And then he opened the little door that led into the bullpen, swinging it open on its hinges and stepping out in front of the counter. Wordlessly, he stepped right up to her, till they were only a few inches apart. And he slipped his hands to her waist, pulling her gently toward him, feeling her body against his for what felt like the first time in forever. He saw hope and joy spring to life in her eyes, those unshed tears falling free as her smile lit on fire. And because he knew he couldn't ramble like her, and would never be able to be poetic, he simply kissed her.

Though of course, there was nothing simple about it. When their lips met, the world disappeared and he felt his heart drag itself off the floor and crawl back into his chest where it belonged. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back as though she could melt their bodies together just by willing it to happen. He practically lifted her off her feet, arms tightening around her. And when the kiss ended, she just burried her face into his neck, holding on for dear life. She was crying, he could feel the shuddering in her frame. And he just held her aloft like that and let her. "It's alright." He whispered finally, feeling her pull back a little at his words, he set her on her feet and she looked up at him with the most gloriously awed and befuddled look.

"I don't deserve you." She said, half choked in tears. He cracked a sideways smile, holding her face in his hands.

"You've got that backwards, remember?" He said, then kissed her again. She sighed into his mouth, and became just as momentarily lost as he was. Neither one of them even heard the chimes on the door, or the footsteps. It wasn't till a familiar and extremely unwelcome voice met Daryl's ears that he ended the kiss, startled, then angry, putting himself in front of Sam immediately.

"Am I interrupting something?" Dusty Hendee asked, an automatic rifle in one hand, held lazily at his side. Behind him were four other men, no one Daryl recognized, all heavily armed. "Hear you've been looking for me." He watched as Daryl's hand hovered over his grip and Dusty shook his head. "Can't save the day this time, my friend." Dusty said, not even looking slightly worried that Daryl wanted nothing more than to pull his gun out. He could feel Sam clinging to his shirt behind him. He made sure she stayed there, keeping himself between Dusty and Sam like a human barrier. "We've got some business to attend to. And if you do everything I say, give me everything I ask for, then I'll be out of your life, out of your county, out of your state. And you'll never have to see or hear from me again. I give you my word on that. Least I could do for you, considering."

Daryl couldn't help it, he gave a wry smile. "You've gotta be fuckin jokin me. You killed three people. You think I'm jus gonna let that go?" Daryl demanded, watching as one of the men behind Dusty moved toward Rick's office. "Hey!" Daryl yelled after him, taking a step sideways only to have Dusty point his rifle at him. He froze in place.

"I think we're going to do exactly what I said so I don't have to kill anyone. Because I will kill your buddy Rick and your girlfriend, if it gets my point across." Dusty said flatly, expression a chilling cold that filled his eyes. And Daryl reached behind himself instinctively, pressing Sam closer to his back. She complied without question. That was when Rick appeared, a gun at his head, the man who'd gone in his office pushing him out. "So now that we're all here, let's get to work, shall we?" Dusty smiled then.

Daryl had wanted to find Dusty, to put him behind bars for the rest of his life and get justice for the people Dusty had killed. He'd never counted on Dusty coming to him, fully armed with his own little gang to back him up. He watched as one of the men wrapped a chain around the doors, securing them in place with a padlock, effectively keeping the world out and them locked inside, like this was
some sort of fucking siege. Rick was pushed beside Daryl, the two men standing side by side and blocking Sam from view completely. Then the four strange men fanned out, securing any other doors they could find. All the while Dusty just standing there, watching Daryl with a look that was utterly confusing. A look of compassion, but cold calculation all at once.

"Let's start with your brother." Dusty said then, out of the blue. And Daryl tensed immediately. He felt Sam's hand grip his side, Rick reaching up and grabbing Daryl's shoulder. "And why I killed him." Dusty added. And Daryl knew, right then and there, that before this was all over, Dusty Hendee was going to die.
"You're wrong, you know."

The floor was hard and cold, and she was trying so very hard to focus on that. She was tucked in close between her brother and Daryl, their backs to the wall in the bullpen closest to the table where Daryl had been setting down boxes. She could feel the tension in every single one of his muscles, her hands wrapped tightly around his bicep. He had one hand on her leg, but gently, as though he were silently trying to reassure her that everything was going to be alright.

This wasn't how this day was supposed to go. It was foolish and silly that she was angry about that. After all, they were surrounded by armed men, locked in and being pretty much held prisoner. The last thing she should have been angry about was the fact they'd screwed up her reunion with Daryl. But she and Daryl had been apart for far too long, as far as she was concerned. And she found herself glaring at Dusty with a quiet rage that so wasn't like her.

She kept quiet, though. Stilled by the safety of being between the two toughest and bravest men she knew.

"I don't know what makes you think this a good idea. Someone's going to notice they can't get in. We never keep the shutters closed or the doors locked." Rick said firmly. His knees were bent, his booted feet flat on the floor, his hands hanging over his knees. He was watching Dusty go through the boxes on the table, dumping them one at a time and sifting through the contents. Hell, they were all watching him. Dusty smirked, a slow stretch of lips that made her want to smack the smugness off his face.

Where was all her courage coming from? She swallowed it down. She was pretty sure lunging at the guy with the rifle was a bad idea.

"Hence the 'closed for renovations' sign I put up." He said, glancing sideways at Rick. "Ain't perfect, but it'll work for a little while. People are sheep. They do what they're told, even when they probably shouldn't." He tossed down a stack of files, pulling a rolling chair away from one of the desks and bringing it over to the long table. He sat, crossing his legs, laying the rifle down on top of his lap. "So, let's talk about Merle."

She felt Daryl tense impossibly more beside her. But he didn't move. She could only imagine the self control it was taking for Daryl not to just all out explode on the man before them. She stroked his bicep lightly, leaning closer into him, trying to give him her presence more and more. He squeezed her leg lightly. "What's to talk about it?" Daryl said then. "You killed him. An I'm goin to kill you."

"Yeah..." Dusty sighed a little. "I did kill him. I put him down like the dog he is. Question is, why?" He asked, tilting his head a little as he gauged Daryl's reaction.

"Because you're a fuckin lyin psychopath?" Daryl countered, and Dusty chuckled a little.

"Can't deny that. But here's the thing..." He motioned to Daryl, "Everything I've done since coming to this shit hole has either been to protect you or to protect myself. Your sorry excuse for a brother wanted to dose you with Spinners. He wanted to buy them off me, to make you go loco so you'd lose your job," he looked at Sam, she met his gaze. "And this pretty girl here." Then his eyes drifted to Rick. "And all your friends." Dusty narrowed his gaze back on to Daryl who, surprisingly, didn't say a thing. Instead he just glared at Dusty like he could make him implode by sheer force of will. "Doesn't surprise you, does it. That your brother wanted to ruin everything you built for yourself." He nodded a little. "I killed him to protect you, cause I've always been your friend."
And that was all it took. Daryl was up off the floor and barreling into Daryl quicker than any of them could react. Rick went to move, but one of the other gunmen pointed a rifle at his head. Another of the men came over just as quick and rammed the butt of his gun down on the back of Daryl's head, making him crumple to the floor as Dusty got back to his feet, motioning for the other man to back off. Daryl held his head, wincing. Sam threw reason out the window and crawled quickly to Daryl, pulling him into her lap. He looked so dazed, his eyes blinking up at her in tense motions. "Stop it!" She finally spat out, Dusty looking over at her with a raised brow. "You call this being a friend?!" She demanded, tears stinging her eyes. Daryl sat up slowly, one hand still behind his head. She helped him, glaring at Dusty every moment.

"I never said my sort of friendship was the right kind... Samantha." He said plainly, but smiled, pulling the chair back toward the table which had rolled several feet away, and he sat down. Daryl pressed his back against the wall. Sam held on to him, and matched his gaze as he practically stared daggers at Dusty.

"He might have been an asshole, but he was still my brother." He let his hand fall from his head. "Yer a murderin fuckin bastard." Dusty nodded a little at that.

"You're right, for the most part." he put his hands up in mock surrender. "Never said I was a saint."

"Jesus christ, man." Dusty said, shaking his head a little and then wincing. "What the hell happened to you?"

"You mean... between Afghanistan and now? Not a damn thing. I've always been this way, Daryl. I'm just typically really good at hiding it. In fact, I'm really rather disappointed. I mean, shit..." he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "If you think about it, this is all your fault, really." His face became dark, his eyes taking on a cold stare that made Sam want to shrink back. But she kept staring at him, just like the two men at her sides. "I did you a favor by killin your brother. If you hadn't pissed him off, I never would have had to. And then that Marcus Wedge boy filmed the whole thing, so he had to go. And Alice was just... a really good fuck who turned into collateral damage. So she had to go. Cleaning up this mess has been a real pain in my ass. And the Old Man isn't happy with me in the least."

"The Old Man..." Rick said then, his brows knitting in concentration. "That's what the background check referred to Vincent Durrow. His alias." He exchanged glances with Daryl, something unsaid passing between them.

"So Total Pharmaceuticals is supplying Spinners, the company you work for." Daryl said, turning his eyes over to Dusty. And Dusty smiled a little.

"Yes and no." He replied. "I work for the Company within the company. It's complicated, but doesn't matter. I'm not here to confirm your theories. I got wind about your little DNA test. Heard you got the results back. Which is fine. I can disappear, so really... not a big deal." He let out a little sigh. "What is a big deal is that the Old Man wants all the evidence you've compiled, everything leading back to me and to Spinners to just... go away." He looked at the stuff on the table, the boxes. "I know this is all for the murders. But where's the stuff on the drug distribution, the overdoses?" He asked, and Rick chuckled a little.

"You're a little late, asshole. The troopers are running that show." Rick said, meeting Dusty's hard stare without flinching.

"I'm a lot of things, Sheriff. An idiot isn't one of them. I know you've kept up with it, done digging of your own. We already know the troopers haven't been able to connect anything back to the Company. But you've connected me, which means you've gotten farther ahead than anyone. And if
you've got evidence on me, it leads back to the Old Man. And we just can't let that happen. So...” He stood up then, and two men pointed guns at Rick and Daryl as Dusty reached forward and grabbed Sam. He yanked her forward, pulling her into him. She tried to hit him, but he grabbed her hair and forced her down onto her knees painfully, making her gasp as she held onto the hand that was holding her hair. She watched as Daryl and Rick both struggled with needing to help her, and not getting shot. "You're going to get everything. Right now. Or the woman you both obviously care a great deal about is going to be a mess of brains on your nice clean walls."

Sam's eyes widened in fear, and hot tears rolled down her face. She wanted to cry out loud, to scream. Every one of her senses was heightened and adrenaline was scorching through her, but all she could do was lock eyes with Daryl. The look of desperation on his face was palpable. She watched the controlled rage wander from muscle to muscle as he fought the urge to rip Dusty apart. When Dusty yanked at her hair again, making her cry out, Daryl stood up quickly, hands out and empty. "STOP IT!" He yelled, "Stop... I'll get yer damn evidence. Jus... jus stop." He said, practically pleading with Dusty.

For a moment, she felt his hand loosen in her hair. "Good." He let her go so fast, she fell on to her hands. Rick grabbed her, pulling her into him and away from Dusty. Daryl watched her, relief on his features now that she was in her brother's arms. "I don't wanna hurt you, man. Never did. But make no mistake..." Dusty said, walking up to Daryl and standing face to face with him, "I will do whatever it takes to clean up this mess. Even if that means tearing your world apart to do it." Dusty patted Daryl's shoulder like they always had been and always would be good friends.

Sam watched as Daryl took a very steady step back, knowing he wanted nothing more than to rip Dusty's throat out. All of this was just a nightmare. A goddamn awful nightmare. She clung to Rick's arms, tears still falling silently down her face as she watched one of the men escort Daryl out of the bullpen, disappearing around the corner into the hall. She looked up at Dusty then, glaring. "He trusted you." She hissed out, Dusty looking down at her. He seemed to study her then, as though gauging what sort of threat she might be. Then he crouched down before her and Rick, hands hanging between his legs.

"That's because he's a good man. Unfortunately for everyone, I'm not. Never claimed to be." He reached out, touching her chin. She yanked her face away, Rick's arms tightening around her. She could practically feel her brother seething rage. "Don't worry, Samantha. Once I get what I want, I'll disappear. Rick here and Daryl won't have any concrete evidence, and the Old Man will be happy. Life will go back to normal. You'll get married, have one point two little rednecks, and I'll be nothing but an unpleasant memory." She smiled then. She couldn't help it. It wasn't a pleasant smile, either.

"You're wrong, you know." She said firmly, and Dusty cracked a smile of his own.

"About what?" He asked, watching her calmly.

"You are an idiot. Because you won't be getting out of here alive." She said, matching his calm. She didn't know where the words came from, or how she got the courage to even say them. But once she had, she felt a pride in her defiance. She knew Daryl. And she knew Rick. And even if it got them all killed, there was no way in hell they'd let Dusty leave. Despite her sudden bravery, a deep weight suddenly fell on her. Her whole future with Daryl was in jeopardy now. But there were more important things to consider.

She'd stand by Daryl and Rick to the end, if it meant getting this monster off the streets, and taking down whoever this Old Man was, getting rid of Spinners for good. It wasn't just about her and Daryl anymore, not about Rick or Michonne and the kids, not about Bill or anyone else they knew, not about Athens or Cooke County. It was about doing what was right, and that was greater than them
Dusty stood up slowly, still smiling, and he nodded. "I see why he's in love with you. You're a lot tougher than you look. That's good. He needs that." He stepped away from her, sitting back in the rolling chair. "Let's hope things go smoothly, Samantha. Because I can promise you this... if I go down, I'll have no choice but take all three of you with me." He met her gaze, his eyes cold as ice. "And that's not something any of us want."
"How bout a third option?"

The guy was built like a brick wall. Daryl could feel his presence at his back, way too big and heavy, as Daryl sifted through boxes in the file room, taking it slow, trying to buy himself time to think of something. Anything. Five against three, or two if he didn't count Sam. Fuck. Sam. This was all just god awful timing. He'd have taken so many more risks if Sam wasn't here. But knowing that Dusty had a gun on her made him feel like he had to be way more smart and less reactive. Not really his strong suit when he was pissed. And he was well and truly pissed.

"Hurry the fuck up." The lumbering man behind him muttered. Daryl heard him shift his shotgun from one hand to the other, and he tensed his back a little, moving another box out of the way. He knew damn well what he was looking for and where it was. But he needed to think. And he couldn't do that in a room full of armed men and his hostage fiancee and best friend.

Why Dusty hadn't just killed them all and ransacked the place was beyond Daryl. It probably would have been easier than all this. But Dusty had some twisted sense of loyalty to Daryl that he couldn't understand.

"There's a lot of shit back here, man. Hold yer damn horses." Daryl muttered, reaching for the next box and almost freezing. The label said 'Marlins, Brock.' Oh. Oh, oh, yes. He had to fight the urge to smile. Brock Marlins had attacked his wife with a hammer several weeks ago. And it was sitting in this box as evidence. He glanced over his shoulder at the man, watching the body builder magazine cover boy shift on his feet as he peered out into the hall. And Daryl quickly pulled the cover off the box, reaching in and pulling out the bag that had the hammer in it.

He couldn't hesitate. Didn't think twice. He just lunged for the larger man and swung the hammer while still in its bag, smashing the man right in the eye when he turned. The grunt that came out of his mouth was strangled, his shotgun falling from his hands and clattering to the ground far louder than Daryl wanted. But he didn't give the Hulk wannabe a chance to get up. He swung again and again. Till the guy was bloodied and down for the count. If he was dead, Daryl didn't know and didn't care. He dropped the hammer, adrenaline flooding every muscle as he let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Well, that worked. But now what? He stepped out into the hall. They'd no doubt have heard the clatter. And Dusty was no idiot. The longer it took for them to get back, he'd send another one of his lackeys to check. Which actually might be a good thing. Daryl dragged the stupidly heavy man into the file lock up, tucking him into a corner and kicking the hammer into the room. Then he stepped in as well, closing the door only enough to leave a crack, shutting off the light.

"Come an' get me, boys." He muttered, then picked up the hammer and tucked the shotgun over his shoulder, flattening himself out of view and against the wall beside the door...

* * *

Dusty froze, glancing in the direction of the hall when he heard something hit the floor. He let out a half sigh. Would Daryl really be so stupid as to try something? Daryl wasn't stupid. Dusty knew that. But he also knew Daryl was a ticking time bomb when backed into a corner. There really was no telling what he would do. He pointed to two of the three men still in the room with him, Sam and the Sheriff. "Go see what's up." He said flatly, standing up slowly from the chair as they nodded and left, his rifle held lazily in one hand. He wasn't worried, really. Daryl was a hell of a fighter, but he hadn't been in the thick of battle in years. He might be able to catch one man off guard. But two highly trained professionals at once? Nope. Not a chance in hell.
He glanced at Sam and Rick, who were looking in the direction of the hall quietly, Sam holding on to her brother's arm for dear life and Rick clenching his jaw quietly. Daryl was a lucky man. He'd come from shit, went to more shit in Afghanistan, and came back and made something of himself. He had his whole life ahead of him, with a good woman and a hell of a loyal family. Dusty could only hope that Daryl didn't do anything to jeopardize that. Because as much as Dusty didn't want to, he'd murder everyone to get what he wanted. Daryl and his loved ones included...

* * *

Daryl heard voices. Then heard the footsteps stop just outside the door. Two sets. Two men. Shit. He wasn't sure he could take two of Dusty's goons at once. But there was no turning back now. His heart was ramming in his ears, drumming along at a far too quick pace. He breathed slowly, as quietly as he could, muscles tense, ready to jump at a moment's notice.

He saw the barrel of a rifle push the door open, creaking it on its hinges and casting light into the darkened room. The angle told him it was coming from the left, which meant they must be to either side of the door. He waited, watching the barrel inch closer into the dark. It wasn't till the rifle wielder saw his companion on the floor that he took a step in. Daryl grabbed the rifle with one hand, swinging the hammer up high and wide with the other, catching the man in the throat with a sickening smack. He went tumbling backward, the rifle coming free. Daryl launched himself backward just in time to see the other man step forward, hand gun raised and firing.

The sound of a gun being fired in such a small space was like a never ending explosion. Daryl's ears instantly rang, and he threw himself to the side, getting down as low as he could as bullets ricocheted off walls and pummeled into boxes. Then silence. How many shots had that guy fired, for fuck's sake?! It didn't matter. Daryl pressed himself to the floor on his back, shotgun up and aimed, and the man stepped in, sweeping his gun in an arch, probably expecting Daryl to be standing upright.

"You missed, asshole." Daryl grunted out, then pulled the trigger of the shotgun.

* * *

Dusty moved for Sam and Rick instantly, the other man still with him aiming a rifle right at Rick's head as Dusty yanked Sam away from him. "Hey!" Rick growled out, attempting to stand up, but the other guy pushed the muzzle harder into Rick's head and he froze. Sam cried out, protesting against the harsh grip on her arm.

"Stop." Dusty hissed out, very close to her ear, and she froze, a soft sob escaping her lips. " Fucking Daryl. Couldn't do what he was told just this once. I don't know how you put up with him." He said, reaching behind him and pulling out the revolver he'd taken from Rick. He aimed it right in Sam's side. And waited.

The silence was palpable. After all that gunfire, he could only assume someone was dead. Moments ticked by, and no one emerged from the hallway. It was just quiet, and that unsettled him more than anything. "Come on, Daryl." Dusty called out. "My men would have come out by now if they were still in the game." He took a slow step forward, pushing Sam with him. "You know you can't win this. I mean," He chuckled, shaking his head, "You could probably take out one more of us. But not before we kill your buddy and your woman."

Again, silence. Then the sound of boots. "Atta boy." He muttered. But the boots stopped just out of sight. Dusty grumbled wordlessly, then let out an exasperated sigh. "You don't want to play this game with me, man. I meant what I said before." He pressed the revolver harder into Sam, making her gasp. Then he lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered. "Tell your boyfriend what I have jammed in your ribs right now." He pulled back the hammer, the click audible as it settled in place.
Sam swallowed, stiffening even more.

"Daryl..." she said softly, then cleared her throat. "Daryl, he's got a gun in my side." She said, eyes wide and staring at the hallway entrance. "And a gun to Rick's head." Dusty smiled at that.

"Good girl." He whispered, kissing the back of her head before looking back toward the hall. "What's it gonna be, Dixon? We going to have a hell of shootout where everybody dies? Or are you just going to give me what I want and we'll write those three wastes of my money off as terminated employees?"

Silence. Fucking silence. Then...

"How bout a third option..." He heard Daryl say.

"The fuck? There is no third option, man. My rules, remember?" Dusty replied, separating himself slightly from Sam to get a better view of the hall, but still holding the revolver in her side.

"Sam, Rick, I'm sorry bout all this." Daryl said then, still hidden. Dusty rolled his eyes, and let out a sigh.

"Yeah, yeah. Cut the touchy shit. I've officially lost my patience." He forced Sam down on her knees, a hand twisted in her hair and he put the revolver to her temple. "Now get the fuck out here, put your weapons down, or I blow her head off. Fuck. This could have been so simple, man. Now you've gone and ruined my..." He paused, glancing at Rick, furrowing his brows in confusion. "The hell you smiling about?"

Rick, who was still on his knees, was smirking, like there was some joke only he got the punchline to. "There's always a third option." He said. Then before Dusty could respond, Rick lunged. But not at him or the man holding a gun on him. He lunged right into Sam, knocking her down and covering her body, just in time for loud shotgun blasts to rip through the room...
"Do what no one expects."

There was always a third option. That's what Rick had told Daryl when he first arrested him all those years back. "You can sit in this cell and end up reliving a stupid cycle, I can let you go and you can get the hell outta my county and be someone else's problem, or... well, there's always a third option."

The third option had been giving Daryl a chance. Hiring him to be a Deputy. Helping him turn his life around. Trusting him. Letting him make the call. And Rick had never looked back or regretted it. Daryl had said it was like, 'Sticking it to the man in grand fashion.' And that little trope had stuck around throughout their career together. The 'third option' had popped up more than once. And it always meant the same thing. Do what no one expects.

Rick's ears were ringing as he pinned Sam to the ground. He'd tackled her hard, but it was necessary. He knew Daryl well enough to know how this was going to play out. Of course, there was no way to really tell what the final outcome would be. But if Daryl had any say about it, Sam was the priority and she damn well not be hurt.

The shotgun blast had taken out the man who'd had the gun on Rick. He was sitting against the wall, eyes wide, stomach a mess, breaths short and shallow till they stopped in a gurgling popping sound. Dusty began firing at the doorway, but Rick was grabbing Sam and standing, pulling her around the counter and away from the bullpen. He had to get her to the office, out of harms way. It was the best way he could help Daryl now. Without Sam in the crossfire, Daryl could take care of business.

As they ran for it, he got a short glimpse of Daryl lunging, flinging his shotgun and tackling Dusty like a linebacker. Another shot went off, and he heard Sam cry out Daryl's name. But he pushed her further into the office, and closed the door behind her, effectively locking her inside.

* * *

Daryl's shotgun jammed after the first shot. Go figure. When Dusty started firing, he had two options. Retreat or push forward. And retreating wasn't going to help anyone now. So ducking and running was the best thing he could do. He felt a bullet slam into his hip, which brought him down to one knee with a yell. But he ignored the burn and sudden ache and pushed himself up, lunging into Dusty and driving him up and down into a desk, slamming the other man hard against the metal structure.

Dusty's gun went wide, clattering against the floor and sliding somewhere out of sight. He brought his elbow down hard on Daryl's shoulder, making Daryl have no choice but to let go and fall off to the side, giving Dusty the leverage he needed to bring a boot up and kick Daryl right in the ribs. "You fucker!" Dusty yelled, kicking again.

All Daryl could do was clutch at his ribs, coughing out the air that Dusty seemed very intent on taking with each well placed boot. Then he saw Dusty reach behind him, pulling out the rifle he'd had slung over his back. Shit. Shit shit shit. Daryl began to get up, diving to the side behind a desk as Dusty began to fire a volley of bullets. Paper and pens and whatever else was on the desk began to fly around. And then, silence.

"You could've made this a whole lot easier, man." Dusty said in the most eerily calm tone. Daryl winced from where he was hiding, catching a glimpse of Rick near the opening to the bullpen, crouched low and giving him a hand signal which motioned to the firearm that Dusty had lost, sitting right there only a few feet from Rick's grasp. But he couldn't get to it without Dusty seeing. Which meant...
Daryl nodded. "When have I ever made things easy?" Daryl said. And Dusty chuckled.

"Stand up, you prick. I'd rather not shoot you through the desk. But hey, if that's how you wanna go." Dusty said. And Daryl nodded at Rick. Slowly he stood, eyes on Dusty, trying to keep the weight off his hip, hands held up and empty. "Ya know, I have to give it to you... you're better than I remember. Took out," Dusty glanced at the dead guy against the wall, then back at Daryl, "All my guys. Not bad, Dixon. You're not as broken as I thought you were."

"Yeah, well... didn't anyone tell ya? Broken people are dangerous." He gave a slow smirk. "They know how to survive," Just then, he heard a shot. A single bullet. And oddly, Dusty didn't even flinch. He just blinked, his mouth opening. And he looked down, as though he were expecting something to be there.

"Fuck." Dusty said, one word. And he fell to his knees, giving a plain view to Rick standing behind him, gun still aimed. Daryl couldn't see it, but he knew Rick had shot Dusty. He watched as if it were in slow motion. Dusty dropped his rifle. Then he fell all the way to his back, his legs bent awkwardly. He kept staring up at the ceiling, blinking, breathing. Then... nothing.

There was just an odd silence.

Rick lowered his gun. And both he and Daryl looked around quietly at all the damage, the two dead men. It all seemed surreal. Like it hadn't just happened. Or it had happened too quick, ended too fast to process. Neither one of them said anything. Shit, what the hell could they possibly say?

Daryl reached for one of the rolling chairs slowly, pulling it toward him and sitting with a wince. His hip was soaked with blood, his jeans darkened by the fresh flowing fluid half way down his thigh. He planted a hand on the open wound, but was watching the now dead form of Dusty.

Months.

Months of death and destruction, drugs and mayhem, all lead to... to what?


He felt numb in a way. And he couldn't help but feel a little sad about Dusty. Despite the fact the man was as evil as they came, he was still a part of Daryl's past. A past that had greatly made him who he was now. Rick moved toward him then, putting a hand on Daryl's shoulder.

"It's over, man." He said, as though even though it was obvious, it still needed to be heard. Daryl just nodded silently. Over.

Bout fucking time.
Dilly was filthy.

Head to tail, her poodle body was covered in mud and brush. Twigs and leaves stuck to her now much longer curly hair. Her tongue was lolling as she laid next to the cold but swiftly running river. It was freezing out, but all that running around had made her perfectly warm. She was not a show dog anymore. Far from it. She was now just a dog, no expectations, no ridiculous haircut, no need to be proper all the time. And Sam could tell that Dilly was much, much happier that way. Daryl had meant it when he said they weren't going to pamper the pooch. But in a way, just letting the poodle be a dog was pampering enough.

Sam was sitting on the log, watching the water run. Leaves flowed by along the current, Autumn letting loose more and more with every short breeze. The chill was infectious, seeping down into her bones. The jacket she wore didn't seem to do much against it. But she didn't want to go back to the cabin. Not yet. Right now the cabin was quiet. And she so very didn't want quiet. She wanted life and noise. And the ever moving water was a boundless sound in her head she could hold on to.

She was having nightmares on and off now. Images of things that didn't happen in the Sheriff's Office. And memories of things that did. It wasn't so much that she was still scared. Dusty was dead. And the men who had helped her were dead, too. Thanks to her brother and Daryl, she wasn't. She was still alive, and so were Rick and Daryl and that alone had triggered some new things inside of her.

Anger, for one thing.

She was angry that Daryl, a man who had only ever tried to do what was right and good, had his world turned upside down and inside out, not only by that asshole Dusty, but her as well. She'd hurt him. And he'd taken her back. Just like that. He'd listened to her ramble and forgiven her in a heartbeat. And she didn't deserve it. Hell, she didn't deserve him. But she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. She wasn't going to be stupid enough to hurt him again. She wasn't going to fail him. Or herself.

For the first time in literal years, she knew what real love was. Not the fairytale sort, not the selfish sort. That sort of love wasn't real because it was cookie cutter, and not meant to last. But her love with Daryl? It was real like the river was real. It had no solid form. It wasn't meant to fit into a mold, and yet could fit everywhere. It was soft and gentle, but could move mountains and had the strength to change the earth itself. It could be cold enough to hurt, but warm enough to soothe. And it could give a peace just by being near it that one wouldn't think could exist in such a rough current.

Unlike the river, however, she felt like she'd finally found her place. The river would keep going, it would branch out, connect elsewhere, someday make its way to the sea. But it would never just be still. It would never settle for a life so quiet and firmly rooted.

For the first time, Sam realized... she wanted that more than anything. Here in this small backwoods Georgia farm town, living in their cabin, watching her niece and nephew grow up, washing a dirty dog every other day, with Daryl.

"That's quite the look."

She turned around when she heard that familiar raspy voice, seeing Daryl standing there, smirking at Dilly who just wagged her little stump of a tail in response. Sam grinned, she couldn't quite help it.
Standing there in his jeans with his Deputy jacket zipped up against the cold, he was a sight for sore eyes. She stood up from the log, hopped over it and practically tackled him in a hug.

It had been one month since the incident at the Office. One month since everything nearly came to a deadly halt. One month since Daryl had forgiven her and taken her back. And in that month, she'd only seen him a handful of times. With the FBI investigating everything, and the interviews and court proceedings against Total Pharmaceuticals, Daryl and Rick both had barely even been in Athens. Not seeing Daryl had been torture. And getting to talk to him on the phone, though nice, had not been nearly enough for her. They had so much to catch up on, and most of it she wanted to do in person.

She felt his strong arms wrap around her, holding her firmly against him, his face against her neck, his breath warm against her skin as he let out a sigh. It sent goosebumps up and down her spine. She buried her face into his shoulder. And for a long moment, neither one said anything else. She could hear the river rolling along behind them, her heartbeat seeming to find a rhythm to magically match its subtle beat. She felt so suddenly full and at peace that it hurt, which really was a little strange to experience. Like her soul didn't know how to cope with being whole. And she shuddered a little in response, clinging to him a little harder.

"I missed you." He said softly, his voice merging into the sounds around them. He pulled back, but only enough to see her face, both of his hands coming up to caress her cold reddened cheeks. Those endless blue eyes of his captured her own effortlessly, the soft smile that played on his lips grew ever so slightly. And then he kissed her. His mouth was an intoxicating warmth. She sighed into that kiss, the feel of his fingers in her hair, his thumbs on her cheeks lulling her. The stubble on his chin was perfectly chaotic, adding an electric pulse to the longing she felt. Whenever he kissed her, it was like fitting two puzzle pieces together. It was an undoing of all she was, and a refitting of all she wanted to be. He was magic. Pure and simple. And she was hopelessly lost in the reality that he'd chosen her. Not just once, but twice.

When the kiss ended, their foreheads were pressed together. Her hands were curled into the material of his dark brown coat, and she let out a shaken sigh. She refused to open her eyes. At least, for now. The tingling he'd left behind had lit up her whole form, and she wasn't quite ready to let go of that yet. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming home?" She asked softly, her warm breath cascading between them. She didn't have to open her eyes to know that boyish smile of his was painted on his mouth.

"Woulda ruined the surprise, dontcha think?" He replied, his hands falling from her face to glide up and down her sides slowly. "Totally worth it, if ya ask me." She chuckled at that, opening her eyes then and lifting her head away from his. There it was, just like she knew it would be. That smile.

"I love you, Daryl Dixon." She had to say it. Couldn't quite help herself. The words came so easily, but the feeling behind them was a powerful thing. She could have lost everything because of Dusty. Daryl could have died in that precinct not knowing how much she needed and loved him, all because she had been an idiot. If fate had been any crueler, she'd be standing here alone in this moment, mourning the loss of a life she hadn't deserved in the first place.

Sam watched that smile grow, though only enough to make his eyes narrow lightly. "That's a good thing. Cause this would be really awkward otherwise." And again, he had her laughing. He was good at that. He made her feel like she was his whole world, that her happiness was everything to him. And that alone made her want to make him happy in return. Before she could respond, there was a jingling of Dilly's collar.

And suddenly, both she and Daryl were shielding themselves from wayward splatters of mud and
other things as Dilly shook herself off. Sam let out a little squeal, Daryl turning to stand in front of her, chuckling lightly. When Dilly finally stopped, thoroughly pleased with her poodle self, she came right up to them. And Daryl looked down at her. "Thanks, mutt." He gruffed, but he was still smiling. "Looks like we all need a bath now."

As Sam and Daryl walked back to the cabin hand in hand, she could tell that all of them being dirty was perfectly alright with Dilly, who trotted along ahead of them without a care in the world. And Sam had to agree with her.

For the first time in a very long time, life was perfect. Mud and all.
"I coulda lost you."

The investigation of the events with Dusty back at the Sheriff's Office had concluded without too much of a headache. Surveillance video had backed up their story completely. And the evidence that he and Rick had gathered over time certainly helped corroborate things. It also helped in the Federal investigation against Total Pharmaceuticals and Vincent Durrow. It had become nearly national news, and the scandal alone had tanked Total Pharm into the toilet. Stocks crashed and the business went under in record time. Which was a good thing as far as the illegal drugs went. A bad thing for all those people who had lost their jobs. But there was a lawsuit going on, spear headed by all the employees who had been lied to and ended up getting the shit end of the stick. A multi million dollar payout, if they were lucky.

Daryl and Rick had spent nearly the entire month at Georgia's FBI headquarters, helping and giving interviews and whatever else the Feds decided they had to do. It had been one royal pain the ass. But Daryl took it in stride, just to get it over with. He wanted this Dusty thing so far behind him that it would barely be a memory, if he had his way. Unfortunately, that wasn’t how his brain worked. And all that mayhem had brought about nightmares he really didn’t want. His psyche had taken quite the blow, but he was working through it. He’d talked to Sam about it over the phone. It often amazed him how understanding she was, how she didn’t judge his broken head.

When he was at his worst, when he felt so hollow and dark that he was sure he would drown in the shadows that plagued him, she only had to smile or touch him or tell him she loves him, and it pulled him right out of that pit back into a better place. She was his reason to keep trying, to take the darkness head on and fight for something better.

Sam asked him once, during one of their longer phone conversations, why he'd been so willing to forgive her after she 'let him down'. Daryl's answer had been simple, which he was sure surprised her as much as anything else. "A man doesn't choose to breathe. He just does. Same goes with lovin' you."

Daryl would never claim to be the smartest man around. He wasn't an idiot, but he wasn't a genius, either. He could admit that. There was still plenty life had to teach him, which he was finding out at some cost lately. But one lesson he was sure never to take for granted was that when a woman like Samantha was willing to love a man like him, ain't no way in hell he was going to walk away.

He knew damn well it wasn't always going to be easy. He knew he was a hellish man to live with. But he wasn't going to stop trying. Before Samantha, he'd been living day to day, going through the motions. His only goals in life were to do his job and do it right. To get through the nights without eating a bullet because of the nightmares. And to get up the next day and do it all over again. Then Samantha came along and made him realize there was so much more to living than being a suicidal robot. She'd saved him, in more ways than one. And he wasn't even sure if she knew it.

She was laying beside him in bed now, on her stomach, hands beneath her pillow and an extremely peaceful look on her face. She was blinking lazily at him, just watching him as he ran his fingers up and down her bare spine, stopping just before the blankets that bunched up and covered her from her rear down. Her somewhat damp hair was a delightful mess, splayed over her shoulder. He’d spent the last hour just massaging her after they’d cleaned up Dilly and themselves. Getting to feel her beneath his hands again was wonderful. Getting to make her feel warm and relaxed, and seeing this look on her face, was even better.

"Marry me," he said to her, his head on his own pillow. He watched her give a lazy little smile and she turned to face him completely, her bare upper body in full unabashed view. She lifted her left
hand, wiggling her fingers to flash her engagement ring.

"I think we already covered that." She said, scooting closer to him and sliding her hand around his bare side to rest at his lower back, right over one of his bigger scars. He took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly before responding.

"I meant... marry me tomorrow." He wrapped his arm completely around her, his other sliding up beneath her pillow to give them room to get closer. "I don't wanna wait anymore." He watched her eyes light up in delight and confusion, and she furrowed her brows at him, soft amusement playing on her features. But then, as she continued to study the look on his face, her expression softened and her brows raised.

"You're serious..." She said softly, then she let out a gentle but slightly exasperated laugh. "We can't just get married tomorrow. I mean, we've got nothing ready!" She said, pulling her head back a bit to see him better. He pushed himself up on one elbow, looking down at her.

"We don't need much. Just us, our friends and family, a field and some home cookin. Shit, throw on some jeans and a t-shirt and you'll be the most beautiful bride in the world. I jus..." he paused, letting his eyes fall to the sheets underneath them for a moment before he looked back at her face, her lips, her eyes. "I coulda lost you." He said firmly. "All it would have taken was one terrible moment, and all this?" He looked up and around for a moment, "Our whole future? It would have gone up in smoke."

He turned her over gently onto her back, pressing his side up against her, moving his hand to slide across her stomach and to her side. "I don't wanna wait. I wanna give you my last name, and I wanna spend the rest of my life tryin to be the husband you deserve."

She got really quiet then, and he could feel his heart making its way back to the floor where it had become accustomed to being as the seconds ticked by. He watched her brown eyes search his features. And then her hand came up, fingers delicately pushing his ever messy bangs out of his view. Slowly, her face became this happy, radiant thing that just pulsed through every graze of her skin against his. "I'll make you a deal." She said, her free hand pushing him more on top of her, her legs wrapping slightly around him as he settled against her. "One week. We'll make this one hell of a whirlwind wedding. But give me one week. Only cause..." she blushed slightly, her cheeks nearly matching the pink of her lips, "I really, really want to look perfect for you."

He could not have described out loud the feeling of the happiness that burned through him if he'd tried. He grinned effortlessly, "Woman, you're already perfect."

Before she could protest that truth or say anything else, he kissed her. He breathed in the clean smell of her coconut shampoo and felt the way her naked body molded against his own as she kissed him back, her mouth opening, lips working as their tongues danced in a state of ever present longing. No matter what she thought, she was perfect to him. Every one of her flaws, everything she hated about herself, every insecurity she might have had, it all made up the woman he loves.

The woman who, at the moment, was urging him on to things far more passionate than a kiss. There was this magic between them. A look, a touch, a kiss, and it ignited a storm that neither one of them wanted to control. It was always like that, as though whatever bonded them together made every physical contact into something stronger. Sure, in polite company they could control themselves. But in the quiet of their room, in the comfort of their bed, there was no control. There was just the passion, the hunger, the undying urge to feel each other's presence inside and out.

He could spend the rest of his life like this. Stealing kisses, making her laugh, drowning in her love, spending every day and night with the woman he loves. Actually, he planned on it. One week, and
she'd be his bride. One week, and he'd have everything he never thought he would. And somehow, it would still never be enough. Samantha Grimes was his addiction. One he'd gladly never recover from...
"One week."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Sexual scenarios.)

Every inch of her body lit up with the feel of his muscular form against her. She could feel her breath come quicker with every motion of his hips, his hardness ready and pressing against her, but teasing her relentlessly as he refused to go inside of her, no matter how she angled her hips. He could always frustrate her like that, in an impossibly good way. He would draw out her need till neither one of them could stand it anymore. And she would nearly lose her head when he finally decided to take her.

But for now, she moaned softly as his mouth broke away from hers, her hands clinging to his shoulders as he slipped his mouth down her throat, to her collar bone. Every nerve was on fire, the warmth of his skin bringing that fire to a near raging inferno. The lower his kisses went, the more she trembled. He made all rational thought flee from her mind, and her hands seemed wild and lost as though she had no idea what to do with them. She felt his mouth take in one of her nipples, and she clenched her teeth at the sudden feel of his lips and tongue working the pertness of it expertly. One of his hands massaged her other breast, the roughness of his callouses somehow offset by the sheer volume of his gentleness as he worked that mound of flesh in his palm. She gripped his hair solidly, trying her best not to hurt him.

She had to look down at him, and she caught his wild blue eyes staring at her. It made her twitch in all the right places and she bit her lip lightly before letting her head fall back to the pillow, breathing out his name. His mouth began to move lower, down the curve of her breast, to the plains of her stomach, his hands gliding down her sides, fingers tracing her ribcage. Her legs opened for him instinctively, anticipating. She never once asked him to do what he was about to do. He always seemed perfectly willing to do it regardless. And it never ceased to surprise her.

When his hands curled around her thighs, fingers ever massaging, she lifted her head, eyes wide in wonder as he gave her one last primal look, and lowered his mouth to her sex. Her whole body arched as his tongue slid between the folds, tasting and pressing till his lips and teeth found that very sensitive nub, making her gasp out, hands clenching the mattress uselessly. He wasted no time in working her clit, finding a rhythm that was simultaneously too much pleasure and not enough. Never in her life had she come so easily as she did when Daryl was in control. He knew every way to touch her, to kiss her, to taste her, and it brought the orgasm to raging, bursting out of her whole body. Or at least that's what it felt like as she tremored on the bed, eyes closed, crying out as she tried to stay aware enough to not crush his head with her thighs.

When it ended, she was beaded in sweat, soft twitches of her body and the heavy rise and fall of her breathing the only proof she was even alive. He had undone her, and even though she was just a trembling mess, she knew she wanted more. Not that she could have said it in that moment. Hell, she couldn't have formed words right then even if she wanted to.

She had to smile, though. The light crease of her lips an involuntary reaction to the feel of his mouth making its way back up her body, his own body slowly beginning to realign with her own. When he was finally hovering above her, his groin pressed into her still trembling own, his dick felt impossibly
harder. And she just loved that she could do that to him, with just her sounds alone. She lifted her legs, bending them at the knees, feet flat on the bed. Her hands gripped his hips, one right over his newest scar which somehow felt softer beneath her palm. And she opened her eyes, instantly awed by the look in his own endless blues.

He was marvelous. A being of pure ecstasy, a man with the purest heart she'd ever seen, and here he was... looking at her like she was not just a star but his entire universe. And that undid her more than anything ever could. They held each other's gaze as he shifted his hips, and she caught her breath the same time he did as he slipped inside her wet tightness. He buried himself all the way in, holding himself inside of her till they both caught their breath. And then he began to move. There were no words to describe the sensation of having his hardness within her. Or what his rhythm did to her. Or what his body alone created in her veins. With each methodical thrust, he had her writhing, biting her lip, breathing his name, clinging to his frame, wanting more.

Making love to Daryl Dixon -and it was never just sex, but making love- was an experience she was proud to know no other woman would ever have. It was hers and hers alone, and he had gifted that to her. He had chosen her, he wanted her, he was in love with her. And it still amazed her. It filled her with a sense of possession she'd never had before. When it came to Daryl, she was selfish. Not in a bad way, really. But in a way that she knew meant she would fight tooth and nail to keep him. She'd been so stupid before. Everything she could ever want, everything she could ever need, was right here in Daryl. It wasn't just making love to him that had her feeling that way, either. But also how he treated her, like she was his equal, like he could live without her but didn't want to. Like he was hers, and glad to be hers. Just like she was his, and always would be.

She felt his rhythm pick up, her body so tightly wound that it made a terribly wonderful ache begin in the deepest part of her. That he could make her build to orgasm just by moving in and out of her was a wonder in itself. And it wasn't long again before she was just a writhing and mindless thing, coming as he pushed himself in and out faster, more. She went momentarily limp around him, only her hands curled around his rear, feeling his body work so well. And then she heard him moan, watched his eyes close, felt his body go rigid as he pressed himself so far into her that it made her arch, the lips of her sex still twitching as he came. She felt each pulse of his groin, the trembling in his muscles as he held himself up over her. And when it was over, he hung his head, breathing heavily, still holding himself up as they remained locked at the waist.

"One week." She finally whispered, pressing her warm lips to his own momentarily. She felt him smile against her mouth before he kissed her back tenderly. A moment later, he was holding her beneath the covers, her back to his chest, his arms wrapped safely around her, his breathing on the back of her neck. The quiet of their room and the feeling of their aftermath engulfed her. This was it. This was her forever. And as she closed her eyes, lost in the wholeness of Daryl Dixon, she knew without a doubt that she was never going to look back...
"Don't you ever forget, boy, you hear me?"

There were bruises on her legs. An almost pock marked trail of browns and greens, some purple, proof that being drunk in a cluttered house was a danger his mother seemed to care very little about. He wondered sometimes if she'd been pretty once. Or at least pretty by the standards of those who weren't a boy who adored his mother despite her dependency on alcohol and cigarettes.

She was thin, bony. Like her body would never get enough food to put weight on her. Merle said it was because she was a waste of flesh. Of course, their Dad had said the same thing. And neither Daryl's older brother or father were the best examples of how to treat a woman. Her dirty blond hair was a forever tangled mess around her shoulders, no amount of brushing able to release those snags anymore. Her lightly freckled face was sunken, gray circles ringing her crystal blue eyes. Those were what he loved the most about her, because he got his eyes from her. Despite the state of her body, her eyes always shined. Especially when she looked at her youngest boy like she was looking at him now. She was sitting on the porch swing, the rusted chains creaking with each push of her red painted toes on the gray and dried out floor boards.

"Come here, sweety." She said to him, beckoning him to sit beside her with a cigarette half burnt between her yellowed fingers. Her accent was dry and frail, her voice a perfect example of the weight of her existence. He pushed himself to his feet, wiping his hands off on his filthy blue jeans as he moved away from his old matchbox cars in the dirt. He climbed those steps in record time, flopping down next to her, the smell of stale cigarettes, stale beer, stale sweat hitting his nose. But he ignored it. He could ignore just about anything for Momma.

"This old world, it's gettin darker every day." She said, peering across the yard to the police cruiser that was making its circle through their decrepit neighborhood. She put a protective hand on Daryl's knee, squeezing lightly. "Ain't a lot to make it bright anymore." She looked down at him, a familiar sadness in her eyes as she snuffed out the cigarette on the arm of the porch swing. "Cept for you, little boy." She smiled. Her slightly yellow teeth coming into view for a brief moment before she leaned forward and kissed his forehead with pink lipstick chapped lips.

"Your brother, your Daddy... they've forgotten what it's like to want somethin more, somethin better. Shit, so have I." She said with a tired laugh, looking back out at the open, dead grassed yard. She let out a deep sigh. "Don't you ever forget, boy, you hear me?" She said firmly, taking one last look at him before standing up and heading into the house without so much as a glance back, the half peeled screen door smacking shut in her wake.

A moment later, he was off chasing the neighborhood kids so he could use one of their bikes. He didn't have one of his own. And if he was charming enough, he could convince them to give him a go around. An hour after that, sirens caught the attention of the small group of kids. They took their bikes to chase after some fire trucks. And Daryl? Well, he had to hoof it after them.

He didn't have to go far to find them, stopped at the edge of his street, staring at his house and the flames bursting through the windows, feeling the weight of all those eyes on him while he watched his whole world burn...

He'd been too young then to understand what his mother had been talking about. And for years afterward, her last words to him were barely a memory. More like a ghost that wanted to be heard, but couldn't form a complete sentence. But now that he was crouching there in that cold and somewhat neglected cemetery, brushing dead leaves off the single slab of marble that had his mother's name on it, it all came back to him with such clarity that it physically hurt. He had to take in
a deep breath, letting it out slow as the air settled around him. He could almost smell her, the memory was so strong.

He wasn't entirely sure why he was there, to be honest. His mother had been dead so long, she really had no footing in his life anymore. But he'd driven the forty five minutes out here for some reason, the urge to 'see' her before he said 'I do' tomorrow far too strong for him to ignore.

Most folks would have their parents at their wedding. Their Dad and Mom dressed in their finest, Momma's crying into their husband's handkerchiefs while they happily watched their kids take on the next step of their lives. But Daryl wasn't most folks. He didn't have family in the traditional sense. His brother was buried in a grave a lot like this. He could care less where his father was spending eternity. But his Momma?

What little of her body they were able to recover from that burning house was here in the dirt, an aching and hollowed out ghost that left him with nothing but words and a grief he never talked about. Mostly because that grief was like an old friend. It was funny that no matter how terrible his mother had been, he'd loved her. Unconditionally. He'd chalked it up to just being a kid. But over the years, even though he'd probably never say it out loud, he knew it was because his mother had paved the way for who he was now. She'd planted those little seeds of tired wisdom within him. When shit hit the fan or life was at its worst, it was her voice in his head telling him to keep hoping, keep trying, don't give up.

She may not have been the poster child for Mother of the Year, but she'd loved her little boy. And she made sure he knew, in her own way.

"Gettin married." He said, his voice sounding strange as he stood, staring down at the moss covered stone. "She's somethin special. She's..." He paused. Shit, this was ridiculous. His Momma couldn't hear him. So what the hell was he doing? He cleared his throat a little, shoving his hands into the pockets of his warn jeans, his winged vest shrugged up a little higher as he hunched his shoulders a little, a long sleeved black shirt the only other thing he wore against the cold.

His family wasn't blood anymore. Besides his mother, he wasn't really sure they ever had been. His family now was Rick, Michonne and the kids, Carol and Sophia, Beth, Maggie, Glenn and Anna Beth and more. It was practically the entire damn town of Athens, at this point. All the people in his life who'd pretty much taken him in as a broken shell of a man and helped build him back up into something more.

'... they've forgotten what it's like to want somethin more, somethin better.'

He had the somethin more. He'd had that for awhile. And the somethin better?

"Her name's Sam. And she's the best thing that's ever happened to me. You'd like her." He finally said. He nudged a twig with his boot, watching as it caught on a crinkled lump of grass. "Don't got to worry anymore, Momma. I didn't forget."

It seemed important to tell her that, even if she couldn't hear it. Daryl wasn't exactly a believer in the afterlife. He wasn't a church goer, though he liked to think his father was wading around in Hell. And even more, he hoped his mother was in that 'better place' that people liked to talk about, maybe looking down at the man her little boy had become, and maybe knowing his words were true. He hadn't forgotten. Maybe that could give her some of the peace she'd never had in life.

He cracked a light smile at that thought. "Yeah." He said to no one and nothing in particular. That was why he'd come. To wrap up that last little piece of unfinished business. To give his Momma the peace she'd always deserved.
He left that cold cemetery, pretty sure he was never going to come back. He'd done what he needed to do. And now it was time to move forward. It was time to marry the woman he loved, to grab on to that 'somethin better' with both hands and jump. Life had been crazy lately, one whirlwind disaster after another. But he was still here. And so was Sam. And that meant everything in the world.

She'd watched him through the screen door as he ran off after those kids on their bikes, a little pang of guilt filling up her empty stomach as she lit another cigarette, a sad smile playing on those painted lips at the courage he had to just put himself out there and want what she couldn't give him, never holding it against her. Such a damn good boy. "You got this." She said softly, lifting the bottle of Jack to her lips one more time before his feet carried him completely out of view of the hell they lived in. "No big." And she closed the door for the last time.
"For when the darkness comes..."

Chapter Notes

(The song in this chapters is called When The Darkness Comes, performed by Colbie Caillat. An absolutely beautiful version. Enjoy!)

It wasn't an image she had honestly thought she would ever see before Daryl Dixon. The woman in the mirror was happy, well and truly and completely happy in a way she had not even known could exist, let alone be felt. How could anyone have known that she was going through miles of frozen hell to find it? How could she have known that everything... every damn thing... was leading up to this?

Slowly, she slid her hands down the subtle silken skirts of the snow white dress she wore. The pale pink sash that rested at her middle flowed down her left side in a subtle trail of material. The bodice fit perfectly, the sleeveless wide shoulder straps offering an angle to her collarbones she hadn't really noticed before. Her hair was up in a wave of messy curls that were peppered in a silver glitter and somehow managed to look far more elegant than she ever thought she was capable of. Her makeup was light. No need to paint it on. Her pale pink lipstick matched the sash, just like her pale pink shoes. No high heels for this girl. The Mary-Janes were perfect. Damn... it was all perfect.

"When you were fourteen," Rick said from behind her, stepping into view in the reflection as he lifted his hands to rest on her shoulders, meeting her visage's gaze. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a black tie that seemed to fit him perfectly. "I found you by that little pond behind the house. You were cryin your eyes out, pulling petals off a dead flower and tossing them into the water cause some guy called you 'disgusting'."

Sam smiled a little, "Oh my god, that was Tucker Wilson. I had such a huge crush on him, till he decided to be an asshole." She said, then blushed a little and touched her lips when the swear came out. Rick just smiled wider.

"Do you remember what I told you?" He asked, turning her in his hands so they faced each other. He curled some hair behind her ear and let his hands fall to hers. She looked up at him, her big brother. She'd always been looking up at and to this man. And she couldn't have been more proud to have him giving her away today. Just the idea of it made a little bit of unshed tears fill her eyes and she cracked a hasty smile. But she didn't answer. Mostly because she wanted to hear him say it one more time. "Don't cry over him, princess. Pick up your head, your tiara is falling."

They both laughed at that. It was so friggin ridiculous. And even back then, they'd laughed. It had been just what she'd needed to get her to stop being emotional over the likes of Tucker Wilson. Rick was good like that. He could always pull her out of her own head, and make her see what was important. He let out a little sigh, but that smile stayed playing on his lips. "You'll never have to cry over Daryl. You two? You're meant to be, kiddo." He said, and he pulled her into a hug. She melted into her big brother, her cheek resting over his heartbeat.

"How do you know?" She asked, her voice slightly shaken with the emotion she was trying so hard to control. Rick kissed the top of her head, not letting her go just yet.

"Cause the couples that are meant to be are the ones who go through all the things that are meant to
tear them apart, and come out even stronger." He pulled gently away then. "I'd say that's you two in a nutshell."

All her hard fought control began to waver then, a tear escaping as she let out a soft little laugh. Rick wiped the tear with his thumb. And when he spoke this time, his voice cracked a little. "I love you, Sammy. And I love Daryl. And I couldn't be happier for you than I am right now." Sam let out a little happy sob, then shook her head.

"We're gonna be a mess." She reached up and wiped at a tear that escaped Rick's eye and they both smiled.

"Hey you two, it's time." Carol said from the doorway, standing with the door open in her light pastel blue bridesmaid's dress. Sam and Rick smiled at her, then at each other. She picked up her bouquet from the side table, an arrangement of light pink and light blue flowers. And she held it in one hand as she hooked her other into Rick's offered arm.

"Ready?" Rick asked her, just as the soft sounds of a melodic guitar filled the air from somewhere out of sight. For the first time in her life, she didn't hesitate. All that had happened to them, all the fear and doubts and heartache and terror... none of that mattered anymore. Just outside that door was the rest of her life. And no matter what came, no matter what tried to tear their world down, she knew she and Daryl were going to be just fine.

"Definitely." She said with a determined smile. And with that, Rick lead her out into the wide open future beyond.

* * *

He'd heard stories of the moment a man would see his bride for the first time, how they'd laugh or cry or sometimes even be beside themselves. But when he saw Sam being lead down that large hall toward him by Rick, all the air went out of his lungs. All logical thought was non existent. And he froze in place in that fancy ass dark blue tux and tie.

There was no hesitation, but a firmly repeating resolve in his head that this was it. This was his future and his forever, all wrapped up in one amazing woman who he sure as hell didn't deserve. And here she was, walking toward him with tear rimmed eyes and a smile that lit up the whole place far more than the twinkling lights or candles did. When Rick finally handed her to him, all the air returned to him, and he was faced with the most surety he'd ever had.

He didn't really hear as Father Gabriel began to speak. He just couldn't take his eyes off of her, and she was just as stuck on him, it seemed. When Gabriel finally said something about vows, Daryl blinked and almost had to look around for a moment before he was sure he wasn't in a really incredible dream. "Vows, right..." he said, clearing his throat, a flush of nervousness filling him up as a soft chuckle roamed over the crowd.

And it was a crowd.

They'd really only wanted to invite close friends and family. But at some point they'd realized that was pretty much everyone in town. Athens was their family. So it was made an open event, and anyone who wanted to be there could. Which was why they'd taken up the entire town hall, the central room decked out in tables and lights and flowers and an archway where they were currently standing. There wasn't an empty table in the place, and some people even had to stand. But he wasn't looking at them. He was looking at Sam, and she was... breathtaking.

"I've never really been good at finding the right words." He said softly, knowing full well that there
were far too many eyes on him. But it was Sam's encouraging smile that had him taking a step closer to her. "Everyone here pretty much knows the mess I came from. How much of a dick I was." He said, cracking a light smile and he saw her smirk as a few people chuckled. "This place, and these people," He said looking around, "They gave me a chance to be someone else, someone good. And I'm forever grateful for that." He looked back at Sam. "But there was always somethin missing. Somethin I didn't know the name of or how to find. I lived so long with this deep, dark hollow..." he shook his head a little, a shaken breath escaping. He cleared his throat lightly. "I guess I jus started thinking that was normal and I was supposed to live like that. But then you came along, all decked out in pink and shy, and you..."

He saw her face soften, her eyes glistening as a tear escaped. He smiled warmly at her. "You changed everythin. You filled up that hollow with everythin you are. You made me believe that I could be happy, that I wasn't destined to be some shell of a man." He reached forward, uncaring if it was what he was supposed to do or not during a ceremony like this, and he slid his thumb over that tear of hers. "You gave me everythin. And I want to spend the rest of my life giving you the same. I want to be the man you think I am, and I want to show you every day just what a miracle you are to me."

She lifted her hand to put it over his, turning her cheek into his palm. "I swear I couldn't love you more than I do right now. But I know," he let out an easy breath, "Tomorrow, I'm gonna love you more, Sam. And it's gonna be like that every day, for as long as you let me."

* * *

She felt everything in her come undone at those words, and she couldn't control the soft sob that melted from her lips. She let his hand fall, but held it in her own. In fact, she held both of his as Gabriel let the whole room know it was her turn for vows. "Daryl Dixon." She said, her voice cracking already, but she smiled brightly. "I was a disaster when I met you." Sam said, watching his face, and those endless blues.

"The world was just one giant, frightening and dark place. And I was trying my best to figure out how to live in it. I knew who I wanted to be, but I'd long ago forgotten how. Then you appeared, and you were this constant, steady, patient presence. Even if I couldn't admit it to myself at the time, I knew right away that I was supposed to find you. You..." her voice cracked again, and she let out a quick breath, shaking her head a little before meeting his gaze again, "You taught me to fight for myself, that I am so much stronger than I ever knew. You gave me my life back just by believing in me. I risked everything on you because you are the one, even if it took me awhile to figure it out. No matter how hard life gets, what challenges we're faced with, you are the risk I will always take. I want to spend our lives together being the woman you always knew I could be, I want to give you back all you've given me. I want to be your wife, because you are my soul mate. And there is no one in existence that I could ever love as much as I love you. I am irrevocably yours, Daryl Dixon, for as long as you'll have me."

* * *

The crowd was cheering, a practical standing ovation, as Daryl kissed his wife for the first time. With rings on their fingers and Father Gabriel introducing them as 'Mr. and Mrs. Dixon,' an unwavering joy seemed to just settle over everyone. Frivolity ensued, but not the raucous kind. It was all good people, sharing with Daryl and Sam something that neither one of them could have ever seen happening. And yet, here they were.

He couldn't feel a single eye on him as he danced so easily and slow to that first dance with Sam, her body pressed warmly against his, their foreheads together. The soft sounds of the acoustic song Sam
had begged to use for their first dance flowing in the air around them as she sang along, just loud enough for him to hear...

"Underneath the echoes, buried in the shadows, there you were. 
Drawn into your mystery, I was just beginning to see your ghost. 
But you must know...

I'll be here waiting, hoping, praying that this light will guide you home. 
When you're feeling lost, I'll leave my love hidden in the sun 
For when the darkness comes..."

He closed his eyes, he couldn't help it. His heart was so full, so set to almost bursting, that he had to let out a shaken breath. He'd been through so much hell, lost so much, and it seemed like all of it finally made sense. Daryl knew for the first time in his life that everything he'd experienced, every last awful and torturous thing he'd gone through, was supposed to happen. If given the chance, he wouldn't change a single moment of it. Because it all lead up to this exact moment.

"Now the door is open. The world I knew is broken. There's no return. 
Now my heart is not scared, just knowing that you're out there watching me. 
So believe...

I'll be here waiting, hoping praying that this light will guide you home. 
When you're feeling lost I'll leave my love hidden in the sun 
For when the darkness comes..."

The song continued, but she lifted her head away from his and met his gaze. "I love you, Daryl." She said softly, and he smiled at her, pulling her ever closer to press his lips to hers for a moment.

"I love you, too." He replied finally, and they danced the rest of their song like it wasn't just their first, but their last.

'For when the darkness comes...'}
"I'll take that as a yes..."

"It's not like..." He said halfway through hoisting the last of the keyboards up on to the shelf above the sheet stands, "We can't afford it, Sam." Daryl wiped his hands on his thighs before turning around. The high school chorus room was almost ready. He and Sam and a few others had spent the last month cleaning it out, putting together risers, painting the walls Sam's favorite shades of pink, and getting things ready for the school year. Sam was standing on one of the risers with her checklist in hand, plastered to a clipboard. She had a bright yellow bandana in her pulled back hair, a pair of paint splattered overalls and a green t-shirt, along with her favorite bright blue sneakers. She looked serious, turning slightly to look at him.

"What's the point, though? I mean... if I'm going to be here every day but weekends, the studio's going to be empty. I know we can afford the rent on it, but I can do private lessons and such at the house. Would be way cheaper." She said, writing something on the checklist. He smirked lightly at her, moving further into the room. Sam had been through the roof elated when she was able to get the job at the high school teaching music and chorus. And though it meant her time at the studio had become seriously limited, and would only get even more limited, and that she'd be making less money than she had been, she was still on cloud nine with the fact that she was going to be teaching at the high school.

"Mrs. Dixon?" A boy named John, about fifteen years old, asked from the double doorway, holding a roll of microphone cords haphazardly. "Where do you want me to put these?" Sam hopped off the risers, motioning to the huge storage closet in the corner of the room. Daryl watched as she helped the boy get them put away, smiling a little wider. He never got tired of people calling her 'Mrs. Dixon.' Sometimes he found it hard to believe it had been a little over a year already. And not a day had gone by since they'd said 'I do' that it hadn't been almost pretty much smooth sailing. Which was saying something, considering all the hell they'd gone through to begin with.

Daryl rubbed absently at his ribs, moving to sit down on an empty milk crate, picking up his bottle of water and chugging the last of it before tossing it into the large trash that sat by the door. He watched Sam lock the doors to the storage closet and send the boy on his way before moving over to sit in front of him, settling herself between his legs and sighing, letting the clipboard rest in her lap as she stretched her legs out. "I think... we're done." She said. He could hear the smile in her voice, and he began to massage her shoulders softly. She let her head fall back, looking at him upside down. He smirked at her.

"You did good, woman." He said, planting a kiss on her forehead. He watched her smile before she lifted her head again. And for a little while, there was nothing but the sound of the ceiling fans in the high vaulted ceilings as he worked the muscles in her shoulders. He felt her heave a large sigh before she slipped out of his hold, setting the clipboard off to the side and getting on her knees facing him.

"Let's go to the river." She said, practically beaming and bouncing in place. Daryl chuckled lightly, resting his palms on her sides as she planted her hands on his thighs, "What? We haven't been in awhile. And I miss it." She said, tilting her head a little. He shook his head slightly, leaning forward and kissing her forehead.

"Alright. You monster." He said, helping her stand with him. Sam giggled, stepping away from him to shut off all the lights.

"I'm your monster." She said, grabbing her bright pink and green backpack off a stool.

"Damn right you are." He said, following her out the door. The hallway was quiet as she locked up.
He'd never really been one for schools. His GED was proof of that. He had just never done well in a classroom setting. And getting detentions every other day probably didn't do wonders for his school career. He watched her slip the keys into her bag, her free hand idly rubbing her stomach before falling. Then she hooked her arm in his.

"There's just... far too much scarring from all the abuse you endured. Even if you were able to conceive, you would never be able to carry a child to term. I'm so... very sorry." The doctor had said all those months ago. It had taken some work on Sam's part to convince Daryl that he'd be a decent Dad. And honestly, he found he really did want to have a kid with Sam. But that day, three months after they were married, pretty much blew those plans right out of the water. Sam had been devastated. And honestly, so had he. But helping her come to terms with the loss, which was what it was, had seemed far more important.

Every now and then, he'd catch her looking off in the distance, a hand on her stomach, daydreaming. He knew she felt like it was her fault. She blamed herself. And he did everything he could to remind her that he didn't marry her for her ability to grow human beings. Little bit by little bit, every day, she seemed to be handling it better. It didn't bother her nearly as much. Especially after she learned she got the job at the high school.

"You know what we should do after?" He said, walking with her hand in hand in the nearly empty parking lot of Athens Regional High School. She looked sideways at him, a curious look in her beautiful brown eyes. "We should go on vacation before school starts. Get out of Georgia for a bit." They hadn't really had what most people would have considered a honeymoon. They'd gone up to the mountains, spent four days in a cabin alone. And it had been exactly what they'd needed. But after that, it was back to work for both of them. Life carried on as usual. And they hadn't really made plans beyond their every day life.

She paused her steps, right next to his truck, still holding his hand as she faced him. "Really?" One word, but there was such a glint of hope and happiness in it. He smiled, pulling her into him. He kissed her soundly, hands holding her warmly against him. She melted into him, like she did every time he kissed her. It never ceased to amaze him how their attraction for one another never seemed to fizzle out. When the kiss ended, he didn't have to say anything. "I'll take that as a yes." She said a little breathily, then giggled, her cheeks turning softly red. She put her hands to her face, then skipped to her side of the truck. He shook his head with a smile.

Maybe a mini-vacation would do them some good. They'd been so busy with work, with getting her set for the coming school year, with renovating and adding on to the house, that they had barely stopped to have time for themselves. Drowning themselves in work had seemed like a great idea after finding out they couldn't have kids. But maybe it was time to re-prioritize. Maybe it was time to get back to living again...
"Never change, Sam."

The house was quiet. Impossibly so.

Their bags were in the truck. Jasper and Dilly were at Carol's. The windows were shuttered, the back door locked up good and tight. And here she was, standing in the hallway, peering around at the insides of their home feeling... what exactly?

She found herself hugging her folded jacket to her chest, clutching it like a child clutched their blankie. Sometimes, she couldn't help but think back on all they'd been through since they'd met. All the disasters and death and pain. And then she couldn't help but think about all the things that had passed between her and Daryl in these walls, private conversations, moments of peace, hours of entangled bodies, days of pure bliss. It was such a stark contrast, her life now compared to what it had been. That life felt like a million years ago. Most of the time, she could even forget that most of it had happened. When she did remember, she worked through it. Daryl was her rock in those moments. All he had endured in his life, and he still had the strength to carry her when her legs failed. It never ceased to amaze her.

But then there were the moments she would think about the fact that her body would never be able to grow a new life. That she and Daryl would never be able to have a child together. And that it was because of all the times Liam had beaten the shit out of her. She'd been taking the pill for so long that it never registered to her that she was infertile. She just thought, when she and Daryl decided to try, that it was taking awhile to get the hormones out of her system. She couldn't have been more wrong. The guilt had eaten at her for months. She'd curl up crying in a ball whenever she'd think about it. She'd never wanted children before Daryl. But the idea of him being a father, of getting to raise a child with him, was like the best kind of dream. A dream that would never happen. And Daryl? Well, he loved her anyway. He didn't complain, or blame her, or treat her any differently. The way he loved her was so deep and honest, sometimes it hurt. For all that was wrong in her, he saw something better. He painted an image of her that was beyond beautiful. And she wanted so badly to be that woman for him. "You're everything I need, Sam. You hear me?" Daryl had said. She couldn't have expressed to him what those simple words had meant to her.

She felt his arms come up around her, his chest pressing to her back, his lips kissing the exposed skin on her neck softly. The scruff of his chin made her skin ripple in goosebumps and she sighed lightly, smiling as she relaxed into his hold. "One whole week. No work, no responsibilities. Jus you, me, a cabin in the woods and a whole lotta time on our hands. Whatever will we do with ourselves?" He joked softly, his breath warm against her neck. He swayed a little, rocking her gently side to side.

Silence stretched on around them. She could feel the warmth in his body, the ever steady thump of his heart against her back. Sam was staring at the walls in the hallway. The pictures she'd put up of their wedding day. A picture of Dilly, of Daryl on Vagrant, of herself covered in pink splotches of paint. There were pictures of Rick, Michonne and the kids, of Glenn, Maggie and Anna Beth. She was beginning to play out their lives on the walls of this place. Bit by bit. She'd pretty much added homey touches everywhere. Every room had been transformed by her 'womanly touch', as Daryl had called it.

He never seemed to complain about any of the changes she'd made. New furniture? Great. Lighter curtains? Sure. Pictures on all the walls? Fantastic. The only thing he asked was that she didn't paint everything pink. She could live with that.

"Do you think I'm too controlling around here?" She asked, somewhat out of the blue, furrowing her
brows and turning in his hold to see his instantly confused expression. "I mean... look at the house. I've pretty much changed just about everything in it since I first moved in. And you don't really say word one." She watched a slow smile spread on his warm lips.

"You do realize this ain't just my home, right?" He held her snugly against him. "And, to be fair, wasn't really a home till you came along." He let his eyes roam past her. "You've made it better. Every little thing you've done? I don't say anything against it cause... you've gone and made it perfect." He looked back at her, then kissed her forehead. "I love you. Love our life. Love our place." He stepped back, slipping his hands down to hers. "And anything you wanna do to it is fine with me."

"Except for the pink." She smirked then, letting him pull her toward the door. He chuckled a little. "As long as the pink stays on your lips and clothes, I'm all for it." He lead her out onto the porch, letting her go to lock the door. She hopped off the porch, feeling a little less heavy than she had only moments ago. Daryl was good like that, lifting the world off her shoulders long enough for her to remember how to breathe. Even when they disagreed or had arguments, or Daryl lost his temper, or Sam got a little nutty, they always seemed to find a way around it.

He held the truck door open for her, waiting till she got in before he leaned forward and kissed her so soundly, so deliciously, that it left her blinking slowly, eyelids heavy. "Wh..." She cleared her throat a little, "What was that for?" She asked as he stepped back. And she was instantly silenced by the expression on his face. No one had ever looked at her the way Daryl Dixon did. And she never wanted anyone else to ever again.

"Never change, Sam." He said, winked, and closed the door.

For a moment, in the quiet of the cab, she was heavy. But this time it was in a good way. Like a warm, love soaked blanket had been draped over her in the stillness of that truck. She had everything a woman could want. She was safe, she was happy, and had an amazing husband who loved her despite all the reasons he shouldn't. She closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly, letting the feel of that heaviness fill her up deep inside, straight to her bones. A moment later, Daryl was settled in the driver's seat beside her, his warm hand on her knee as he pulled the truck out of the driveway.

She might never come to terms with the fact that she and Daryl couldn't have a child together. But maybe, a little bit more every day, she'd learn to accept it. For the sake of their relationship, she could learn to do just about anything. For the love of Daryl, she'd sure as hell try...
"You'd think hell was chasing him."

'... manhunt continues for the two escaped convicts, Presley Watts and Edgar Watts. The two fled after the transport van they were in crashed off Interstate 20 in Wolfam. They were arrested last month in the double homicide of Arielle Winters and William Winters. The brothers were set to stand trial later on this month. Local residents are being asked to follow a curfew, and to report any suspicious activity to authorit-

Daryl reached forward and shut off the radio. He knew all about the Watts brothers. They'd broken into the Winters' home, looking for loot. Found the elderly couple in bed. Decided it was a good idea to torture and kill both of them before leaving with their goody bags. It took three weeks for the local cops to catch them. And in that time, they'd gone on a spree of beatings and theft. The guys were serious degenerates. But that was all out of his county, and this week was going to have nothing to do with crime and everything to do with relaxing.

They were about forty minutes into a good two hour drive to the Northeast Georgia Mountains. And then they'd be surrounded by nothing but deep forests, sparkling rivers, lush waterfalls and not a single person for miles. Just peace, quiet and his woman. Throw in some hunting and fishing, and Daryl was destined to be one happy man.

He tapped the steering wheel idly, the truck idling in the parking lot of the rest stop. One elbow hung out his window, eyes watching the shape of a hawk high up above the trees, his perpetually haphazard bangs somewhat obscuring the view. It was getting cooler the farther north they went. It would be chilly up in the mountains, but he didn't mind that. The cabin, which belonged to Carol, was decked out to the nines with just about everything anyone might think of needing. And stuff no one really needed, either. Like an outdoor hot tub. "Girl's gotta spoil herself sometimes, pooky." She'd said. Daryl smirked at the thought, watching Sam open the passenger door, a handful of Mountain brochures in hr hand, and hop back into the truck.

Her hair was down, and she'd put on her thin brown jacket. It used to be his. One of his old Deputy jackets that he didn't use anymore. Sam had found it in a box and wore it from time to time because, 'It smells like you.' She'd said.

"What's the smirk for?" She asked, plopping the brochures onto the dash and pulling the seatbelt down across her body, buckling it in place. He blinked and shook his head a little.

"I was thinking about the jacuzzi." He said with a small grin. She smiled and giggled softly. He loved that sound.

"Well, get your head out of the gutter and on the road or we'll never get to use the jacuzzi." She said with a comically stern look. He shook his head, turning the engine over and pulling out of the parking lot.

Sam turned the stereo back on, searching till she found one that was playing some acoustic version of a song he recognized but didn't know the name to. He rolled his window up once the wind started picking up, pulling back into highway traffic easily. "I can't wait to see the waterfall. The one Carol told me about? With all the flowers and the cave behind the falls." She said, pulling her messenger bag up into her lap and pushing her sneakers off of her feet one a time, revealing mismatched socks of various colors.

"Flowers won't be bloomin. But the falls are still pretty." He said, moving into the center lane and picking up speed. He watched as a large tanker drove past, raising a brow at how fast it was going.
"Shit, slow the fuck down..." he muttered, his own truck rattling a little as the much larger vehicle roared past.

"Wow, he's in a hurry." Sam said, watching slightly wide eyed as the shiny silver water tanker got further and further away. "You'd think hell was chasing him." She added, shaking her head in disapproval and opening her messenger bag to pull her phone out. "I told Carol I'd take pictures of us at the cabin, but I can't get the flash to work on this stupid ph-"

"SHIT!" Daryl suddenly yelled, swerving the truck abruptly, tires squealing, one of his hands reaching out and grabbing Sam as the truck rocked to a stop. Ahead of them, the tanker was on its side, several cars had slammed into it, another pickup had flipped over. And Daryl had swerved just in time to avoid piling up into it all. He was breathing heavily, arm still protectively across Sam who was holding on to him.

The crash had happened so quickly, he'd barely had time to react. The tanker had suddenly jackknifed and flipped onto its side. And the traffic all around it had turned into one giant mess. He was about to let his hand fall away from Sam, who was breathing just as heavily as he was, when out of the corner of his eye he saw a minivan swerve, but the front axle broke. And suddenly... there was just the image of a black and green van full of people tumbling straight for Daryl and Sam...
There was a car alarm blaring. Over and over, in resonating beeps that were far too loud and obnoxious to just ignore. The woman whose leg Sam was holding was crying, hugging herself, swaying slightly as her wide, tear rimmed eyes surveyed the scene around them. Her family was crowded around her. And she was sitting in a puddle of dirty water. The truck had spilled water all over the highway. The driver was dead. Daryl hadn't said from what. He was at the pickup truck, having pulled the windshield glass out, tending to the driver who was trapped in the crumpled front end of the brown Ford. Several people were milling about, assessing damage, or in a state of shock by what happened to them. Other than the woman in Sam's hold, who was bleeding profusely from a wound on her upper thigh, no one else beside the two truck driver's seemed to have been badly hurt.

It could have been a much different story. Every time she looked at that mini van, she thought it over and over again.

Before she could even react to the fact that a five thousand pound vehicle was about to slam right into them, Daryl had peeled the truck into reverse. The van had flown past them and slammed into the guard rail with nothing but a breath to spare in time. Everything after that had happened so quickly, Daryl barking orders to the people around them, Sam herself helping the people and this woman out of the mini van. Neither one of them even stopped to think about their own well being, except to ask each other if they were okay.

The sound of sirens could be heard in the distance. "Hear that?" She asked the woman, keeping her hand firm on the wound. "Help's on its way." She said, giving the woman a reassuring smile before glancing over her shoulder to the sideways pickup. She could see Daryl's legs and hips sticking out from inside the cab. But the angle it was at didn't allow her to see much else. She wanted to call out to him. But she didn't want to distract him, either.

She felt an insane burning her eyes then. A need to cry that just welled up out of thin air. She swallowed it down, let out a deep breath, forced her attention back on the woman and the approaching sirens.

They could have died. Daryl could be dead. She could be dead. Why did this sort of thing keep happening to them? But they were lucky this time, weren't they? Daryl's quick thinking had kept them from getting hurt, had saved the truck, and allowed them to help the people who really needed it.

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, rubbing them angrily with her free hand, just in time for a fire truck and two ambulances to arrive.

* * *

Daryl had his hand wrapped around the teenage girl's throat.

If this were a different set of circumstances, it would have looked really bad. Well, shit... it was really
bad. She'd pierced her carotid artery. And she was pinned at a very bad angle by the steering column. He'd had to rip out the safety glass of the windshield and crawl in beneath her, using one hand to keep her from putting too much strain on her body, pretty much holding her up by her ribs, and the other to keep her from bleeding out.

"Okay, Mary, you hear that?" He said, offering her a slight smirk. The green eyed, blond teen, no older than sixteen, blinked at him, pale faced and scared.

"S-sirens." She stuttered softly, hands gripping the dash for dear life.

"That's right. Sirens. Know what that means?" Daryl said, ignoring the fact that her blood was dripping down his arm in tiny streams. "Means we'll have you out of here in no time."

"I'm scared. Daddy's... gonna be so mad." She said, silent tears emerging from her eyes. Daryl grit his jaw tight for a moment, then let out a slow breath, shifting his hip slightly.

"Don't you worry bout that, kiddo." He said, "I bet he's going to be happy as a clam that yer alright."

"But his truck..." she said, closing her eyes a moment and wincing in pain.

"Trucks can be replaced. You can't. So no more of that, you hear me?" But she didn't reply. A popping sound was heard that made her scream lightly.

"What was that?!" She demanded, sounding more panicked than she had originally. For a moment, Daryl didn't respond. Because he smelled gasoline. The tank was leaking. Shit. Vehicles didn't explode like they did in the movies. Not really. But get enough chemicals into a melting pot, and one spark was as good as setting off a bomb. He couldn't get her out. Not without help. Which was exactly what pulled up. The fire engine stopped just a few feet away, and then boots were heard hitting the asphalt, the steady hum of the engine in the background.

A firefighter poked his head through where Daryl was half hanging out of. "Sir, I need you to come out of there." He said, motioning with a gloved hand.

"No! No, please don't leave me!" Mary began to cry. And Daryl shushed her gently before looking back at the firefighter.

"Name's Dixon, I'm a Clarke County Deputy Sheriff. I can't come out cause my hand's the only thing keepin the blood in this girl's body." Things moved steadily at that point. They had a paramedic switch out with him. Which took a good twenty minutes, to make sure Mary lost as little blood as possible. And there was also the fact she was pretty much panicking at the idea of Daryl leaving. But he assured her she was in good hands and got the hell out of the way so the firefighters could do their work.

A half hour later, Mary and everyone else who was injured were well on their way to the hospital. He was sitting on the tailgate of his pickup, a blood soaked rag in one hand. Sam next to him, tucked so close into his side that he thought she was trying to melt into him. Both of them were quiet, watching as tow trucks and a cleanup crew were attempting to get the highway open again. Firefighters were packing up. State troopers were milling about. It was a mess. But it could have been a hell of a lot worse. The only one who'd died had been the tanker driver. And Daryl was pretty sure it had been a heart attack. Which might have explained the erratic driving beforehand. Daryl and Sam had both given their accounts of what had happened, including offering up their contact info. And now... well, they were both just sitting in stunned silence.

He reached over with his free hand, which was still a little blood stained, and squeezed her knee
lightly. She almost jumped. "Hey," he said, tossing the rag behind him and turning slightly to look at her. "You okay?" She blinked up at him. And just like that, her face crumpled and her head slumped into his shoulder, her hands curling into his shirt as she sobbed. Daryl was at a loss, wrapping his arms warmly around her. "I got ya." He whispered into her ear before pressing a kiss to the side of her head and just pulling her close, practically setting her in his lap. He didn't care what they looked like.

"I'm sorry." She whispered after her tears stopped, though her shoulders still shook. She lifted her head, prying one of her hands away to wipe at her cheeks. "I don't know why I did that."

"I do." He said, bringing both hands up to hold her face, his thumbs smoothing across her damp cheeks. "Shit, Sam. That was just... a mess. You'd be insane if you didn't cry." He smoothed his fingers through her hair carefully, letting his hands glide down her shoulders to rest on her arms. She was only human. There was no shame in crying.

"We almost died." She said softly, eyes searching his face, furrowing her brows lightly. "I mean, if you hadn't-" He lifted a hand and put it to her lips. Stopping her. She raised a brow at him, confusion painting her delicate features.

"I don't want to hear word one about what almost happened. Cause it didn't. And that's that." He said, hopping off the tailgate and turning to hold a hand out to her. "We're going to get back in this truck, and we're going to go to the mountains. And we're going to have a good damn week." He stated so firmly that she just sort of gaped at him, slipping her fingers into his palm before hopping off as well.

"How do you do that?" She asked, walking around to the cab of the truck with him. "How do you just... stay so calm? How can you act like nothing just happened?" Her voice was almost angry. But he knew she was just frustrated. It could be hard to come to terms with the fact that something so awful had happened. That good, innocent people got hurt. But accidents were... well, accidents. There was no rhyme or reason to them. He paused, holding her door open, meeting her steely gaze. And for a long moment, he wasn't quite sure how to respond. The Army had trained him to be ready for all sorts of terrible shit. Being a deputy had its fair share of crap, too. He'd seen probably far more death and disaster than most people would experience in three lifetimes. But it just didn't phase him anymore. Not like it used to. Now? Well, it just seemed like a part of life. Which was a terrible answer.

"Freakin out doesn't help anyone. And it's over. Did what needed to be done. And now?" He motioned toward her seat, "We get on with our vacation." Totally not what she wanted to hear, but she took it and frowned, sliding into the passenger seat and quickly putting on her seatbelt. He closed her door with a sigh, making his way over to the driver's side. He waved once at a trooper, who nodded and motioned that they could use the breakdown lane to get out. He got into his seat, and carefully drove around the mess. "Sam," he said, glancing over at her. She had her arms crossed over her chest, his old Deputy jacket tugged tight. "I don't know why, okay? Just been through too much not to be."

She glanced at him, her face lightening a little. Then she undid her buckle and scooted closer to him, sitting in the middle seat, buckling up again and curling herself around his arm, resting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes. He could smell the lavender in her hair, and he breathed her in deeply, filling up his lungs and senses with her, calming himself even more. "I love you." She nearly whispered. He let his breath out slowly.

"Love you, too." He replied warmly.

As they drove away from the crash, despite all the calm he just seemed to have, a rock began to form
in the pit of his stomach. A sense of foreboding he couldn't explain. The sky above had begun to turn gray, threatening rain. Or maybe snow, the higher up they got into the mountains. Which didn't help ease the grinding in his gut.

He reached forward and switched on the radio. He needed something to drown out his thoughts. And he simply continued to drive.

"... were spotted on the logging road heading into Polk. They were believed to have abandoned the vehicle and headed out on foot. Currently, the surrounding area and logging routes have been closed until officials can rule out the possibility of-"
The first day at the cabin was not quite what either one of them had hoped. The crash had set the mood, and neither one of them could seem to get out of the funk they'd fallen into. But when she woke that morning, it was to the smell of freshly brewed coffee, eggs, bacon, toast, all sitting on a tray in Daryl's hands.

"Wow..." She said, a lazy smile spreading across her lips as she pushed herself to a sitting position against the headboard of the large wooden, four poster bed. The blankets pooled around her waist, revealing her bright pink tank top. Her hair was everywhere, in its typical morning mess. She folded her hands in her lap after she rubbed one eye. "Mornin." Sam said, beaming up at Daryl who was smirking at her, watching her from beneath his ever messy bangs. He was only wearing sweatpants, which was a delightful sight to wake up to.

"Mornin." He said, carefully moving to sit next to her, setting the tray easily onto her lap before kissing the side of her head and curling his arm around her, gently holding her against his frame as he stretched his legs out on the bed. "Thought you could use a pick me up." He said, his tone always a little more raspy in the morning. She smiled warmly, staring down at the food. Daryl didn't really fancy himself a good cook. He made do, or that was always his explanation. But she always enjoyed even the simplest things he made. He was a way better cook than she was, that was for sure.

"This is great. Thanks, babe." She said, picking up a piece of bacon and splitting it in two before holding half out to him. He took it with his lips, pulling it into his mouth. She popped the other piece in her own mouth. Mmm, maple bacon.

"So I figure we'll hit the trails this morning." He said quietly, "Head up to the falls?" She could feel his eyes on her, watching. Daryl had this way of taking her in, staring without making her feel self conscious. As though she were literally the only star in the entire sky. No matter how much time seemed to pass, he still looked at her the same. And it always made her heart feel heavy in the best way possible. She didn't have to look at him to know he was staring at her just like that now. He was always so instantly ready to make her happy, to make her needs come first. Sam paused with her hands on her coffee mug, feeling the warmth penetrate the pads of her fingers.

"What do you want to do?" She asked, turning her head to look at him. Even after all this time, his bluer than blue eyes still took her breath away. She watched his brows furrow softly in confusion, searching her brown eyed gaze. She smiled lightly. "I mean... we always do what I'm interested in first. What about what you want to do?"

He smirked slowly, the corner of his mouth lifting in a far too handsome tilt. "Ain't no need to rush on that. I've been round here before. You haven't. Besides, I'm easy to please. Long as yer happy, so am I." She sighed at that, shaking her head a little.

"Okay, you... you gotta stop that." She said, still smiling softly. He raised a brow at her, and she lifted her hand to move some of his bangs out of his view. "You have this way of making me feel like the most important person in the world. But you never really ask for anything for yourself. You never make anything about yourself." She let her hand fall, tilting her head a little, counting the flecks of dark blue in his eyes. "You can be selfish for once, ya know." He chuckled softly, the sound sending tingles up her spine.

"Woman, my motives are purely selfish." He picked up the fork on the plate, stabbing the scrambled eggs. "Like I said, long as yer happy, I'm happy. Simple as that." He popped some of the eggs into his mouth, chewing as he watched her narrow her eyes on him.
"Nope. Not today." She crossed her arms over her chest, his eyes moving instinctively to her ample cleavage before lingering back to her face with that ever present smirk. "Today we do what you want to do. And if you need a reason, it's because that would make me happy." He swallowed his food, that smirk turning into a mischievous grin that made her blush. But she didn't stand down. Today was going to be about Daryl Dixon, even if she had to hypnotize him to do it.

"Alright, Sam." He said, "In that case," He reached over and picked up the tray, setting it onto the side table. And before she could really react, he grabbed her and practically tossed her onto her back, making her squeal and giggle as he tickled her relentlessly. She was all arms and legs, laying there in her tank top and panties as his fingers prodded her ribs. But eventually, he lined himself up against her, pressing his body into hers, smiling wickedly as she slipped her fingers into the thick of his hair. "Let's start with this..." He whispered breathily before lowering his mouth to hers. And all thought went completely out of her head, her mouth instantly responding to his, her skin rippling in goosebumps as his hand slid underneath the material of her tank top, fingers stroking the same ribs he'd been tickling not a moment ago.

Sex was never just sex with Daryl Dixon. That was something Sam had learned right from the start. Sure, they had their quickies from time to time, or the hot and heavy romps to get rid of energy. They even had make up sex, which was always ridiculously greedy on both their parts. But there was never a time she didn't feel satisfied after, that he didn't meet her physical needs as well as her emotional ones. He never pushed the envelope with her, and he was never rough even though he definitely could be. She knew the strength that lay in his muscles, the finely honed power that could probably crush her if he chose. But she also knew how easily he could control that strength and power, which made his every move thrilling.

By now, they knew each other's bodies down to the very last detail. They knew the right spots to touch, to tease, to please each other. They knew how to ask for exactly what they wanted, and they knew how to get what they needed from each other without being overbearing. There was a real partnership to their pairing. And though most couples hit there stride, where things fizzled out and sex didn't last as long or was as thorough, Sam and Daryl still went at it like it was day one.

What passed between them in that bed would have made most anyone blush. And by the time they were done, she was laying on her stomach, arms hanging off the bed, her body beaded in sweat, flushed from ecstasy, and their breakfast was completely cold. Daryl had just gotten off the bed, stretching his delicious form before crouching near her. She turned her head, her chin in the mattress, smiling lazily at him. "Showers time." He said, pressing his lips to hers once more before standing and heading toward the bathroom just off the bedroom. A moment later, she heard the water turn on, which just made her smile widen.

She rolled over, stretching her own body before relaxing, staring up into the vaulted ceilings. The wooden beams crisscrossed, and an antler chandelier hung just over the bed. It really was a lovely cabin. Mostly open concept, everything made of wood and decorated in plaids and country style aesthetics. She could see her and Daryl spending a lot of time up here, which was a bit of surprise. Deep down, she was still a city girl. But as more time went by, she found herself enjoying the simpler things far more than she used to.

She bounced herself off the very comfortable mattress, bare feet carrying her to the bathroom to join Daryl for a shower. Despite how their mini vacation had started, this morning made her think it was going to end up being perfect. How could it not be? She had Daryl, she had breakfast in bed, and she had a whole week of no responsibilities to look forward to. The only thing that could make it bad would be her own head, which she actively chose to stay out of the moment she stepped into the large tiled shower behind Daryl, hugging him from behind. The water was hot, and he smelled of old spice as the soap swirled down his body. He slid an arm over hers before turning in her hold,
pushing his wet hair out of his face and holding her easily, swaying a little in the water, watching it pool between them. "Why don't we go huntin?" He asked, eyes hopeful. She smiled and got on her toes, raising herself up to plant a kiss on his wet lips.

"Absolutely." She said, and giggled when he grinned, splashing a little water at him.

_Daryl Dixon, you are... perfect._ She thought to herself as he squeezed some of her body wash on to her loofa and started roaming it around her body. She couldn't stop smiling as she watched him. For the first time since she'd found out she couldn't get pregnant, she felt... light. Maybe this getaway was exactly what she needed. What they both needed. And as they finished off their shower, she realized she was very determined to make that feeling last as long as she possibly could...
The reticence of the forest always left a heady feeling in the air, a notion that just around the corner there could be anything waiting. From a deer to a squirrel to a dead end. In some ways, hunting was as much of an art as anything else. Knowing how to track, to sneak up unseen, unheard and without being smelled, even knowing how to make a clean kill was a skill set that took patience and calculation.

A lot of hunters decked themselves in cammo, used scents and traps and whatever fancy gadgets they could get their hands on. But for Daryl, it was as simple and easy as using a crossbow and his own senses. Or it would have been normally. He glanced back at Sam, who nearly stumbled over a sapling, the small tree thwacking her in the butt as she tumbled slightly over it. She yipped, straightening, rubbing her jean clad rear end. Then she froze, looking at him, grimacing. "Sorry." She whispered.

He couldn't help but smile lightly. For all that Sam was adjusting to country life, she was still very much a city girl. And it was terribly endearing.

He raised his crossbow, pointing it at the sky, tucked into his side. And he held his free hand out to her. She slipped her leather glove clad hand into his, stepping over a split, termite eaten log. She stopped right against his side. "I'm not very good at this." She said, her face flushed red from the cold and embarrassment. "Maybe I should just head back, let you do your thing..." She muttered, pressing her cool forehead to the side of his neck and tucking her body around him. His old Deputy jacket snugged around her frame, and he rested his cheek on her head.

"Naw, yer doin fine." Well, for a beginner, he thought to himself. "Besides, how would I know where the animals were if you weren't scarin em off?" He grinned, and she lifted her head, punching her knuckles into his shoulder. He chuckled, moving away slightly.

"That's so mean." She said, pouting, but half smiling. He leaned back and kissed her on the forehead.

"Come on. We'll head ba-" But his sentence was cut off by the sound of a loud, reverberating gun shot, birds flying off somewhere in a frenzy at the sound, which echoed around them in the silent forest. Daryl instinctively grabbed Sam, crouching them both down, crossbow still in hand as they both froze, eyes wide and wild as they glanced around quietly. The silence seemed to stretch on around them, as well as the confusion.

"Daryl..." Sam whispered, her voice laden with fear. He shook his head at her, slowly standing up. It could just be another hunter. Except... hunter's didn't use shotguns. Which was exactly what that blast had sounded like. As the silence stretched on, he was about to suggest they head back to the cabin. But then a different sound filled the woods. A scream, long and blood curdling, from a woman. Only to be cutoff by another shotgun blast. His head whipped in the direction all the noise was coming from, and he moved toward it, only to feel Sam's hand wrap around his arm. "Daryl, wait!" She whispered harshly.
"Sam, I have to." He said firmly, his voice as quiet as possible. "Go back to the cabin. Follow the way we came. Run. Don't stop. And use the radio in the truck to get help." He ordered her. But something passed over her features, mingling with the fear in her eyes.

"No way. I'm not leaving you alone. Plus... I don't remember the way back. I told you, I'm no good at this." She admitted, jaw clenching, her eyes slightly watery. Daryl tore his eyes away from her, back to where he was sure he'd heard all the noise. For a long moment, he was having an inner battle. Keep Sam safe, get her back to the cabin. But you have to go see what's happening, you have to help. He growled low in frustration, looking back at her.

"Stay behind me. Stay quiet." He said, nodding once before turning again and walking. He could feel her hand curl into his angel wing vest, clinging for dear life so she wouldn't lose track of him. To her credit, her steps became a lot quieter and a lot more sure as they hurried carefully ahead. He had no way of knowing what they were going to find. His gut told him it wasn't anything good. Screaming like that? Someone was definitely scared... or worse.

And worse was what they found.

He stopped her just behind a tree, pressing her back to it and holding his fingers to his lips. She nodded hastily, letting him go as he slipped past her, crouching low behind some brush and bushes. A good twenty feet away, he could see everything. A small clearing, a bright blue tent. Campers. They'd tied orange tape around the trees to warn hunters they were in the area. But who he saw walking around the little area weren't hunters. They were two men, dressed in jeans, shitty boots, one had a thick plaid green and black jacket on, a black beanie pulled down low over his ears, and the other had a fluffy brown jacket that definitely looked as though it had seen better days. The plaid wearing man was spinning a knife in his hand, scratching at the black stubble on his face, walking around the tent like he was trying to decide what to do with it. The other man had the shotgun in his hand, resting up against his shoulder lazily, a half spent cigarette peaking out between his lips. He poked something on the ground with his boot. Something that wasn't moving easily, most likely heavy. Daryl narrowed his gaze, rising up just enough to get a quick, better look. And then he ducked, his heart hammering in his chest. Two women. Both dead. One's head had been blown to bits by a point blank shotgun blast. Twisted bone and brain, and no face. The other woman's chest was bright red and had a hole the size of a candlepin bowling ball. Daryl heaved a few big breaths, turning back to look again.

The two men looked similar. Related. And an image of a wanted poster flashed into Daryl's head. "Watts..." he muttered. He knew who they were. The Watts brothers. The escaped convicts everyone was looking for. How the hell did they get this far into the mountains on foot? They must have stolen the weapons and clothes from somewhere. Which really wasn't the problem. The problem was, if they were this far north, no one was looking for them. Not in the mountains. Everyone thought they'd headed in the other direction.

Daryl watched as the shotgun brother bent down and picked something up off the ground. Something small and shiny. A lighter, maybe? "Hey, Ed. Catch." He said, turning, tossing the lighter at the knife wielder. Daryl ducked quickly, not wanting to be seen. He had a decision to make. Did he try to take these guys down alone, with nothing but a crossbow? Or did he head back, call it in, take the risk that these two would disappear in miles of mountainous land? And then there was Sam. If he went after these two, and he failed, she could be in danger. And that was just not an option.

He looked back over at the tree where he'd left her, seeing her crouched low and peaking out at him wide eyed and terrified, eyes brimmed with tears. But her face was determined, like there was no way in hell she was going to leave his side. He grit his teeth and moved quickly and steadily back to
her, grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her up. He quietly motioned back the way they came. And before he could change his mind, he had them on a dead run back to the cabin to radio for backup...
"I remember."

Chapter Notes

(Warning: Mentions of blood.)

"I know what I saw." Presley said, pausing with rifle aimed low while his brother examined a broken branch. "Two of em. Runnin. And I'm tellin ya, one had a Deputy jacket. We're fuckin screwed if they get help, Ed. You said head to the mountains, they'll never catch up. Well fuckin good plan!"
He hissed, panic setting in as he began to pace lightly. Edgar Watts barely glanced at him. His little brother could always be a bit of a worrier. He sighed, yanking a twig off a low lying tree.

"Keep movin. If we catch up, ain't no one screwed but them." He said, tucking his rifle against his side before adjusting his beanie. The clothes they had smelled of stale beer and mildew. But they were better than the prison jumpsuits they'd had before. At least this way, they stood half a chance of blending in. He smacked Pres on the shoulder. "C'mon." He said, then simply started trotting forward. Of the two of them, Ed was definitely the better tracker. And from what he could see, there was only two of them, like Pres had said. A man with a wide spread, and someone smaller, a woman perhaps? Yeah, definitely a woman. Her prints were far less sure in the underbrush, like she wasn't good at footing the debris of the forest floor. The man, on the other hand, had absolutely no hesitation in his wake. Either way, they were in a hurry and didn't seem worried about hiding their trail. Which was why they were so easy to track.

Easy to track meant easy to find, meant easy to take care of. The two brothers hopped over a moss covered downed tree, and Edgar paused his brother with one hand. "They stopped here for a minute..." he said, stepping past him, following the details the ground had to show him. That was when he saw something that brought a small smile to his lips. "Looks like it's our lucky day after all, bro." He said, crouching and shifting aside some bloody brush to reveal a hastily cranked open trap. A crude, clamp like device that would spring shut in a painful and debilitating vice, trapping an animal's leg. They were illegal just about everywhere. By the look of this one, it had been put down a long time ago and probably forgotten. And the fresh blood told him that their unfortunate witnesses stumbled right into it.

He looked up at Presley with a grin before standing. Then motioned quietly with one hand to follow the trail, which had turned into one set of prints, heavier set. The man was carrying the woman. Which slowed his pace some. "Guy must be strong." Pres whispered, making sure not to step in Ed's way. He nodded.

"Careful now, little brother. Takin no chances here on out." He said. But in his head he knew it was smooth sailing ahead. A wounded woman, a single guy to deal with. They'd be back on track in no time, heading deeper into the mountains and no one would know they'd come through for days...

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"Daryl!" Sam hissed out. "Stop, pleasepleasepleaseplease..." she found herself practically muttering, clinging to him for dear life. Not in a million years did she ever think she'd be piggy back riding her husband. But one hop over a log, and the sharp, rusty teeth of an old trap digging into her leg had made that a reality. The only thing that had kept her from screaming out in pain when it happened was Daryl's quick thinking to plant his hand over her mouth. He'd wasted no time, using his
crossbow to pry open the trap, wrapping her leg in his long sleeve shirt, leaving his arms exposed to the cold in just his vest and brown t-shirt. Then, without so much as a word, he made her get on his back. And they were off running again. Albeit, slightly slower. If she hadn't been in such pain, and they weren't pretty much running from serial killers, she might have enjoyed the impressive feat of Daryl's endurance and strength.

"Can't." He whispered back over his shoulder, slowing his pace only slightly. But she buried her face into him, hot tears rolling down her cheeks with every jarring of her injury. It took everything she had not to sob. As though her tears were more encouragement than her words, he slowed to a stop, heaving in a big breath and letting it out as he adjusted her in his hold and looked around. She noticed him staring back the way they came for a moment. Everything was quiet around them, an odd stillness to the forest that made her every hair stand on end with anticipation. The air had grown chillier, but she wasn't sure if that was just the shock of her getting hurt or the threat of a snowfall. There was also the fact that Daryl had grown impossibly still. So much so that she didn't dare breathe, afraid of what had made him so statuesque. But then he finally spoke.

"We're bein followed." He muttered softly, just loud enough for her to hear. She let out a shaken breath, fear rising up into her throat. Daryl looked around hastily then, not letting go of her for even a moment. "Gotta hide ya." He said, then without another word or a chance for her to protest, he began moving again, causing a painful hiss to escape her lips before she once again buried her face. The pain in her leg was god-awful. It wasn't like she hadn't had worse. But most of the injuries she'd endured over her lifetime had been on the inside. Broken bones, bruises, maybe some stitches. But this? It felt like something had pierced her right down to the bone, and the nearly melodic throbbing that ran in time with her heartbeat sent waves of coarse pain through every exposed nerve.

It wasn't till she felt Daryl stop and shift her again that she opened her eyes and winced, a small sob escaping her mouth as he lowered her carefully behind a protrusion of stone. It was like a low dip, that plummeted further on into a steep hill covered in trees. Sitting behind it, no one would be able to see them. Daryl turned around to look at her, concern and anger in his eyes. A combination that completely silenced her. He checked her leg, being careful not to loosen the shirt. She'd already soaked through it. Damn. He took his vest off, laying it over her lap. "Listen. I have to go clean our tracks. We're not going to beat them to the cabin. Ain't no way, with me carryin you." He said softly, reaching a hand forward and stroking her cheek softly. "You stay here." He handed her the crossbow, which he'd showed her how to use a half dozen times. "You remember how to use this?"

She felt all the air go out of her lungs, a faint trembling spread through every inch of her body. "You're..." she swallowed, nodding hastily. "I remember." She wanted to tell him not to leave her, to stay. But she knew whatever he chose to do, it was for both of their benefits. He smiled lightly, resting the crossbow on top of his vest and pressing his lips warmly to her mouth for a brief moment.

"That's my girl." He said. And before she could protest further, he was gone.

She slipped her shaking hands onto the crossbow, willing herself to just breathe normally, to get her heart rate down. Tears, hot against her skin, still fell down her cheeks. But she didn't dare make a sound. She was hurt, she was scared. But she wasn't alone. 'He won't really leave you. He's just hiding your footprints, so you don't get found.' She thought to herself. But as reassuring as she tried to make that sound, she couldn't help the fear that was steadily swallowing her whole. Especially as the world around her grew increasingly quieter, small snowflakes beginning to fall as the cold turned colder and the unknown crept in...
"No big, Sam. Remember?"

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mentions of blood.

'Erasing' their tracks was the easy part. So was not leaving anymore behind. Years of hunting and living in the backwoods of Georgia, coupled with his stint in the Army had taught him more than a thing or two about how to be invisible when he wanted. And right now, being invisible was pretty much the only shot they had.

There was no way they'd outrun the two men following them, not with Sam's leg injured. Which was, let's face it, some seriously shitty luck. The whole situation was shit. 'Why the hell can't we just catch a fuckin' break?' He demanded inwardly, making a slow circle back toward Sam. She was really keeping it together. He had to give her kudos for that, considering how scared he knew she was. And being in pain couldn't be helping her fear, either. Daryl had seen those traps before. They were easy enough to use, but crude and cruel. And had long since been deemed illegal by the powers that be. The rusty spikes had dug all the way down to Sam's bone. The chances for infection were high, considering how old the damn thing was and how long it had been out in the elements. He needed to get her back to the cabin. But that wasn't going to happen till their two new friends passed them by.

"Hey." He said, crouching low beside her as she jumped nearly out of her skin when he reappeared from out of the brush. She let out a tremendous sigh, closed her eyes and pressed one hand to her chest.

"Daryl, you scared the crap out of me." She whispered harshly, loosening her grip on the crossbow which was still settled in her lap. He smirked lightly, settling against her side and the rock behind them. He took the crossbow away from her, winding the strap loosely around his forearm. He was beginning to really feel the chill, but he ignored it. He looked at her leg quietly, feeling her relax against him. It looked like the bleeding and had slowed. But he didn't dare remove the makeshift tourniquet.

"Quiet now." He whispered, feeling her go steadily still, the only movement the steady rise and fall of her chest. It felt like a century passed, waiting for those two to come along. Murderers, in the middle of the woods, on a mountain. What were the odds? Were they fricken disaster magnets? At this point, it seemed easy to surmise that the screw up fairy had taken permanent residence in their lives. 'Fuckin fairies.'

Eventually the sound of steady footfalls reached their ears. He felt Sam grow even more impossibly still at his side. He held the crossbow aloft and ready, not a shake in his muscles as his ears strained to pick up every sound. "Lost the trail." One of them said, then more footfalls. "Naw, jus looks like they wizened up, covered their tracks." The other replied. Daryl could hear them moving around. His jaw tightened, every muscle tensed in anticipation. One set of feet shuffled closer and closer. He could feel Sam's fingers digging into his bicep, her face buried in his shoulder. His heartbeat was severely steady, calm, ready. Anyone else would have had their heart hammering away, but for Daryl this was just another rodeo. And he wasn't entirely sure what that said about him.

"C'mon. They can't be far. And they had to come from somewhere. We'll head toward the hikin trail,
see where that gets us." One of the men said, and the feet closest to them began to shuffle away. ‘Fuck.’ Daryl thought. If they hit the trail, they’d end up going right for the cabin. Neither he nor Sam moved for a full ten minutes after the men left, and finally she lifted her head, swallowing hard, her face pale.

"What now?" She asked very softly, shakily. He pushed himself to his feet, peering over the rocks, lowering his crossbow and scanning the immediate area. Everything was quiet and cold, flurries falling all around them in a silent cascade of white. He looked down at Sam, her beautiful brown eyes catching his gaze. Had she not been here, he'd hunt them down, take them out, end all this. But Sam was his priority. And getting her help had to come first. He looked away from her, hooking his crossbow over his back.

"Think you can stand?" He asked after a long, silent moment. He could practically feel her eyes boring a hole into him. He looked back at her, watching as she moved her gaze down her legs, then she nodded and pushed against the rock. He slipped both hands beneath her arms, hoisting her up. She leaned her whole body into him, pressing her forehead against his chest as she waited for a bout of pain to pass. When she finally lifted her head, silent tears smoothed down her cheeks, she let out a sigh. "We gotta get back to the cabin before the weather gets worse." He said. She swallowed lightly.

"B-but, aren't they headed that way?" She asked warily. He smirked softly at her.

"So you were payin attention to the trail." He remarked. She gave a very small smile.

"Hey, I learn things." She joked back. He kissed her forehead.

"We don't have a choice. The cabin's got the radio, a first aid kit, all my gear." He shifted her so she was leaning against the rock, then swung his crossbow back in front of himself before crouching down. "Come on, girly. Time for another ride." He could almost feel the tired humor in her hands at the idea of piggy back riding him again. But she climbed on board without hesitation, letting him hoist her back up. He headed toward the cabin, but from a longer, more circular route. No way in hell he'd chance running into the Watts. It was bad enough they'd been spotted as is. As he made a steady, and determined way, he could feel Sam's breath hot and shaken against the back of his neck.

"Daryl..." she said, her voice bouncing a little as he took one step after the other. "I'm scared." She pressed her forehead into his shoulder, hiding in the crook of her arm. He paused just before a shoulder height sapling, shifting her a bit higher in his grip.

"Don't be." He said warmly. Truth was, the only thing he was scared of was losing her. And he'd be damned if he let that happen. "No big, Sam. Remember?" He felt her lift her head.

"No big." She replied. But the sentiment didn't really reach her voice. He let out a breath, and simply continued walking. 'No big... right...' He had no idea what they were going to come across when they got to the cabin. He just knew that it was the only chance they had. Inwardly, he was preparing for the absolute worst. But he couldn't let Sam know that. So... no big it was. Or that's what he kept telling himself with every consecutive step in danger's direction...
Edgar Watts stood next to the big black and brown Ford Clark County Deputy truck, his rifle resting lazily over his shoulder as he chewed idly on a toothpick. Even with the beanie tucked low over his ears and the warmth of the warn out jacket he'd stolen, he was still cold. He'd always hated winter, in a way that was almost unnatural for someone who had pretty much grown up in the worst sorts of elements. The chill, the way everything just laid down and died, the ridiculous amount of white shit that coated the world against its will... yeah, winter was no friend of his.

His free hand stroked the sheath of the knife he'd hooked to his belt, also stolen, as he began to pace around the vehicle. Presley was walking the exterior of the cabin. Quiet as could be. Even Edgar couldn't hear his little brother. He'd always been a good hunter, even if tracking wasn't really his strong suit. Ed could give his pain in the ass kin that much credit, at least. But for right now, he wasn't really thinking about what Pres was doing. He unsheathed the knife, probably meant for skinning animals. It was hefty, but graceful and sharp as hell. And definitely not intended for doing what he was about to do with it. No matter, it would get the job done. One by one, he stabbed the tires of the truck. The hissing of air was almost enjoyable, the truck sinking to its rims. About the time the vehicle settled entirely was when Pres came back into view.

The younger Watts raised his bushy brow, spitting in the snow before coming to stand beside Ed. "What'd you do that for?" He asked. Ed had to fight the urge to sigh, and instead rolled his eyes."

"So the cops don't have a way out." He sheathed his knife, switching the rifle to his other hand and motioning to the truck. "Think you can get in it? Cut the radio?" He asked, glancing sideways at his dumber but handy counterpart. Presley smirked, yellowed teeth from smoking most of his life flashed momentarily.

"Do zebras have stripes?" He disappeared a moment, then came back from the opposite side of the cabin with a broken fishing pole. With pocket knife to wedge open the door, and the fishing pole slipped inside to catch the lock, Pres was in the truck in a matter of moments. Another moment later, he cut the CB cords and dangled the damaged receiver out for Edgar to see.

"Zebras. What is it with you and zebras?" He muttered, shaking his head and moving away toward the cabin door. He could almost feel Presley's disappointment behind him, the tirade about to begin.

"We talked about this, Ed. Zebras are seriously underrated. They're majestic, land abiding creatures." He rambled, tossing the receiver away and following his older brother who just smirked for a moment, then rammed his way in the front door.

"We did talk about this. And I told you then, and I'm tellin ya know, I don't give a shit about zebras." He shoved his brother ahead of him, kicking the door shut behind. The cabin was well taken care of, pretty much open concept except for the bedroom and bathroom which were in their own separate area in the back. It was cozy, with a killer fire place and enough supplies to last a winter. It also seemed, after some inspection, that the two they'd seen running were a couple. Maybe both deputies, maybe just one. That didn't matter, either way. They'd seen something they shouldn't have. And Edgar just couldn't let that stand.

"Now what?" Pres asked grumpily, flopping down on a soft chair by the hearth. Edgar set his rifle down on the wide wooden table in the center of the cabin, glancing around one more time slowly.

"Now... we wait. Woman's hurt. The man'll take her back here. He's got no choice. And when he does? Well..." he smiled, a real smile, for the first time since they'd escaped. "We'll be waiting." He
could feel it then. Something he'd been denied for far too long.

There was a thrill to killing people he couldn't have shared with anyone but Presley. His little brother was a dimwit, but his twisted sense of morality had made it easy to drag him along in Edgar's exploits. They'd only been charged in the murders of that elderly couple. But they both had more under their belts than that. Four each, to be precise. Well, five each now if they counted the two lesbian hikers they'd shot back at the camp site. That kill had been bland. Easy. No thrill at all. But soon, if luck continued to stay on their side, they'd each have one more to add to their count. And Edgar had a feeling it was going to be a challenge. That alone gave him a hard-on he didn't bother trying to hide.

"Can I have the woman?" Pres asked, picking up a doily off the side table and staring at it like it held the secrets to the universe. Ed breathed in deep, letting out a slow sigh.

"Sure, little brother." He said. Ed didn't share his brother's taste for rape. He wasn't above paying for sex, but he wasn't really into taking it, either. He watched Pres toss the doily, letting it fall wherever it willed, standing a moment after.

"So... what's the plan, then? We just sit in here? They're gonna see what we did to the truck." He wandered slowly toward Ed, knocking a picture off the end table without a care. Edgar gritted his teeth.

"First, you're gonna stop makin so much damn noise." He nearly growled out. Pres held up both hands in mock surrender. "Second... we'll both be outside. Might as well greet our guests face to face, right?" Both Watts men grinned at that. Rifle's back in their hands, they stepped back outside into the cold, snowy air. And even though Ed really couldn't stand the winter, he took a deep breath of chilly air, sucking it as far into his lungs as he could get before blowing out a billowing steamy breath. Maybe for once, winter wouldn't be so bad after all...
"You're gonna head toward the falls."

Sam couldn't stop staring at his face.

The stubble on his chin and cheeks, the stark curve of his jawbone, the deep lines of concentration on his forehead, how his bluer than blue eyes narrowed when he was trapped in thought, the way his bangs cascaded around his face in a glorious mess. She wanted to sear that image into her retinas, the pure strength and power in every expression that man had. Her man. She knew right at that moment, everything he said and did and thought was to protect her. There was a cold around him, a deeply penetrating chill that had nothing to do with the falling snow. As though he'd switched off the part of himself that was warmth and kindness, opting for something far more... frightening. But not to her. She couldn't be scared of Daryl Dixon even if right that moment he turned into a snarling fanged monster and roared in her face.

'Mature love is not caught up in a fantasy. It is willing to see someone for who they are and choosing to love them fully.' God, she wished she could remember where she heard that quote. Or maybe she read it. It was spinning around in delightful circles inside her head the more she saw Daryl like this. It wasn't that she hadn't seen how dark he could be, how hard. He'd never tried to hide that part of himself from her. And that unbridled honesty had only served to make her love him even more. Even at his absolute worst, she loved him. Because she knew that 'worst' would never be turned toward her.

That didn't mean she wasn't wary. Of what was going to happen. Of what could happen. She'd never actually seen Daryl hurt anyone before, even at the Sheriff's office when Dusty and his men had tried to kill them all. She'd been locked in Rick's office when the bulk of the mayhem happened. And though she hadn't said it before, she was glad of that. She knew there were just some things that Daryl would never want her to see. And looking at him now, she knew he was still going to try to keep those things from her. She could see it written all over him. And it made a steady calm rise within her that she didn't quite understand. Knowing Daryl was willing to kill to keep her safe was... everything. If she'd been any other kind of woman, it would have made her feel like a queen. If she said it out loud like that, though, it might sound vain and entitled.

How could she explain that being loved like that was a miracle? She would never ask Daryl to kill anyone. Ever. She wasn't that sort of woman. And he knew it. But she also knew that Daryl was a good man forged in the battles of several different hells. His willingness to do the worst for what he thought was right was what made him better than anyone. He wasn't afraid to wade neck deep in blood to protect those he loves. Even the devil feared men like him. Because he made no deals, he made no hollow threats, he never ran anywhere but into danger, and the world be damned if anyone got in his way.

Sam closed her eyes, letting out a slow breath as a prayer made its way into her head. Whether it was to God or just her own inner desperate need to hope, she begged for Daryl to be kept safe. Even in her state, knowing she was the useless one here, she wanted nothing more than for Daryl to be the one to make it out of this mess. And it was a mess.

It seemed they were always in a mess. Before she had thought it was just because of circumstance. It had been their pasts catching up with them at the same exact time. They'd tumbled through it and come out the other side alive and ready to move on. Then they'd married and life was... well, it was heaven. And then it wasn't. It was heartache, and Sam blaming herself for the fact Daryl would never get the chance to be a father because of her. But he'd pushed her through that, proved to her that he loved her regardless. And life was still good, even if it had its bumps.
But now, they were back in danger. As though they were dancing around with giant 'screw their shit up big time' bullseyes on their backs. She couldn't help but wonder if they'd cosmically messed up somewhere in a past life or something. Was this how it was always going to be? One disaster after another until one of them finally died from the exhaustion of it?

"Sam." One word and every inch of her skin tingled. His voice could always do that to her. Even scared and in pain, it brought warmth back to her extremities. She opened her eyes to see he'd turned to look at her fully where she was leaning half against a tree. "I need to get closer." He said, reaching his hands beneath her pits and hoisting her a little straighter against the birch. She immediately didn't like what she saw in his gaze. He was hiding something, keeping her in the dark.

"No." She said, shaking her head and forcing herself into his hold away from the tree. "Not without me." She clung to his vest and shirt, his arms enfolding her so easily that it was like he'd done it her entire life. She felt his chest heave as he sighed and looked away from her steely gaze for a moment. "They've flattened the tires on the truck. Door's open so they probably trashed the radio." he said flatly. He looked back at her, shook his head slightly. "They're waitin. I know it. You're not gonna do either one of us any good goin in." She knew he was just being honest. Daryl was never cruel, or unkind, when it came to her. But it still hurt to hear that she was pretty much dead weight. She knew he was right. She didn't know a damn thing about fighting, or going after bad guys. She frowned lightly, then flattened her head unceremoniously into his throat, mumbling into him. "I hate this."

He closed his arms even tighter around her, resting his chin on top of her head. "I know." He didn't say he hated it, too. Because he didn't. She knew he hated that she was in danger. But this sort of thing? Well, it was right up his alley. It was his skill set in a nutshell. Surviving, fighting, saving the day. A super hero with a tattered vest instead of a cape, never wanting recognition but always willing to dive head first into the fray. "Listen..." he pulled her gently back, just enough so she could see him. "You're gonna head toward the falls." He motioned in the exact opposite direction of the cabin, into the thick of the forest where there was no trail to follow and plenty of trees and underbrush to disappear into. "It's hard going. But follow the birches. You'll get to the water before you know it. Go right into the falls, right behind em. To the caves I told you about. You'll get wet and cold, but no one'll find you there."

She felt all confidence just flop right out of her. She felt tears sting her eyes, welling up the edges and tumbling over. She shook her head quickly. "Daryl... no. I don't... I don't want to leave you." She didn't mention the fact that her leg hurt like a bitch and her foot was tingling like crazy, which was probably not a good thing. She wasn't sure she could walk ten feet by herself, let alone all the way to the waterfall. She was scared shitless. Every inch of her being wanted them to just make their way together down the mountain. In her head it was a far better option than splitting up. Sure, she'd probably die before they got to the bottom. Blood loss was no laughing matter. And she probably had an infection brewing, too. But at least they'd be together. At least Daryl would be okay. If they split up... he might be the one who dies. And she just couldn't wrap her head around that possibility.

She felt his hands come up and cup her face, his thumbs smoothing over her tears, her face crumpling in his hand as she choked on a sob she refused to let out. He pressed his lips warmly and firmly to her forehead before resting his head against hers, stroking her cheeks ever so gently. "I know you're scared. But this is what I do, Sam. I can't protect you and take them out at the same time. This is the best chance we got. You have to understand that." He sighed softly, his warm breath cascading around her face as she attempted to stop the trembling in her lips. "I know you're hurting, that this is all... just... fucking nuts." He lifted his head, catching her watery brown eyed stare. "I'm sorry. This was supposed to be a fun week." He smiled half way, slipping his hands away from her.
"At least I'll get to see the falls." She cracked her own half smile. But she didn't feel it. Didn't feel anything in that moment but fear. "Don't die, Daryl. I can't lose you." She said plainly, then practically buried herself into him. He held her in his arms, so tight and safe, for minutes. She didn't dare count them because she wanted them to keep going. But eventually, he pulled away. He kissed her, his lips warm, deliciously so. She kissed him back like it was the first and last time all wrapped in one, needing to remember the taste of his tongue, the feel of his stubble on her skin, the crashing of his mouth on hers. When the kiss ended, he heaved a heavy breath and whispered 'I love you.' Then stepped back away from her, sliding his crossbow down into his hands, watching her with steely blue eyes as he stepped back again. There was no more room for protest, no more room for any kind of talk. She swallowed the rocks of fear in her throat, nodded, and turned.

She moved without looking back, because if she did she knew she would go after him. And if he was going to survive this, he needed her to be safe. She knew it, and in that moment hated herself for being hurt and useless. Tears burned her cold skin as she hurried as fast as her gimpy state would let her, roaring electric pain shooting up her leg with each awful step. "Keep moving..." she whispered every other footfall, as though she needed the vocal encouragement to keep herself from falling over.

Sam couldn't have said how long she'd been going before she heard the telltale sign of rushing water. Relief washed over her in a wave that nearly made her legs give out. A small cry of joy escaped her cold lips as she came upon the clearest, most beautiful water she'd ever seen. Okay, maybe not. But in that moment it might as well have been. The river wasn't deep, maybe calf height at this point. It was about thirty feet, surrounded by rocky banks and birch trees. The snow falling everywhere added a truly surreal, almost foggy glow. And the waterfall was just as Daryl had described it. It rumbled over a rocky part of mountain, billowing at the bottom in a tumble of white and rolling water, bleeding into the river before her like a faucet.

She took a long deep breath, teetering slightly. "Keep moving..." she whispered again, and forced herself to stumble over the rocks into the water. It was like stepping into flowing needles, sharp and stabbing into her flesh as the cold accosted her injury. She had to let out a cry, but kept moving toward the waterfall. Daryl had told her all about the caves behind it. How it was a network of them that moonshiners had used back in the day to hide their wares. Now only the people who knew this mountain well knew about the hidden caves. The closer she got to the falls, the deeper the water got, and the harder it was to keep pushing forward. The cold water had her gasping for air, her teeth were chattering, her hands were shaking relentlessly. She was only about five feet away from the falls themselves when she heard a loud, echoing crack that filled the air and shook her entire world, making her whip around and nearly fall ass first as she grasped onto air and righted herself with her good foot.

"That was a gunshot..." she said out loud to no one. "Daryl..." she took a step back in the direction she'd come from, but froze. "He needs you safe." She reminded herself, still talking out loud. But everything in her was protesting. She felt her face crumple as she brought her shaking hands up, wiping them down her cheeks and dragging over her lips as she steeled herself and turned her shivering form back around. She heaved a few deep breaths, then plunged into the freezing falls, heading for the caves within...
"I know who you are."

Chapter Notes

Warning: Blood, fighting

Sometimes, monsters come out of the shadows to play, filled with delightful terror in their hearts, bent on the most delicious of pains given. And these monsters are confident, they're self-assured. In the world of colors and grays, they are the black in the hollow of the soul that cannot be erased or denied. They rain their terrifying nightmares down on all those who live in seeded sunshine, sure that anyone who stands against them will never be able to stop them. After all, who can kill a shadow? They fight for nothing, they live for horror. They thrive off the blood of those who live in the light, parasites... leeches of innocent humanity. Peace for them is found in blood tinged tears, just demons finding respite in the shade of a nightmare.

But sometimes... sometimes another monster comes to play. It's forged in the same fires as the others. But it's the kind that holds the weight of worlds on its shoulders, dancing between what it is and the light it so desperately wants to hold on to. It's the sort of monster that knows it isn't entirely evil, that it can step out of the shadows without burning. And it's also the sort of monster that isn't afraid to dive back into those shadows when the darkness calls. Those monsters, those champions of good with blood on their hands, are the most terrifying monsters of all. Because they don't want simple death and destruction. They don't crave mayhem and disaster. They don't live off the pain of others. They choose something better, choose to have something good to fight for instead of something good to fight against.

They're the devils with halos, the angels with black wings, the broken image in a mirror that still manages to smile.

A superman with a tattered cape, a wonder woman with rusted gold...

A man pieced together by stitches sewn with love, wielding a crossbow against hell, walking the fine line between light and dark to fight for something more...

* * *

He didn't dare look back.

Setting his mind apart from Sam was so much harder than he could have explained. But to save her, to get her help, he needed the backup radio Carol had in the cabin, which was blocked by two rifle carrying murderers. He couldn't think about Sam so he could save Sam. It was a hell of a thing.

He'd made it as far as the truck, flattening his back to the passenger side, hidden from view from the cabin itself. He'd already surmised that they'd messed with the radio in the cab, and one quick peek through the window proved him right. They'd kicked in the door to the cabin, the wood splintered around the frame. Though they weren't going to find much of use in there unless they planned on vacationing. He hadn't brought his sidearm with him which, admittedly, now seemed like a really stupid idea. But that didn't mean he couldn't make a dent. There was a lot to be said about a good crossbow and the hours he'd put in learning how to use one. It was like an extension of himself. He breathed and it breathed with him. Every target he aimed for, he hit. Sure, he needed to be closer
than he might have if he'd had a gun. But the outcome was the same. The target went down. It just made it slightly more dangerous for him.

The sound of footsteps coming around the cabin, coupled with the sound of something metal dragging along the dirt, made Daryl crouch low near the flattened passenger side tire. He quieted everything in him. Every thought, every breath, down to the energy roiling in his muscles. He silenced himself till he was as quiet as the snow floating down from the sky. The footsteps stopped near the edge of the porch, the metal sound ending in a clatter as the man behind the steps dropped a shovel he'd probably found on the side of the cabin. It was almost like he was bored, turning to kicking dirt around, shuffling his boots through the pine needles that had clustered near the bottom step of the porch. Daryl raised up slowly, just enough to see the man with the poofy brown jacket. He had his rifle flung up over his shoulder, his finger resting lazily on the trigger itself.

Was he really that stupid?

Daryl frowned, his brows furrowing. The guy didn't look in the least bit worried or on guard. And it confused Daryl. Anyone else worth their salt wouldn't just be sauntering around without a care like some toddler in a waiting room. He watched as the man turned around, flopping his rear end down on the top step and stretching his legs, the rifle ending up in his lap and barely held on to by one hand as he started half whistling a really awkward sounding tune.

Well, shit... if yer gonna make it easy...

Daryl slowly raised the crossbow to the edge of the hood, so easily and quietly that he didn't even disturb the snowflakes around him. He aimed easily, his finger on the trigger, but he couldn't help the strange unease that was rising in his gut. He hadn't seen the other guy. He figured he was just in the cabin. And he'd surveyed the area completely before making his way to the truck. Maybe these guys were really just dumbfucks. He pushed the wariness away and began to squeeze, but just as he was about to let an arrow fly, he heard a crack from directly behind him.

He dodged out of the way just as the beanie hat guy shot his rifle. The shot hit the panel of Daryl's truck, right where his neck would have been. He'd barely missed it, splintered metal slashing the side of his face and his ears ringing with a hollow echo that thrummed throughout his head. It made his vision swim, but he couldn't afford to lose even a moment of awareness.

"Well... look at you!" The man laughed, watching as Daryl forced himself back up to his feet from where he'd sprawled on the cold ground, crossbow up and aimed at the man now before him. He heard a chuckle from the front of the truck as the other man made his slow way around. Daryl could feel warm blood sliding down his cheek and throat from the metal splinters, but he ignored it, eyes wide, heart steady, focused only on what stood before him. And what stood before him was two men, both with rifles trained directly on him as he flattened his back against the truck door. "You are not at all what I expected, I mean shit. You look nothing like a deputy. The whole coverin your tracks thing? Makes sense now. You're a rough and tumble kinda guy, I can tell." The man with the beanie kept smiling as he spoke, then raised his rifle and one hand in mock surrender. "Maybe I should introduce us..." He said, motioning idly at the other man. "I'm Ed. This here's my little brother Presley."

"I know who you are." Daryl said calmly, his voice raspy in the chill. The man just raised both his brows.

"Hear that Pres, we're famous." He said, his rifle coming back down to rest in both hands. Daryl didn't flinch. He didn't dare. One breath, one slip, one sneeze or hiccup and these two would lay out on him. For now, there was talking. There was bullshitting. Daryl could work with that. Sure, the odds sucked. Two rifles against one crossbow in close quarters? Fuck. He needed a plan, and he
needed it fast. "Wanna tell us who you are? I mean, it's only polite, right?" He asked, narrowing his
gaze on Daryl.

"Fuck you." Daryl growled out lightly. Presley chuckled, leaning against the headlight of the truck.

"You kiss yer lady with that mouth?" He asked, tilting his head like a feral cat having too much fun
playing with its supper.

"Speaking of lady, where's she at? We know she's hurt. So she couldn't have gone too far." Ed took
a step toward Daryl, then, all humor leaving his eyes despite the crooked smile on his face. It made
Daryl's blood run cold, drawing an icy heat that filled his own gaze, like flipping a switch from
defense to kill the moment the man mentioned Sam. Ed raised both brows, his smile widening. "Now
that's interesting." He didn't move any closer to Daryl. "You're like us. I can see it. Right there... in
your eyes..." Ed said, motioning to Daryl's face. "We got ourselves a kindred spirit here, brother.
You're a killer, aren't ya?"

Presley just watched, still smiling. *Smile way too fuckin much*, Daryl thought. "How bout we find
out?" Presley asked, pushing away from the truck, pulling a knife out of his belt. And that was about
all the encouragement Daryl needed. Sometimes, it wasn't about a plan. Sometimes, it was about the
lack of one.

He dropped to his knees, turning his crossbow at Presley just as the brown coated man lunged at him
with a knife. He let an arrow loose, the sharp arrowhead colliding with his sternum, the shaft gliding
halfway in with a slick sound. Daryl didn't have time to wait and see whether or not he'd fall. He had
the other brother to worry about, and he was still far enough away to get a shot off before Daryl
could do anything to him. Which was exactly what he did.

The rifle shot was far too loud for Daryl's still ringing ears, so loud that he didn't even hear the
barrage of swears that Ed let loose with the shot. He also didn't register where the bullet hit, barging
forward, letting his crossbow go to tackle Ed like a linebacker. Both men hit the cold, hard ground
with a thud, grappling as the automatic rifle went flying sideways and clattering into a pile of cut
firewood. Wrestling was a good word for what happened next. The two men were matched in
strength, even in anger at that point. The rage in Ed's eyes was like hellfire, but the urgency in
Daryl's head was all about surviving.

He'd always been good at that. Surviving. Getting the upper hand. Beating his way through a dead
end. No matter what shit barreled down on his head, he somehow managed to make it through. And
now could not be any different. It just couldn't. He had to win this, to stop these monsters in their
tracks, to keep them from hurting or killing anyone else. And most importantly, to save his Sam.

Sam, the woman who'd taken his broken, scarred and guilt riddled self and put him back together
with nothing but patience and love on her side. He could never explain to anyone just how much
she'd actually saved him. The people around him had taught him how to live with his darkness. But
she'd taught him how to step out of it. She saw in him all the light he would never see in himself,
she'd taken his darkness in her hands and called it beautiful. She'd married his worthless ass and gave
him a future he didn't deserve. He would be damned if these two took that from him. Took her from
him. It was Sam's goodness he used for fuel in that fight, channeling everything she'd given him into
every blow.

Where Daryl outmatched Ed in skill, Ed had strength and size on his side, at one point hoisting Daryl
up and slamming him into the truck, spittle flying from his lips as he growled out, an arm across
Daryl's throat while his free hand groped at Daryl's ribs. It took him a moment to realize what Ed
was trying to do. It was the instant, terrible and searing pain that gave him the answer. He'd been so
captured in adrenaline and the rush of the fight, he'd never even noticed that when Ed fired his
weapon, the bullet sliced right across Daryl's ribs, gouging out a fair amount of flesh. The other man's fingers digging into the open flesh wound was just fucking painful. And Daryl cried out. "That's right, you fucker! You're weak!" Ed practically spat in Daryl's face, Daryl's vision beginning to swim with the lack of oxygen from the awkward choke hold and the pain being clawed into his ribs.

'You ain't ever gonna beat me, little brother. Yer weak, yer nothin, Darylena.' Merle chuckled as he held a thirteen year old Daryl up against the wall, his arm across Daryl's throat. It was the laughter that undid Daryl, the sound of his father in the background urging Merle on. Where the rage went away to and the calm came from, he never could say. But one moment Merle was choking him out and the next, Daryl had Merle on the floor, beating him with his fists, utterly emotionless, till his father pulled him off and threw him...

It wasn't till Daryl realized that Ed wasn't moving anymore that he stopped.

The air felt heavy around him. Hot, even. A complete defiance to the cold snow falling everywhere in a strange peaceful dance that had nothing to do with what had just happened. Daryl pushed himself up, heaving his lungs, letting out a strangled sound as he staggered backwards, grabbing up his crossbow as he went, knuckles bloody. Ed was... well, he was a mess. His face was barely recognizable. His eyes were swollen, his face painted in blood, his teeth busted, his lips split. Daryl barely recognized his face as being a face and it made everything in him turn more cold than he'd felt in a very long time. There was a difference between rage and calm that was terrifying. In rage, Daryl could lose control, a man on the edge of a cliff. In calm, he was just a weapon. A tool. A means to an end.

When he realized Ed was not getting up anymore, that there was no air coming out of his lungs, that Daryl had killed him with his bare hands... well, all the fight went right out of him. His crossbow lowered, he fell to his knees as exhaustion crept into his trembling extremities. He lowered his head, breathing heavily, one hand holding to his ribs, warm blood slipping between his fingers. Besides the sound of his heart slowing down and his labored breathing, everything was... quiet. Everything was blanketed in a fine film of white, the snow coming down heavier, mixing with the blood on the ground, the body in front of him, the aftermath of monsters.

As much as he hurt from Ed's blows, and the damage to his ribs, as much as he would have loved to just collect himself and get his wits about him, he couldn't. He could almost hear Sam's voice in his head, an echo of a whispered plea, 'I can't lose you.'

He forced himself to stand, then. His crossbow hung in his hand as he turned to head toward the cabin. But he barely got a step.

"Ff- uck you." Presley said from where he was slumped against the flattened tire of his truck, blood dripping from his lips, his rifle aimed right at Daryl when he pulled the trigger...
Chapter 82

Sam was sprawled out on the bed, laying on her stomach smiling brightly, her long legs bent, ankles crossed, feet swinging lazily. She was wearing one of his old Army t-shirts and a pair of bright pink sleep shorts, watching him where he laid on the floor. Only... it wasn't the floor. It was cold, and dirt, and hard. "We should adopt." He heard her say, watching her tilt her head, her hair tumbling gently over one side of her face. "I think I'm ready for that. I think we are." He watched her push herself up, sitting on the edge of the bed, bending forward with her elbows on her knees. "But that's not going to happen if you don't get up." She nudged him with her foot, right in the ribs, and pain flashed through him. He gasped, an almost strangled sound escaping his lips as the bed disappeared, and Sam turned into a mist with a face. "Get up, Daryl." And then, he was blinking in the darkness.

There was something unsettling about that darkness, the intense feeling of heaviness in his limbs and the lack of color even in his peripheral vision. Not knowing where he was, if he was even real in that moment, fired a panic within him that he couldn't even voice. The confusion was as bad as the quiet around him. Or maybe it wasn't quiet. Maybe the roaring in his ears was far too loud to differentiate between noise and silence. Time seemed to speed up and slow down all at once, taking any control he may have had away from him. His thoughts were a jumbled mess of memories and flashes of things unsaid, an existential crisis off the rails. And worst of all, he had no idea what had caused it all. Until the pain in his ribs came into drastic focus.

Bit by bit, the feeling came back to his extremities. And what he'd thought had been darkness swirled away to a gray sky and falling snow. The ground was cold and hard, he'd been right about that much. But why he was on the ground was lost on him. He forced himself to raise his hands, to look at them. They were filthy, blood covered. His knuckles were gashed on both hands. Something happened... something...

He let his hands fall. Why couldn't he remember? Daryl felt his ribs then, no longer able to ignore the fiery pain. Just touching them sent caustic runs of aches across an expanse about the size of his hand. Though the wound itself didn't seem deep or even big. A flesh wound. Just aggravated by... something. "Fuck." He muttered. His voice sounded far too loud, and just saying the one word made his whole head rage in pain. So much so that he was turning over and puking before he could stop it, the nausea a violent side effect of the brain shattering pain. Not that the puking helped ease it any.

Once it was over, he was a panting, shaking thing, laying half on his stomach, face buried in his forearms as he tried to get the world to stop spinning. That was when he realized the side of his head was wet. And oddly numb to the touch. He lifted his head, touching the area over his temple with one hand and fingers coming away bloody. Really bloody.

It took far longer than it should have for him to get into a sitting position, mostly because it was just one confusing revelation after another. Two dead guys. Rifles. His truck with flat tires. Carol's cabin. And two injuries he couldn't remember getting. It was also snowing. When had it started snowing? He just sat there, against his truck, back pressed to the rear wheel. Eyes roaming, mind reeling, in the middle of a mess he couldn't remember. And none of that was even the worst part. He couldn't help but feel like he was missing something far more important than all the crap surrounding him. And that was saying something.

"Shit." He muttered. He closed his eyes as a new wave of nausea overtook him. But thankfully, this time he didn't puke his guts out. The pain in his head was bad, and making it hard to concentrate on all the confusion. He needed to see himself. Needed to refocus. Needed to get off the fucking
ground. Though that was apparently far easier said than done. Standing up ended with him falling over almost into the lap of the dead guy against his truck. The dizziness was beyond intense, and took far too long for his liking to pass. His second attempt was much slower, purposefully, and using the truck to keep himself upright. The minutes were ticking by painfully slow, and yet he still felt sort of numb to its passing. Opening the truck door, he forced himself to sit in the passenger seat, heaving some heavy breaths as the world took another spin. After it passed, he pulled down the visor to look at the mirror.

Blood pretty much painted the whole left side of his face, coming from a gash that began at his temple about the length of a cigarette and the width of his thumb. He touched it gingerly, blinking rapidly. When the realization of what sort of wound it was set in, he let his hand fall and just stared at his reflection. "Damn." He'd been shot. By the looks of it, the bullet skimmed off his head. Which meant he probably had a hell of a concussion. Which would account for all the confusion. Worst case scenario, he had a fracture. He let his head fall back to the headrest, just breathing, just trying to remember. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his palms to his forehead. Anger welled up slowly. He felt useless. More than that, a fear was brewing. That nagging feeling that he was missing something important just wouldn't let him go.

The river. 'Go to the river.' He thought to himself. Getting pissed and trying to push through it wasn't going to do him any good. He needed to calm himself. His hands fell to his lap, his eyes still closed, and he focused on one of the only things in his life that had the ability to truly calm him. The river. The sound of its flowing waters, tumbling over rocks and fallen logs, trickling along the moss covered banks, the smell of wet earth surrounding him, the feel of cool breezes colliding with his form. He let it overtake him, filling him up and pushing the anger and fear out. Let the sound of the waterfall drown out his... There are no falls at the river. ’He thought.

His eyes flew open, then.

"The falls." He mumbled out. And just like that, everything came back to him. It was a bit like being hit with a sledgehammer. His head exploded as the memory just fled into him. He cried out in pain, hands holding his head as he doubled over. He couldn't help it. It was like sensory overload. When it finally passed, his whole body trembling and weak, he opened his eyes and looked out the windshield. "Sam."

And that was all it took. He was off and running as fast as his battered, protesting body would let him, stopping only long enough to get a hasty distress call out on the radio in the cabin...

* * *

Her whole body was a shaking, cold mess. She was shivering uncontrollably, teeth clattering where she laid on the hard stone on the other side of the falls. The white noise of the waterfall was calming, and probably about the only thing keeping her sane till she heard the second gunshot. Counting the minutes after that was unbearable. She couldn't stop looking at her watch. Tears rolled relentlessly out of her eyes, and when she wasn't looking at her watch, she was looking at the falls for any sign of Daryl.

She knew he was the toughest sonofabitch the world had to offer. He was trained and strong and brave and all the other things she kept reassuring herself of. She'd seen first hand what he could live through. If he went down, it was never for long. Sam knew it, knew that if there was anyone who was too tough to kill, it was Daryl. But she was afraid. Daryl didn't have a gun. He had a crossbow and nothing else. And there had been two shots. Two bullets. Two chances Daryl wasn't coming for her.

Sam knew why he'd sent her here. He'd said he wanted her safe. Needed her to be safe so he could
do his job. But she knew the real reason why. He'd sent her here because if something happened to him, it was the one place he knew that the Watts brothers wouldn't find her. Which spoke myriads. About many things. She already knew damn well he'd both kill and die to protect her. But facing the reality of it was inwardly destroying her. Never had her heart felt so suffocated with the need to cry hysterically. She was holding it in, stamping it down. She needed to keep it together. Every minute that passed was a minute that Daryl was fighting for her. She had to at least try to be strong.

The pain in her leg had grown into a dull ache, numbed by the cold and watery expanse of the cave. There wasn't any point in staying dry because the falls sprayed her from every angle. And she wasn't about to go much further in, because she had no flashlight and had no idea where to go. So laying there, watching the time, watching the falls had turned into her momentary terrible existence.

An existence that suddenly stood still.

She heard splashing. Of course, it could just be the falls. Hell, the falls were just one big never ending splash cascading into the river. But something had told her what she'd heard was different. She pushed herself up on her elbows, then into a sitting position, her bad leg stretched out. She couldn't breathe, the idea that someone was out there. Daryl... or maybe not. She wanted to call out, but fear silenced her. And she hated herself for it. For far too many seconds, she could only stare wide eyed at the curtain of water, praying for the man she loved.

* * *

The river was fucking freezing. Just stepping into it was a whole new painful sensation that his broken head did not want to wrap itself around. Halfway toward the mouth of the falls, he slipped and fell. Pain cascaded straight through him as he forced himself up to a sitting position in the water, breathing heavily, sharply in the chill water. But he couldn't just sit there while his head hurt. He had to get up. And so get up he did. Which was a whole lot harder than it should have been. He was beginning to think that bullet had done a much bigger number on his head than just a concussion.

He stood, bent over for a moment, hands on his knees. He just needed to get his breathing under control. When his memory came back to him at the cabin, the first thing he'd done was pull out Carol's ancient CB radio and call for help. He'd made it a quick, abridged explanation, demanding medical assistance and backup. The cavalry was on its way, probably rangers first. They'd told him to stay put, but he'd already been halfway out the door, headed for the falls where he'd told Sam to hide. He hated that it had taken him so long to remember what had happened, that Sam was hurt and in hiding. Of course, he'd had no way of knowing that it had only been about a fifteen minute span of time between him getting shot and coming back to his senses.

Daryl stood straight then, forcing himself to wade through the water. He could think about the time loss and the pain later. Sam needed him. And without a second thought, he took a deep breath, and plunged headfirst into the falls...

* * *

She nearly screamed when he pushed his way through the cascading water, collapsing to his hands and knees, breathing like he'd just ran a ten mile without stopping. He was drenched, and bathed in the moving shadows of the cave. Even in his obviously battered and soaked state, he looked like heaven to her. She completely forgot that her leg was useless and crawled to him, throwing herself at him like she needed to be sure he wasn't just a hallucination. He straightened up and caught her just in time, a small sound escaping his throat as his arms came around her and he ended up on his back with her almost completely on top of him.

And she cried.
She cried till her lungs hurt and the shivering took over again. And the whole time he just held her, without complaint, stroking her back, arms impossibly warm around her despite the cold. She should have gotten off of him, should have moved back. But she just kept her face buried in the crook of his neck, her arms somewhat pinned around his shoulders. She would have died happily right then, simply because he was there. He was real, he was alive, he was with her.

But then his arms came down from around her, his body shifting to gently lower her to the cold stone beside him. Only then did she really get a good look at him. His head was bleeding, mingling with the water that had drenched him. His eyes looked exhausted. His hands were covered in scrapes. His t-shirt had a dark splotch over his ribs. He looked like absolute hell. "Daryl..." she whispered through blue tinged lips. He just smiled at her, then pushed himself to a sitting position with a wince and a slight sway.

"Come on." He said, forcing himself to stand. Just watching him was painful. Like she could feel how much pain he was actually in. Probably as much as she was. But it hurt her more to see him in pain than it did to feel her own. He helped her up. And despite her gimp, and his swaying teeter, they managed to get out of the falls and out of the river, heading back to the cabin wordlessly, helping each other every terrible step.

When they reached the cabin, which felt like it took forever, Daryl pretty much just laid down in the dirt drive, hands over his eyes, fingers pressed into his forehead. It was like he was intentionally trying not to talk. That every sound out of his mouth made his head hurt worse. He'd managed to tell her help was on the way. But he hadn't said a word since. She should have sat with him, should have just relaxed. The danger was over. Yes, they were both hurt. And though physically they were far from okay, the Watts were gone. She knew they were dead without Daryl saying anything. And her lumbering gait around the truck was proof of that. One was shot with an arrow through his chest. He was just sitting there, eyes still open, but dead as a doornail. She moved past him, finding herself staring down at the other man.

He was... god, there weren't words.

His face was a mess. She couldn't even really make out his features anymore. That was how bad Daryl had beaten him. The idea that Daryl could do something like that should have scared her. Hell, looking down at that dead man should have made her feel something. Anything. But she didn't. She felt no sorrow. No regret. Not even a little bit sick. All she felt was... relief.

Sam walked back to Daryl, practically flopping down onto her ass. Without looking, he dropped one of his hands, gently gripping her thigh. She covered his hand with both of hers. "I'm sorry." He said so softly, she barely heard it. She just shook her head, gazing up at the gray sky. The snow had stopped. She took in the deepest breath she'd taken in awhile. Letting it out slow, she lifted his hand to her cold lips and kissed his damaged knuckles gingerly.

"I'm not." She replied softly. Just then, the sound of a truck barreling toward the cabin could be heard. She just closed her eyes, holding his hand, face turned toward the sky. They were alive. Daryl had done what he needed to do, and they were alive. No, she wasn't sorry the Watts brothers were dead. "Not even a little." She muttered, as the Ranger's truck pulled to an abrupt stop nearby...
'It isn't what you think.'

Darkness wasn't supposed to feel like this. A twisting, writhing thing that curled around him like a snake with shining jasper scales that reflected only the scant light the stars around him gave off. It was a terrifying sensation, knowing this dark thing was crushing him, killing him. But he didn't feel it. His bones didn't break. His lungs didn't suffocate. He was simply surrounded and helpless, paralyzed and unaware just how close to death he truly was.

'It isn't what you think.' Words echoed around him, bouncing off walls that didn't exist. Daryl knew that voice, and yet it somehow was brand new to him. As though it was more a recollection of something he might have heard once rather than a concrete memory of someone talking. 'Hurt is part of the plan.'

Suddenly, the leviathan around him shifted. He had a vague notion he was being spun on an axis he couldn't feel. 'The hurt isn't over. But it will be soon.' The voice said, emotionless, toneless. An almost mechanical, robotic thing. No soul, no heart. Just wires and cogs and sparks of electricity breathing life into something man made and cold. 'Soon.' It said again, but it wasn't echoing anymore. It was muffled now. And at first he couldn't understand why. Then it dawned on him. The Darkness had truly swallowed him whole, coiled around him in shimmering scales of hard, frozen pain. Pain that flushed throughout his body instantly, replacing the paralysis he'd been feeling only a moment ago. Pain that had him screaming, a distant sound in his head that no one would ever hear.

He woke with a start, sitting up so quickly that he tore the blankets right off of Sam. His upper body was beaded in sweat, his chest was heaving, his eyes glancing around wildly as he grasped his own body as if trying to make sure he wasn't being crushed by the monster in his nightmare. He felt Sam move beside him, not daring to look at her as he heaved one large breath, letting it out slow, forcing himself to calm. Her hands slid up his back after she scooted as close to him as she could get. “Another one?” She asked so softly, he wouldn't have heard her if she hadn't had her mouth so close to his ear. He just nodded, closing his eyes and sighing as her arms curled around his abdomen, hands gently clinging to his sweat dappled skin. “Sorry.” He said, his voice rough with agitated sleep. “Didn't mean to wake ya.” He felt her lips press to the back of his shoulder before she rested her cheek on him. He put his hands over her arms, thumbs stroking her skin in the moonlight that shone through the open window.

It had been seven months since the events at the cabin. Seven months of healing on both of their parts. Physically at least. Daryl had a new scar on his ribs, and one on his head. The bullet that had knocked him senseless had given him a small skull fracture, bruised his brain, given him a fuckall of a concussion. But he'd healed up easily enough. Sam's leg had needed two different surgeries. And though she had a series of scars that she'd never be rid of, she'd tackled her physical therapy with a fervor, healing and pushing through the worst of it. When the weather was bad, or when she was on her feet for far too long, her leg gave her hell. But eventually, she'd be one hundred percent again. Well, minus the scars, of course.

As a couple, they'd worked tirelessly to move past what had happened. She didn't think any less of him, for killing those men. She didn't look at him differently after having seen how he'd literally beaten one of them to death with his own hands. Sometimes, he'd still get subtle flashbacks of his hands colliding with the wet flesh of his face. But Sam? She would just hug him or kiss him and say, 'All I care about is that we're both alive.'

Daryl knew she was right. And he was more than a little in aw at the fact that this amazing woman still wanted his dangerous, messed up self. Though messed up was beginning to seem par for the
course. He had thought his time of nightmare fueled nights had been behind him. But getting shot in the head seemed to trigger his PTSD in a way he didn't understand. The doctors had said it was probably an affect of the bruising to his brain and the massive concussion. And that, if he kept up with his meds and his counseling, he'd recover. Of course, he knew damn well it wasn't that easy. It had taken him literal years to get through it last time. Why it was happening again, he just couldn't say. It didn't make sense. Getting clunked on the head wasn't exactly a daily occurrence, but it hadn't been the first time. Rick had said maybe it was because of the possibility that he'd almost lost Sam. Daryl couldn't disagree with that. Any guess was a good one at this point.

Sam shifted, pulling her arms back, scooting behind him. Her legs stretched out to either side of him, pushing the blankets farther away. Then he felt her hands grip his tense shoulders, massaging, working the rigidity out of him. He felt himself begin to relax, taking in a few deep breaths and letting them out. His state of mind lately hadn't been easy on her. His temper was high half the time, and his nightmares seemed to have no schedule. They came of their own accord. But she bore the brunt of it all without complaint, taking his mood swings in stride. “Why do you put up with this?” He asked her, his voice oddly calm despite his thoughts on the subject. Any other woman would have ran for the hills. But not Sam. Daryl wasn't stupid, he knew how lucky he was. But still, why would she put herself through the mess of his broken head? He felt her hands slow a little, then her cool lips on the back of his neck before she began to roll smooth circles into his shoulderblades.

“You're not getting rid of me now, Daryl Dixon. We've got this, remember? No big.” She said, and he could hear the smile in her voice as she used his own words on him. He cracked a small smile of his own.

“That's my line.” He remarked, and she chuckled softly.

“Not tonight, it isn't.” She moved her hands further down, dragging her knuckles slightly down the sides of his spine.

“Still didn't answer my question, ya know.” Daryl pushed, letting his gaze fall on the crumpled covers of their bed. Bathed in moonlight, they almost looked like an eerie gray instead of a teal. Sam did pause then, her hands going still on him. Then the whole bed shifted as she moved. Before he knew it, she was sitting on his lap, straddling him, her white and pink polkadotted nightgown hiked up around her waist, one of the spaghetti straps down off her shoulder. Her hair was a delightful mess, and her eyes were sharp and steady in the cold light as she stared him down. One of her hands curled behind his neck, the other smoothing his bangs out of his gaze so she could see his eyes better.

“I love you. That's why.” She nearly whispered. “Daryl, I'm not gonna run just because times get tough. You wouldn't, either. That's why we work. We don't give up on each other. Never have.” He watched her pale pink lips stretch into a warm smile. “No reason to start now, right?”

He settled his hands on her hips, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead to hers as she locked her hands behind his neck. “I don't deserve you. Never did.” He said plainly. He said a lot of things like that lately. After everything that had happened, up to now, he'd come to a very real conclusion that she would be far better off without him. But like always, Sam didn't agree. He felt her sigh, then felt her move till her lips were pressed solidly against his own. There was nothing more concrete in his head than that, the feel of her love. It drowned out whatever battles were raging in his cracked head. The kiss wasn't passionate, but it didn't have to be. It was a simple taste of lips and the tips of their tongues reaching out for a connection. When she pulled away, it was his turn to sigh.

“You're everything I want. And you always will be. Don't you forget that.” She pulled completely away from him then, slipping off the bed. He watched her nightgown fall back over her thighs as she moved toward the closet.
“What're you doin, woman?” He asked a little gruffly, watching her move in the dark. She switched on the small bulb in the closet, bathing the room with yellow light that mixed with the moonlight.

“What's it look like?” She asked, pulling a pair of blue jeans off a shelf. She also grabbed one of his t-shirts, turning and tossing it right at him. He caught it easily, watching her with a raised brow as she shook her jeans out.

“Looks like yer goin somewhere at...” he glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand, “Two fourteen in the damn morning.” He said, holding his t-shirt in the ball he'd caught it in. She grinned, slipping her jeans on, one leg at a time.

“We, honey. We are going somewhere.” She buttoned her jeans, coming over to the bed and pulling his t-shirt out of his hands, shaking it out, too, before slipping it over his head. He took over at that point, pushing his arms through the sleeves and tugging the shirt down around his torso. “The river calls.” She said and winked at him, holding her hands out for him to take. He pushed the blankets the rest of the way off his gray sweatpant clad legs and stood, slipping his hands into hers with a slight smirk.

Daryl let Sam lead him to their shoes, and then out the door. Dilly tagged along sleepily without a leash, the short shaven poodle padding along without bothering to do much sniffing about. The night air was crisp, but not cold. It felt good on his exposed skin. Sam walked at Daryl's side, her hand curled around his bicep. She hummed as they walked, completely at ease in her own skin, completely content at his side. He kept stealing glances of her as they went. The beautiful chaotic tumble of her hair around her face and shoulders sometimes hid her expression from view, but every now and then the moonlight would hit her just right and he could see the utter peace and calm on her features. He'd have to be a blind man not to see how much ethereal beauty his wife sure as hell had. He would never quite understand how a diamond like her could find his scarred, rough rock of a self handsome. But she did. And he would never really complain about that odd fact.

The sound of frogs chirruping away mingled with the other sounds of the night. Their footsteps were probably the quietest thing out there, her humming adding a comforting tone to the walk they had made hundreds of times by now. They knew the path so well, they could have taken it with their eyes closed and not gotten lost. Even Dilly expertely navigated her way through the ground debris. Which was why it surprised both Sam and Daryl when the poodle suddenly huffed a sound of protest and turned completely off the path, heading left into a denser part of the woods.

“Hey, mutt.” Daryl said, then let out a soft whistle. The dog stopped in her tracks, but she began to whine, moving uneasily in the same spot on her feet, looking back at him with perpetual need written on her canine features. Daryl and Sam stopped, he could feel Sam's thumb stroke the muscle in his arm.

“C'mere, Dil.” She said softly, but Dilly just whined at her, turning in a circle and pacing as though she was struggling with being a good dog and continuing in the direction she'd started in. Daryl moved toward her, kneeling beside her, slipping his hand onto her back.

“What is it, mutt?” He asked. He almost couldn't believe he was talking to a dog like she was friggin Lassie. But it seemed to be all the encouragement Dilly needed. She was suddenly bounding away from them, deeper into the woods. They were lucky the moon was so full and bright or they'd lose track of her. Daryl followed quickly. “Come back here, you idiot!” He growled out at her. He could hear Sam's footsteps behind him. Dilly just kept going, every so often looking back to make sure they were following. They went on like that for a good several minutes before Dilly finally stopped and sat down, panting softly. “What the hell, dog?” Daryl asked as he and Sam caught up. “Ain't nothin out he-” But he stopped when he felt Sam's hand make a near vice grip on his arm.
“Daryl.” Her voice was almost stern, worried. He glanced at her, saw her staring away from him, ahead of them. And he looked in the same direction. Of all the things that Daryl ever found or thought of finding in the thick of the woods in the middle of the night, what he saw now was the absolute last thing he would have imagined coming upon. Slowly, he slipped out of Sam's hold, moving easily past Dilly, who just whined quietly.

The girl couldn't have been more than twelve. If even. She was laying face down, her clothes and skin filthy, her bright red hair a tattered, bramble filled mess like she'd run straight through bushes. She was covered in scratches, her bare feet were dirty as hell and cut in places. Her blue t-shirt was torn and her jeans had muddy patches all over them. And she wasn't moving. Daryl knelt carefully, swallowing down a terrible lump. Dead kids were hard. The hardest. The worst part of his job. Dead adults were easy to deal with. But kids?

He held his breath as he moved her hair out of the way. She didn't move an inch as he pressed his fingers to her small neck. “Fuck.” He blurted out, reaching for her so quickly that Dilly jumped up from her sitting position and Sam let out a small sound. He hoisted the girl straight up into his arms. She weighed practically nothing. “She’s alive.” He said, spinning around with her in his hold. He cradled her easily, moving toward Sam. The girl was trembling, like she was freezing. But he could feel heat pulsing from her frail form. She was probably running one hell of a fever. Her breaths came out labored and slow. All he had to do was look at Sam, who nodded once firmly at him, and he was off running toward home without another word, Dilly and his wife hot on his heels.

'Hurt is part of the plan.' A voice in his head said, abruptly breaking into his thoughts as he carried the sick and battered girl toward home. It almost made him flinch, almost made him stumble. But he glanced down at the dirty, cut face of the girl in his arms and pushed the voice away. 'Not now.' He thought, and kept going without so much as a pause. He couldn't help, though, but feel like the source of that voice was following him, too, chasing him like a demon that wanted nothing more than to drag him back to hell...
"No one's looking for me."

They were at the hospital for hours.

The girl had spent a good chunk of that time unconscious. The doctors and nurses cleaned her up, stitched her leg, wrapped her broken wrist. The poor girl was a mess. A thorough inspection showed old injuries, some still healing. It was pretty clear that she'd been abused. Badly. Not sexually, thank god. But she'd been beaten on more than one occasion. She was also malnourished. Her pale skin was almost gaunt, and there was very little meat on her bones. But when she was finally awake enough to ask questions of, she spent a good ten minutes screaming, then crying, then curled up in a tight little ball as deep into her hospital bed as she could get. Any sound made her jumpy, every new person she eyed warily. All a man had to do was enter the room, and she'd start crying again. Which was why Daryl was out in the hallway with Rick, talking quietly, his arms crossed over his chest in that way of his.

Sam still had an image of him in her head, running with the little red head in his arms. He never let up, never slowed down. In no time, he had her in his truck and they were driving with sirens blaring all the way to the hospital. A quick call to Rick got the cavalry involved. And though morning came and went, and either one of them could have left at any time, there was just something about that girl that was keeping them there.

She wasn't sleeping. Sam could see her playing with the edge of her pillow, where she lay on her side. She'd just finished eating, not too long ago. One thing she could say for certain was the girl had a hell of an appetite, which was a good thing. But she was so terribly quiet. She never made eye contact with anyone, and didn't utter a single word. One thing she did notice, though, was that every now and then she would stare at Daryl and Rick out in the hallway through the open doorway, eyeing them like maybe just by staring she could figure out what their intentions were. She seemed to ignore Sam altogether. Which was why Sam was still sitting there, next to her bedside, watching everything this girl did with quiet concern.

She watched the girl's soft green eyes peer back out at the two most important men in Sam's life, and she followed her gaze, catching a light smile when Daryl winked at her. Looking back at the girl, she cleared her throat softly. "The guy with the messy hair? That's Daryl." She said warmly, "My husband." She watched the girl look away quickly, back to the pillow. "And the guy with him, with the scruffy beard, is my big brother Rick. They work for the Sheriff Department." She continued.

She wasn't even sure why. The kid probably wouldn't respond. Hell, she didn't even know if the kid understood. But Sam was delighted when she saw the girl peer back out. She decided to keep the one sided conversation easy. "Rick never used to have a beard. I think he's getting lazy the older he gets." She smirked softly, daring then to scoot her chair just a little closer. Then she waited, to see how the girl would respond.

"Daryl and I, we found you, out in the woods. Well, our dog, Dilly... she found you. She's a poodle." She continued when the kid didn't so much as budge. There was a soft spread of freckles over the girls nose and cheeks, as though someone had sprinkled them there and decided she didn't need more anywhere else. Her hair, though free of brambles now, was still in need of a good brushing. "Did you know, Daryl... he carried you all the way out of those woods, drove you here?" She offered up. She wasn't sure why, but Sam felt like it was important for the girl to know that the men in the hallway weren't the bad guys. The way she'd reacted to every male she'd seen since waking up made Sam think the poor girl had been abused by a man with very unkind hands. To her surprise, those green eyes turned toward Sam. She almost went still at that innocent, tired stare. "He's awfully worried about you. We both are."
"Why?" The girl asked. And Sam did go still at that. Her voice was small, but clear. Almost firm. She had some life in her after all. Sam smiled brightly at that. Then shrugged a little.

"Because you're hurt, and you were alone. And no one should be that way." Something occurred to her then, and she slowly put out her right hand, extending it toward the girl. "I'm Sam, by the way. Sam Dixon." The girl stared at her fingers for a breath of a moment, then easily reached out with her good hand and squeezed Sam's before quickly taking it back.

"Nina." She nearly whispered. Well, well.

"It's good to meet you, Nina." Sam gave her the best, most friendly smile she could manage. Nina's expression softened to something less wary, and more into just something tired. "Do you think, if you're feeling up to it, Daryl and my brother could come in and ask you some questions?" Nina didn't look at her, her good hand curling into her blanket and tugging it up to her chin. "You see, I know someone hurt you. Hurt you really badly." Sam didn't want to bring it up. But there was some bastard out there who needed to have his ass handed to him. It was funny, almost, thinking like that. Daryl was really rubbing off on her. But it was more than that. Sam knew first hand what it was like, to be beaten on a near daily basis and not be able to fight back. She'd been an adult, but Nina was just a kid. If anyone didn't deserve that, it was her. "Someone hurt me the same way once. All the time. But Daryl and my brother? They saved me." In more ways than one, but the girl didn't need an elaboration right now. This wasn't about Sam. "If you let them, they can help you, too."

Nina glanced back at her slowly, then looked out the door again. Rick was leaning close to Daryl, speaking in a hushed tone near his ear. For a long, far too quiet moment, Sam thought the girl was just going to retreat into herself again. But then she pushed herself up into a sitting position, wincing lightly. Sam fought the urge to reach out and touch her. Nina pulled the pillow out from behind her and hugged it to the front of her body like a shield. "Not him." She said, motioning with her chin. "Not the guy with the beard." Her tone was so frail and sheepish that it practically made Sam's heart bleed. "He scares me." Nina looked back out again. "But the other guy's okay... I guess..."

Sam wasn't going to question it, not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. A few moments later, Daryl was in the room, the door closed, Rick off to get coffee. He was standing at the foot of the bed, somehow able to judge the fact that the last thing Nina would want was being close to any man at this point. "Nina, I'm gonna ask you some questions, okay?" He said, his raspy tone warming through the air. The girl just nodded, her chin sinking into the pillow she was hugging. She wouldn't meet Daryl's eyes. He slipped his hands into the pockets of the blue jeans he was now wearing. Rick had brought real clothes for both of them, since they'd pretty much showed up to the hospital in their pajamas. "Can you tell me your last name?" He continued.

He had this way of talking that wasn't pushy. A pace to his words that made it seem like everything was on Nina's terms. It was fascinating to witness, actually. She knew damn well how good Daryl was at his job. But she rarely got to see how he interacted with other people when he was doing it. He could cold read a situation instantly, and run with what little he had better than anyone.

Nina sniffled a little, glancing at Sam who just gave her a reassuring smile. "Allen." She nearly whispered. Daryl gave a very small smile.

"Nice to meet you, Nina Allen. I'm Daryl Dixon." He replied. Nina looked away from Sam, daring a look at him.

"I know. She told me." She said almost flatly. Looks like she had a touch of sass in her. Daryl's slight smile turned into a smirk.

"She's takin my lines." Daryl remarked, and Sam had to smile at him. "How old are you, Nina?" He
asked then, daring a small step sideways toward the corner of the bed. Nina was watching him now, though very warily like she was sure at any moment Daryl's kind demeanor was going to switch to something monstrous and horrifying.

"Ten. I'll be eleven next month." She told him, as though that was a very important piece of information. Little did the girl know that every bit would go a long way to helping her, to figuring out where she came from.

"Practically a lady, eh?" Daryl said, taking another calculated step. Nina, for the first time since she'd woken, smiled. It was small, delicate, unsure. But real. Sam couldn't help the warmth she felt at that, knowing it was Daryl who'd drawn it out of her. Every time Sam was sure Daryl couldn't possibly still surprise her, it turned out she was wrong. "Did Sam tell you what my job is? What I do?"

"She said you and the other-" she paused, looking him up and down for a moment, "Her brother, that you're Sheriffs." She finished, letting the pillow fall slightly, like she'd seen something about Daryl that didn't seem so awful after all.

"Well, Rick's the Sheriff. I'm a Deputy. Which means it's our job to stop bad guys, people who do bad things to other people. Like whoever it is that hurt you." Daryl was still moving, only stopping once he was completely next Nina. He never took his hands out of his pockets, he didn't try to tower over her. Instead, he slowly sat in the empty chair on the opposite side of the bed from where Sam was. Only then did his hands come out, resting on his thighs. "I know it ain't easy to talk about. I know you're scared." Nina was staring at him now, still as a rock. "But I need you to tell me, if you can remember, who hurt you, Nina."

Sam watched a single tear roll down the girls face, seemingly out of nowhere. "I can't. He'll... kill me." She whispered, a small shudder going through Nina's shoulders, and she tore her eyes away from Daryl, smooshing her face into the pillow. Daryl and Sam exchanged a long look. There was something in his eyes she recognized. A furious need to protect, to make this right, to make whoever did this pay. She knew that look by now. And it eased something inside of her, a knot that had been growing. Sam would never ask Daryl to do more than what he felt was necessary. But it was pretty clear to her now that taking care of this little girl, seeing her safe, was high on his list.

"I won't let that happen." He said so firmly that Nina stiffened, but raised her head. Her eyes were rimmed with wetness from silent tears. And she met Daryl's eyes questioningly. "Wouldn't be much of a Deputy if I did." He gave her that damn gorgeous and warm smile of his that he rarely gave to anyone. And Nina blinked a few times. "It's tough, I get it. But, kid, someone's bound to be worried about ya, looking for ya. Everythin you can tell is one step closer to gettin you home." Sam watched Nina's brows furrow lightly.

"No one's looking for me." She said almost grumpily. "And my name's not 'kid'." She practically pouted. Daryl put up one hand in mock surrender.

"My bad." He muttered, narrowing his gaze slightly, a touch of humor sparkling in his brilliant blue eyes. "And what makes you so sure no one's lookin for you? What about your Momma?" Nina turned her eyes away, staring down the length of her bed and let out a slow, shaken breath.

"Momma's dead. He killed her." And suddenly, her small face crumpled, tears flowed and she sobbed, squeezing the pillow for dear life. Daryl was frozen in place. Sam could see he was struggling against the instinct to reach for the girl, mostly because he knew she would probably freak by a man getting that close to her. But Sam wasn't a man. Sam could comfort her. And without second guessing herself, she got up, sat down on the bed and pulled the girl into her frame. Nina let her, which was almost surprising, pushing the pillow away and clinging to Sam for dear life while her tiny body wracked with sobs.
Sam felt her own tears escape, a terrible ache forming in her chest as she rocked this innocent little girl in her arms. She didn't know Nina from a rock in the ground. But she knew, right then and there, that she and Daryl had found this girl for a reason. Maybe it was fate, divine intervention, karma, whatever. It didn't matter, really. Nina was in trouble. She was suffering. And both Daryl and Sam knew all too well what that was like. If it hadn't been for Daryl, for her brother, Sam never would have survived. She knew without a doubt she wouldn't be there right then. Looking at Daryl, who was clenching his jaw in quiet anger, she knew he felt the same about her.

They had to help Nina. They had to make this right. And one way or another, they'd find the asshole who did this and make him pay...
Janet Allen was always a smart girl. Good grades, good friends. She had dreams of being a professional ballet dancer, religious about her classes and training. She was gorgeous, really, petite with striking red hair and perfect skin. But she was modest, never letting it get to her head. She was also part of a wealthy family but wasn't spoiled. Her parents were strict, sometimes far more than they had to be.

When she was fifteen years old, she got drunk at a party. It really wasn't her style, but peer pressure was a hell of a thing. She woke up on the floor naked the next morning without remembering what had happened. She only had a vague recollection that she might have been physical with one of the senior football players. It was certainly not the way she'd wanted to lose her virginity. But she wouldn't let it affect her, or so she tried to think. One month later, she found out she was pregnant.

And her parents, furious, threw her out of the house. They disowned her pretty much on the spot. And she was suddenly left alone, without support, money or a home, and the terrible realization she was about to be a single parent at a very young age. Her dreams of dancing professionally disappeared. Her whole life disappeared. But not for a moment did she even consider having an abortion or giving her baby up for adoption. Especially after seeing that first sonogram. Little fingers, little toes. And she fell in love.

She worked two diner jobs, eventually moving from a women's shelter to her own meager studio apartment just before Nina was born. And from there, the owner of her old ballet school offered to let her be a seamstress, paying her more than her two waitressing jobs combined. It was perfect. Not only did just paying bills no longer have to be a daily struggle, but her baby girl could be with her every day. Her beautiful little freckle faced wonder. The light of her life.

By the time Nina was old enough to go to school, Janet was working as a costume designer and coordinator for two different ballet companies. Life was good. She was living a new dream, with her beautiful baby girl at her side. And then she met Simon Duke.

He was sweet, the sort of guy to take home to meet her mother, if her mother had been in the picture. He treated Nina like a princess, and Janet like a queen. And after two years of dating, they moved in together. It was a nice little house. Nothing fancy, but Janet didn't need that. Nina had a yard to play in, and Janet felt like life couldn't get any better. She was right about that, at least. Because life didn't get better, it got worse.

The first time Simon hit her was the day after he lost his second job in three months. He'd been drinking a lot, which she'd chalked up to depression. He felt useless, like he wasn't providing. He didn't feel that Janet should be the one paying all the bills. The moment he hit her, he apologized. As shocked as she was, from the looks of it. And Janet forgave him, because she knew he was in a bad place. But the first time was not the last time. It happened again. And again. For months. Years. And Janet never could figure out why she didn't leave. She was scared of Simon. He threatened to kill her if she left, threatened to kill Nina. And knowing how violent he'd become, and how resourceful he was, Janet believed him.

He didn't hit Nina, unless Nina tried to stop him from hitting Janet. Those days were the worst. Those days, Janet felt as though she was failing her daughter. Part of Janet believed she deserved those beatings. By that time, she was so brainwashed and broken down, it didn't dawn on her that she should just take Nina and run.

Then Nina was ten years old.
And Nina was done sitting on the sidelines. Simon's latest assault on her mother made something in her snap, and she threw herself at him, clawing and biting. That was when he pulled the knife out, driving it toward the little girl with only one thing on his furious mind. Only Janet stepped in the way, shielding her daughter for the very last time, the knife sinking into her stomach as she screamed for Nina to run and never stop.

The end to Janet's story was played out in blood in her living room, where Daryl was now standing, one latex gloved hand half over his mouth and nose to try to block the smell. The Georgia humidity and heat had done a number on the decaying process. He had Janet's diary in his hand, a warn out thing that she'd written the sad details of her life in, page by page, in delicate handwriting and sorrowful detail. He was watching the Coroner examine the knife wounds. Twelve total. The one to her jugular most likely the killing blow and the cause of the exorbitant amount of blood that painted walls, furniture, floor, even the ceiling. She'd been dead for nearly four days by the time they'd found her. The house was set off the road from any neighbors, so no one heard or saw anything. Everyone said Janet was nice, but shy and rarely came out of the house except to go to work. And work hadn't heard from her because she'd taken vacation time to spend with her daughter.

It was strange, looking down at Janet from where he was standing, letting his hand fall and moving toward her. Her face was oddly untouched. There were no bruises, and only a drop or two of blood. If the rest of her wasn't such a mess, she'd have looked like she was fast asleep. Duke had been careful never to beat her face. But that didn't mean Daryl couldn't see the tired lines in what should have been a young face. The soft gray circles beneath her sunken eyes. The dull color of her red hair. All things he could have equated to her laying here and decaying for four days. But there was just something so painfully familiar about it all. It wasn't till he knelt beside her, gently taking a lock of her dry, dull hair in between two fingers, moving it off her forehead, that he realized why.

She reminded him of his mother.

And the sudden memory of his mother standing in the tiny dirty bathroom of his decrepit childhood home made him cringe, the way she had looked into the mirror, eyes dulled by years of abuse and drinking. It took Rick's hand on his shoulder to yank him back to the present. He nearly jumped out of his skin, standing up with a deep breath. “You okay, brother?” Rick asked him as the two stepped away from the body. Daryl could only shake his head, moving to grab an evidence bag out of one of the black cases that was sitting near the front door. He slipped the diary into it, sealing it and pulling a permanent marker out of his pocket to date and sign it. “This one's really got you, doesn't it.” Rick stated. Daryl sighed softly, setting the diary gently into a crate before turning around.

“Jus... brings back stuff.” He grated out. Rick just nodded slightly. “And then there's that kid.” Daryl crossed his arms over his chest, motioning toward Janet's body. “She lived in this hell, saw her Mom get stabbed by that asshole. That's not an easy thing to come back from, for anyone. Let alone a kid.” He found himself explaining. Rick reached up and gripped his shoulder firmly. “She doesn't have to do it alone. She's got you, and Sammy.” Rick reminded kindly. Daryl met his gaze quietly. Nina was out of the hospital now. She was supposed to be in foster care. But Sam, big-hearted and loving Sam, had convinced Daryl to volley for temporary foster status. He now had a little traumatized girl taking up residence in his spare bedroom. It was a good thing it was summer, because school was out and Sam spent every waking moment with Nina. The kid was a spitfire, he was learning really quickly. But he was also at a loss how to act around her half the time. Sometimes, she seemed fine around him. Other times, his gruff demeanor scared her. And hearing him wake up yelling from nightmares wasn't helping any. He was trying to tone it down. But he wasn't having any luck. Sam was a godsend in those moments. She was a rock for that little girl, able to relate to her on the same level of someone who'd had to live with abuse. Daryl didn't think he could relate to the kid at all. Until now. This place, Janet... it was all too familiar to his own childhood, despite the obvious
Rick let his hand fall. “Look, we've scoured the hell out of this place. Duke hasn't been here in days. And we've bagged up everything pertinent. I'll go back with the Coroner to the morgue. Why don't you go to Nina's room and grab some stuff for her? Sure she'd like to have some of her own things. Don'tcha think?” Daryl's partner, brother and best friend flashed a knowing smile at him. And Daryl simply shrugged, letting his arms fall, and moved away, sparing one last glance at Janet's body.

Nina's room was nothing like the rest of the house.

Where the living room was pretty dusty and bare, and the kitchen looked like it hadn't had a real cleaning in ages, not to mention the master bedroom a mess of laundry and beer bottles, Nina's room was immaculate. It was painted in splashes of all different kinds of greens. The bed was neatly made. Toys were in their place. There was a desk covered in drawings. A tack board with more. Going through them, Daryl could see Nina was quite the artist for her age. She liked to draw scenery. Trees and lakes and mountains. She also drew animals, mostly deer from the look of it. He took a good five minutes thumbing through her pictures, then putting them in a neat pile to take with him, along with a kit of drawing pencils and charcoal he'd found, and two different drawing pads.

He got together some of her clothes. The ones that seemed to be in the best condition. He grabbed the only stuffed animal on the bed which happened to be a well loved pink bunny in a tutu. And then he put everything into a duffel bag he'd found in her closet. He was about to leave the room when the picture on her bedside table caught his eye. He moved over to it, sitting on the edge of the bed as he picked it up. It was Nina, younger but not by much, sitting on a fence. Behind her, hugging her, was Janet. They looked happy. Smiling. Laughing. It had probably been a rare but memorably nice moment. Sometimes, Daryl wished he had a picture of his mother. All he had were fuzzy memories of her sorrow laden face. He felt something tug at the corners of his eyes at the thought, and cleared his throat. He stood up, quickly, and slipped the picture frame into the bag.

He shut off the light before he left, closing the door. He wasn't sure why it was important, but he didn't want the pristine image of Nina's room to be seen by the rest of the house. The kid would never come back here. He was pretty damn sure of it. After all, there was just nothing to come back to. Except for nightmares and death.

By that time, the Coroner had bagged up Janet's body and had it on a stretcher. Rick spared him a nod as they went out the door, leaving Daryl standing in the suddenly far too quiet crime scene. There were still techs outside, some officers, a couple of deputies. But he was alone for the first time since they'd arrived that morning. Looking around at it all, holding that duffel bag, Daryl felt everything in him go eerily still.

Simon Duke better pray Daryl Dixon doesn't find him. Because if he does, whatever mercy Daryl might have had no longer existed. And Daryl was damn sure that he now had no problem shooting Duke first, asking questions never. He spared one last glance at the diary at the top of the evidence pile. He'd spent a good hour reading it before bagging it. “Sorry, Janet.” He whispered. He knew she couldn't hear him. But he felt like someone should apologize to her for the hell she had to live through. But like with most things, sorry would never be enough. Daryl left with those words hanging in the air, ghosts dancing with ghosts, because this might be where Janet's story ended. But he would be damned if this was where Nina's ended, too...
"What's with the oranges?"

Nina was sitting at Daryl and Sam's little table, her ankles hooked around the legs of her chair. Her brilliant red hair was pulled back in a ponytail that was swishing lightly as she bobbed her head to the Mamma Mia soundtrack Sam had put on, the little girl's green eyes watching her pen strokes as she continued to draw Jasper, who was lazily stretched across the table with her eyes closed and stub tail twitching lightly. The little cat had grown quite attached to Nina. The two were nearly inseparable. And Dilly was never far from her side, either. It was true what people said about animals. Their instincts were spot on, knowing this girl needed the comfort and protection.

Sam finished setting the dishes she'd washed from lunch onto the drying rack before turning around, wiping her hands easily on a towel. It was warm in the house. But the windows were open and the ceiling fans were going. The shade from the taller trees kept most of the sun from beating down on the cabin. So the heat was manageable. Nina seemed not to care, either way. She was wearing some shorts and a t-shirt Daryl had grabbed for her from her old house. Her feet were bare and she looked completely comfortable, at ease in her own skin. It reminded Sam so much of Daryl. But she also saw the shadows beneath the girl's eyes, the tightness around her mouth, as though she were exhausted and waiting for some hard hand to fall.

Even though Nina seemed to settle right in with them, she also seemed to be unable to stop being wary of Daryl. Sam had tried to explain, to help the girl see, that Daryl was never going to hurt her. That he was a protector, a good man. But no one could blame Nina for being afraid. Of anyone. Hell, she couldn't even be in the same room as Rick till he'd shaved his beard. Which, silently, Sam was thankful for. Rick had started to look far too scruffy. Like a mountain man. The thought made her smirk and she draped the towel over the oven handle. The song switched just after and when Sam turned back around, Nina was no longer bobbing along. The pen in her hand had stilled and she was staring across the room to the collage of pictures hanging next to the back door. All of Sam and Daryl.

"Why'd you marry him?" Nina asked, so out of the blue that Sam was momentarily surprised. The girl was good for that, she was finding. She'd ask questions or say things that were completely unanticipated. Slowly, Nina's eyes turned toward Sam, the sadly familiar look of wariness flooding the greens. Sam let out a slow breath, then smiled before coming to the table and pulling out the only other chair, sitting and folding her hands before her.

"He's good to me. Besides my brother, he's the greatest man I've ever known." Sam tilted her head a little, "And I love him." She practically beamed when she said it. It wasn't a new concept, what she felt for her husband. But there was something wonderfully comfortable and familiar about it now that it was still warming to say it out loud. "He loves me, too."

"How do you know?" Nina scrunched her brows, setting her pen down and watching Sam with an intensity that she still hadn't gotten used to. Sam chuckled a little.

"He's good to me. Besides my brother, he's the greatest man I've ever known." Sam tilted her head a little, "And I love him." She practically beamed when she said it. It wasn't a new concept, what she felt for her husband. But there was something wonderfully comfortable and familiar about it now that it was still warming to say it out loud. "He loves me, too."

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"He's shown me. Still shows me, every day. In little ways and big." Sam nodded lightly. It occurred to her that Nina was trying to figure out Daryl in her own way. "You're scared of him still, aren't you..."

Nina frowned then, looking down at Jasper who was actually snoring lightly, all stretched across the table uncaring. "I'm not scared of him, not really. He just..." She shrugged her slight shoulder, "He's kind of surly." Sam laughed a little.

"Surly?" She asked. "That's quite the word." Nina crossed her arms over her chest and frowned
"I read a lot." She blurted out. Sam put up a hand in amused surrender.

"Okay. Yes, he can come across... surly. But think of it this way... do you..." she looked around for a moment, held up a finger and got up, grabbing an orange out of the fruit bowl on the counter and sitting back down. "Do you like oranges?" Nina just nodded, curiosity across her features. "Well, oranges are great. But you can't get to the good stuff unless you," she began peeling, exposing the fruity center, "Get past the surface, right?" She saw Nina's face sober a little, soften. She handed the orange over to the girl, who took it in both hands quietly. "Daryl's had a hard life. He's been through things half of us can't even imagine. It makes his outside hard. But inside?" She shrugged, "He's as good as they come. He's kind, and honorable, with a whole lot of love and courage thrown in."

Nina slowly began to peel the orange, a small smile creeping up on her lips. "Think he'd be mad if I called him juicy?" She asked. And well, Sam had to laugh at that. Till Nina was giggling, too. Afterward, they separated the pieces and shared the orange.

"You've been through a lot, too. Right?" Nina asked, watching Jasper hop off the table to get away from the orange smell. "I heard you talking to Daryl last night. About how you and I are similar." She popped a piece of orange in her mouth, innocence painted on her face like a panoramic view. Sam was quiet, but for barely a moment, wiping her hands on her jean shorts.

"You're right, I have been. I was... married to someone, before I met Daryl. He used to beat me. Badly. Broke a lot of my bones. Had stitches more than a few times. He was horrible." Sam said honestly. She didn't see a point in lying to the girl. And the child psychologist at the hospital said that finding a common ground with Sam and Daryl could give Nina a better chance at coming to terms with her situation. Though, that doctor probably hadn't had this conversation in mind. Nina went slowly still, setting her last piece of orange down.

"How did you get away from him?" She asked very softly, something tight and painful in the edges of her voice. Sam had to let out a slow sigh, wanting so desperately to hold the still traumatized little girl. But she knew she had to let Nina come to her on her own. There was just some healing you couldn't force.

"I ran." Sam replied with a single nod. "I realized I wanted to live. That I deserved better. So I ran. Back here, to Georgia. I lived with my brother for awhile, then I met Daryl. And life... got a whole lot better." 

"He didn't come after you?" Nina seemed so small in that moment, a touch of hope in her wet green eyes. Sam gave her a knowing smile.

"He did, actually. But the people who love me, and some new friends, kept him from ever hurting me again. Rick, and Daryl... they gave me back my life, helped me figure out who I was again. And I've never been happier." Sam answered. And a swell of silence filled the room as Nina's eyes wandered back to the collage of photos. There were so many similarities between this girl's situation and her own, and yet Sam saw so much of Daryl in how Nina reacted. The way her eyes could express myriads without her having to say a single word was so distinctly something Daryl did. And right that moment, there was a flash of raw and real anger. The painful kind, that hurts the heart and makes the soul feel heavy. The kind no ten year old girl should ever feel.

"Why didn't my Mom run? We could've run!" She choked out, pushing her chair back and standing, her little hands in fists. "She didn't, and he killed her!" She was yelling now, tears streaming down her freckled cheeks, Sam getting to her feet and moving toward Nina without a second thought. "She's dead! She was trying to protect me, and he killed her!" She was full on crying now, lungs and
throat cramped with sobs. "It's all my fault! If it wasn't for me-" Sam grabbed Nina gently but firmly by the forearms, crouching in front of her. In an instant, Nina had switched the blame from her mother to herself.

"Nina, stop. Listen to me, okay?" Sam demanded, and Nina let out another sob, but locked eyes with Sam. "It's not your Mom's fault. It's not your fault. Neither you or your mom deserved this. Don't ever -ever- blame yourself, Nina. That's not what your mom would want. Do you hear me?" Sam wasn't sure what she was expecting, but Nina throwing her arms around her and sobbing into her shoulder and neck was not on the list. Sam enfolded the little girl in her arms safely, feeling a rock in her chest, a terrible ache that threatened to bring tears. But she wouldn't let herself cry. Nina needed her to be strong. Sam had lived through this, she'd been on the side of the coin Nina was on. And Daryl and Rick had been her safety, seeing her through it. Nina needed the same now from her and she was sure as hell going to give it to her.

"Hey, punk." Daryl's voice suddenly filled the room shortly after Nina's tears began to slow. Both Nina and Sam startled a little, the little girl pulling back to see Daryl leaning against the door frame near the refrigerator. He had both hands in the pockets of his deputy pants, his shirt was unbuttoned revealing the white under shirt beneath. He was staring at Nina who met his gaze with a swallow. "I know you don't know me. And I know I ain't everyone's first choice." He pushed away from the wall, coming over and pulling his hands out, crouching next to Sam. Nina didn't budge, except to watch him. "But I need you to hear me now. Ain't no one to blame but Duke. You wanna be mad, you be mad at him. Your Momma, she was good people. She loved you more than anyone or anything. And I know that you know that everything she did was for you. That doesn't mean it's your fault. That just means she was the sort of Momma you could be proud of." Nina let out a held back sob, fresh tears rolling.

"I miss her." She mumbled. And Daryl sighed, reaching up and smoothing his thumb over Nina's wet cheek. She didn't shy away, she didn't flinch. Sam was actually quite surprised.

"I know, punk. And I know we ain't a replacement. But as long as you want, you got a home here." He let his hand fall. "You don't have to do this alone. We're yours if you want." Daryl said, so calmly and sure that Sam had to let her own tears fall. Every time she thought it was impossible to love this man more, he proved her wrong. Nina let out a shaken breath, her face scrunched in tears for a moment. Then, to the surprise of them all, she moved into Daryl and wrapped her little arms around him, hugging him much like she'd hugged Sam.

For a moment, Daryl just blinked, a little wide eyed and uncertain. But then the strong arms and firm hands Sam knew so well wrapped around Nina's small frame and held her warmly. And they just stayed like that, quietly. Sam felt like something profound had just occurred, something she had no name for, but it made her heavy heart feel light. Finally, Nina pulled away, wiping her face with one hand for a moment before letting out a slow sigh and looking between Daryl and Sam before finally letting her gaze settle on Daryl's face.

"Do you like oranges?" Nina asked then. And Daryl just raised a brow. Which, of course, made Sam laugh and Nina giggle. Leaving Daryl in a moment of confusion. The rest of the evening progressed like that. Feeling far less strained and heavy. They played board games, and Daryl helped Nina hang up all her artwork in her room before tucking her in for the night. Sam stood in the doorway, watching as Daryl settled a thin sheet over Nina's form. Her window was closed, the curtains drawn, despite the warmth. She was afraid of someone, namely Duke, getting in and taking her. Dilly was curled up at the foot of her bed, already half asleep. Jasper had taken up residence on the top of Nina's pillow. And Nina was hugging the stuffed bunny that Daryl had brought back, the sweet fluffy look of sleep all over her face.
"I don't want to go to sleep." She mumbled, fighting it. Nina had been having nightmares since the hospital. No one could blame her for that, and if there was anyone who understood, it was Daryl. He let a breath out of his nostrils, quietly mulling over what he was going to say, holding Nina's gaze easily.

"You know why you have em? Those nightmares?" He asked, as though reading Nina's mind. The girl shrugged a little, watching him. "Cause when bad things happen, the body remembers. It gets in your skin, and ends up in your head. And it sits there, boiling like a pot of water. So when you go to sleep, it bubbles over and makes you remember right along with it."

"You have nightmares." She stated softly, real tiredness in her voice. Daryl just nodded.

"That's right, I do." He shrugged a bit, crossing his arms over his chest, palms flat over his ribs in that way of his. Sam was in complete silence, watching the interaction. "But I learned a trick awhile back, on how to make them go away."

Nina seemed to perk up slightly at that. Turning her head just a little to get a better look at Daryl. "How?" She asked, though somewhat skeptically.

"Cause the body remembers good things, too. Just gotta get some good, fill yourself up with it, and before you know it, it'll replace those nightmares. Make it like they never existed." Daryl replied resolutely. "Which gives me a good idea." He narrowed his gaze on her. "Tomorrow's my day off. What say I take you to my favorite place? Take the mutt with us. Get ourselves some good."

"What's your favorite place?" She questioned, snuggling her stuffed bunny a bit closer as her eyelids grew heavier.

"Now that's gonna be a surprise. Right now, jus get some sleep, punk." He said, letting his hands fall and moving to stand up and shut off the bedside lamp. But Nina reached out far quicker than Sam would have guessed she was able, grabbing Daryl's much larger hand with her smaller one.

"Don't..." She paused, glancing from their conjoined hands to his face, "Don't go. Please stay... till I fall asleep?" She made it a question, but there was so much needful demand in her little voice. Daryl exchanged glances with Sam, who just smiled as he slowly sat back down on the bed.

"Alright. But no more talkin. You close those eyes." He said firmly, and Nina let go of his hand, apparently content with the idea, looking over at Sam.

"Night, Sam." She said before shutting her eyes. Sam pushed away from the door frame, catching Daryl's gaze. He winked at her, but she could see that he was feeling overwhelmed. She'd learned to read his body language, and he was definitely out of his element. But that didn't mean he wasn't handling it, amazingly well. Sam had always known Daryl was good with kids. But seeing him connect with Nina, a traumatized and damaged little girl with no home and a heart full of fear, was just downright awe inspiring.

She left the room quietly, heading to the kitchen to make some tea, thoughts of Nina and Daryl swimming in her head. She paused with her hand on the cabinet door, a smile spreading across her pale pink lips at the sight of two more oranges in the fruit bowl. Things were strange right now. Even uncertain. They had no idea where Duke was, or really how to help this little girl heal. But Sam was steadily coming to the conclusion that Nina was supposed to be here. That she was a piece to their puzzle they hadn't even known they'd been missing.

Sam let her hand fall to the fruit bowl, picking up an orange instead and turning to lean her rear
against the sink. She peeled the orange lazily, smiling as she did. Nina was definitely supposed to be here, just like Sam. Here in Daryl's home, in his life, in the world he made so much better just by being himself. It wasn't supposed to be easy, or without its hardships. But she was alright with that. Because whatever seemed to happen to them, good or bad, only made them stronger. A strength they could share with Nina. And when Daryl finally emerged, Sam halfway through eating the orange, she had a very real and sobering idea in mind. An idea that could change... well, everything.

"What's with the oranges?" Daryl asked, confusion painting his stern face as he walked quietly up to her. She nearly choked on what was in her mouth, trying not to laugh. "Seriously, what the hell?" He urged, and she just shook her head at him, grinning.

"I love you." She said, setting the rest of her orange aside and putting her arms around his waist. He let his hands glide up and down her bare arms. He narrowed his eyes on her, but cracked a slight smirk.

"Love you, too. Crazy." He replied, and she let out a content sigh, resting her cheek on his chest and relaxing into him. "And I have a feelin I ain't buyin oranges anymore."

And again, Sam was laughing.
"You're terrible."

The frogs were louder in the summer. The constant chirping was nearly symphonic, murmuring around the cabin from the marsh behind it. Daryl was standing in nothing but sweatpants on the front porch, leaning against the awning's post beam, listening to the chorus of amphibians. The moon was out full, the sky was clear. And though it was still ridiculously warm, there wasn't much in the way of humidity anymore. There was even a slight breeze, that took the edge off. It was nearly midnight, and he should have been sleeping. He and Sam had learned early on that Nina liked to wake up at the ass crack of dawn. But his mind was on overdrive. He didn’t want to sleep. He wanted to hunt down Duke and peel the flesh from his bones for what he'd done to that little girl.

He also couldn't stop thinking about Nina, how she'd hugged him for the first time and suddenly seemed at ease in his presence. Like someone had flipped a switch and she decided he wasn't so bad after all. It was humbling, really. Knowing everything she'd been through, the fact that she chose to trust him made him feel all sorts of things he couldn't explain.

He'd always had a soft spot for kids. They were fun to be around, for the most part. And he had this innate need to protect them. But he'd never really been able to bond with them. With Rick's kids, it was different. They'd pretty much grown up with Daryl around. So they were used to his gruff and bearish demeanor. But most other kids had to warm up to him. Though, honestly, they seemed to take less time than Nina had. Nina was in a different situation. And Daryl had prepared himself to never be liked by the freckle faced redhead. She'd surprised the shit out of him by proving him wrong.

"You're a million miles away." He heard Sam's sultry voice from behind him. And sultry was the exact word anyone would have used for the way she'd sounded. There was a thickness in her tone he recognized all too well, and it made his heart skip a beat or two. Especially when she came up behind him, pressing her very bare chest to his bare back and sliding her arms around his waist. She'd been in the shower when he came outside. Apparently, she hadn't bothered to get dressed after she'd finished. "Penny for your thoughts?" She whispered before pressing her warm lips to the skin between his shoulder blades. He let out a breath, then slowly turned to look at her, feeling her arms and hands glide around his torso as he did.

She was literally standing there on their porch as nude as the day she was born. He let his eyes look over her entire moonlit frame, the valley of her stomach, the swell of her breasts which pressed against him again when she took a step forward, looking up at him with pupils blown eyes. Her hair was everywhere, a tumbling rainfall of dark around her shoulders. He lifted his hands to her hair, needing to run his fingers through the damp waves. "Ain't nothin on my mind but you, now." He said with a light smirk, unhinged roughness in his tone from the sudden need she'd brought about in him with this rather delightful surprise. She smiled knowingly at him, rising up on her toes, her mouth hovering near his.

"Good." She whispered again, sending shivers to places only she'd ever been able to send shivers to, and then she kissed him. Her mouth was so warm and willing, her body softening into his instantly.
And the fact that she was doing this, out here in the moonlight, on their front porch, was goddamn sexy as all hell. Everything in his head became a glorious nothing. His hands were smoothing down her body, their tongues colliding as she moaned when his hands curled around her rear. He hoisted her up, her legs straddling his waist as he held her easily, neither one of them breaking that damn delicious kiss. She practically wrapped her arms around his head, trusting him completely not to drop her. She always trusted him, in everything, in every way, and it was the most important gift anyone had ever given him.

He didn't carry her inside. No, he wanted her out here, bathed in the soft white glow the moon had to offer. He stepped down backward off the porch, then lowered her down onto the wooden boards, his knees on one of the steps, lining their bodies together. He was already hard as a rock, pressing himself into her groin. She moaned into his mouth, and broke the kiss, her head going back, hands gripping his ribs firmly. He ran a hand down her throat, holding himself up by the other hand, trailing his fingers down her sternum, watching her skin ripple in goosebumps. Her nipples were erect, enticing. And he just had to taste them.

The moment he drew one into his mouth was the moment she gasped out, legs tightening around his sides, her hands in his hair, encouraging. He teased just like he knew she liked, with equal lips, tongue and teeth taking their turns on each breast till she was breathing in and out in deep, ruptured breaths. He wanted to go lower, wanted to keep tasting her skin, but she tugged on his hair, making him meet her gaze. There was such fire in the way she looked at him in that moment. The heat, the hunger there was nearly primal. "Knees... on your knees..." She panted out, sitting up and forcing him to comply. He was on the next to top step, kneeling and watching her in quiet anticipation. He knew this part of her, the part that took control of the situation, the part that was all seductive and confident. When she was like this, he let her take the reigns. And she certainly wasted no time doing so now.

She was up sitting, her legs around his, and her hands slipped into his sweatpants, around his rear as she kissed the skin around the waistband, tasting the salt there. He felt his breath come a little quicker, watching her. He saw her eyes dart up to his, a small smile playing on her lips that was far too provocative. And then she slid his pants down his thighs, revealing his very hard, very willing cock. From where she sat on the floorboards, she gripped his ass from behind with one hand, then took his shaft in her other, stroking and pumping without a second thought. He had to admit, she was damn good at this. She knew the right amount of pressure to use, and that she could make him a complete mess by stroking the thick vein beneath. It wasn't long before he felt her warm breath on the tip of him, her tongue sliding over his head and tasting the pre-cum there, making him let out a low sound that was halfway between a growl and a moan. Then, before he could even bother to make a comprehensive thought, she took him into her mouth.

He had never, not once, asked her to do this. The first time she'd done so, he'd even protested a little, not wanting her to think she had to. He knew what Liam had put her through, the things that asshole had made her do. And Daryl would be damned if he ever demanded anything from Sam. She'd assured him this was different. This was her choice. And he'd shut up real quick. He wasn't about to take her freedom from her. Her choices. They meant too much to her, even in sex. Though, to be fair, it was never just sex with Sam. Even when they were hot and heavy like this, even when they were just sweating bodies and flailing limbs, there was always something deeper about it. Something untainted and real. Something all their own.

It wasn't long before her mouth, her tongue and lips and teeth and warmth, had him panting, his groin twitching. "Careful, woman..." he rumbled out, slipping his fingers deep into her hair. "Gonna make me..." he swallowed, forcing his eyes open to look at her. "Gonna make me go before we've had a chance." He finally managed. He could almost feel her smile around him, before she gave him one last good squeeze and slid her mouth away from him, giving one small lick to the head of his
dick before letting go. "Damn..." he growled, and his hands were on her. He couldn't help himself. She moaned when their mouths met again, his strong arms guiding her back down to the floorboards. He kicked off his sweatpants, though one leg tangled at his ankle. He didn't even care. He wanted in her, and now.

And she wasn't protesting. She was practically wrapping her body around him, but before he could maneuver himself to slip between her folds, she was pushing him back, and then over, till she was on top of him, straddling. He watched her rise up, the glorious view of her bare body on top of his was just breathtaking. "So beautiful..." he whispered, not realizing the words actually left his mouth till she smiled down at him, then she was reaching between them, grabbing his dick and guiding him inside of her. With one swift push of her hips, he was sheathed as deep as she could get him in, her head going back, her mouth coming to an 'o' shape. He had a similar reaction, his head falling back to the floorboards with a thud. And just like that, she was moving.

Her hips pushed back and forth, her strong thighs squeezing, her hands gripping to his chest. She was so warm, so tight and wet. It never ceased to amaze him just how damn good she felt. And it never changed, either. It was always good. Always just damn perfect. He would never tire of the way she felt, of looking at her body, of feeling her beneath his hands or around him. Daryl was completely addicted to Sam, and he would gladly admit it at every turn.

He kept his eyes on her, letting out deep breaths, feeling that painfully wonderful tension build in his groin as she rode him. The way she moved with her eyes closed, her body trembling despite the heat, her breasts perky and swaying with the rest of her. He slid his fingers up her sides, over her ribs, gliding his thumbs beneath the curves of each breast. She responded by panting, small sounds escaping her throat as she picked up her pace. They had both learned fairly early on that he was pretty much the right size and right shape to hit her g-spot nearly every time. And he could see she was taking full advantage of that. Even in the moonlight, he could see the blush forming on her skin, above her chest, over stomach. And her panting grew into small, needy sounds. Until she finally came, a surge of heat inside her surrounding his shaft, making him grit his teeth as he watched her tremble and heard her attempt to stifle her cries of pleasure.

To her credit, though she was a quaking thing after her orgasm, she kept moving. Kept going till she took him to the brink, till his hands gripped her hips almost roughly and held her down against him, his head going back again as he came inside her, his groin pulsing almost painfully hard, the release of pleasure causing beads of sweat to ripple on his brow and chest. And he held her like that, till the pulsing stopped and his hands and everything else went limp. He couldn't even open his eyes, he was so ridiculously spent. This time round the rodeo hadn't even been that long, but damn if she hadn't used him up completely. He felt her lower herself on top of him, not bothering to separate their groins. She pressed her chest to his, her lips finding his own. And the kiss they shared was far less greedy than the sex had been. It was soft, and eager, and just soothing. He traced her spine with his fingers, opening his eyes when she pulled her mouth away, letting her settle easily against him till she was completely relaxed.

"Where'd that come from?" He asked after a few forest-noise filled moments. She let out a very warm sigh against his cheek.

"I was thinking about you in the shower. And one thought led to another, and then..." He could hear the shyness in her voice. She was such a conundrum sometimes. One moment she was just the sexiest most enticing woman alive, confident and in control of her body and his. And the next she was blushing and modest, like she wasn't capable of doing what she'd obviously just done. He tightened one arm around her, resting his hand above her rear, still stroking her spine with the other. With a light smirk, he closed his eyes.
"I ain't gonna complain about that." He muttered, his voice thick and lazy sounding. "Was definitely a nice surprise." He felt her lift her head, opening his eyes to look at her as she attempted to move her hair out of view.

"Really?" She asked, smiling with that perfectly bright smile of hers. He lifted his hand from her back and helped smooth her hair the rest of the way.

"Really. Who'da thought you'd like doing the dirty on the porch?" He grinned a little at that and she slapped his chest lightly before smiling back.

"You're terrible." She said, "And I love you for it."

"Love you, too, Sam." He said, smiling warmly. Everything felt warm. And not just because of the Georgia heat. But because of her. He could remember when he'd always felt cold, like something deep inside of him had frozen solid and no amount of heat would ever bring the warmth of real life back. But then he'd found Sam. And she'd thawed him out, filled him up with love and warmed him up without effort. He was always warm now. And he loved every minute of it. She smiled at him in response before kissing him again, then she sighed, sitting up on him, still straddling him despite the fact they could both definitely feel him shrinking inside of her.

"You don't think we were too noisy, do you?" She asked, playing with the hair below his belly button idly as she looked over at the screen door. He knew she was thinking about Nina.

"Naw. Kid's out like a light. She wouldn't hear a bomb go off right now." He said, but propped himself up on his elbows, watching Sam think.

"Maybe we should check on her." She offered before looking back at him. Daryl nodded a little.

"Why don't you go get cleaned up and dressed. I'll check on her." He suggested. And the look Sam gave him nearly made his heart stop. He suddenly felt silent and completely transfixed on her face, her eyes. He'd never seen that look before. And he wasn't sure what it meant. All he knew was that it was damn beautiful. Like she was seeing him for the first time and she was pouring all the love she had into that gaze. He swallowed lightly, then sat up a little further, sliding his hands around her hips.

"What's... the look for?" He nearly whispered. He could see a touch of wetness in her eyes, tears threatening. "Hey... you okay?" He suddenly felt worried. Maybe he'd read her face wrong. But she smiled at him, brightly, completely happy.

"If we weren't already married, I'd ask you to marry me right now." She said, slipping her arms over his shoulders and pressing her forehead to his. "I love you so much, Daryl." Sam whispered, her voice filled with emotion. He furrowed his brows.

"Hey, now..." He whispered back, holding her safely and close. "I love you, too, Sam. You know that." Daryl pulled his head away from hers to catch her eyes. "What's this about, then?" He lifted a hand to wipe a stray tear. She just smiled again and shook her head.

"I'm just... really happy. Ya know?" Her voice cracked. "Is that silly?" She half laughed, half whispered. He felt his heart swell about fifty times too big. And he shook his head, his face calm and sober.

"Not even a little." He replied, and he kissed her before she could say anything more, slow and steady. A few minutes later, she was in their room getting dressed, and he was standing in sweatpants and a t-shirt in the doorway of Nina's room. The pink pajama clad girl was all over the bed, little limbs splayed, her rabbit over her face and her hair all over her pillow. Her sheet was bundled up around her waist and one foot was hanging completely off the bed. Jasper was half over
Nina's stomach. And Dilly was pinning her other leg. She looked downright ridiculous, and Daryl found himself smiling before he even realized it. It was quite the picture. He quietly went into the room, and moved Jasper aside, then Dilly, who both complied by being as heavy and lazy as possible. Then he put Nina's foot back on the bed, and attempted to uncurl the sheet. Then he just gave up, because the damn thing was rolled way too tight on itself, and he didn't want to wake her.

Then, very gently, he peeled the rabbit off her face, settling the stuffed animal against her side before stepping back. Nina was out like a light, probably sleeping more soundly than she had in days. Her mouth was slightly open, the sound of her breathing was steady and easy. She looked... peaceful. And it tugged at things in Daryl's heart and head he wouldn't have been able to speak of out loud. He tore his eyes away, moving to the door. Part of him was happy. Happy that the kid finally felt okay being around him, that she finally felt safe enough to really sleep. But part of him was scared shitless. And he hadn't told Sam about that yet.

He was scared of having the kid around. Of having her witness his nightmares and his anger issues. Of traumatizing her more than she already was. Sam understood, she knew his past and how hard he worked to be where and who he was now. But Nina was just a kid, and she'd already been through so much. What right did he have to fuck her up even more? He'd been incredibly reluctant to vie for emergency foster status. It took Rick, Sam and Michonne to all convince him to finally do it. Their logic was sound. The kid needed a safe place, she'd already bonded with Sam, and they needed her around during the investigation. So... yeah, it made sense. But still. He felt like it was a powder keg waiting to blow. He was no father. He'd been willing to have kids with Sam, but finding out she couldn't get pregnant had pretty much nailed that coffin. He'd thought, if they'd had a baby, he could have learned over time how to be better, how to be a good dad. But this? This was a crash course he didn't know the right way to handle.

So far, he hadn't made any real mistakes. But what happens when he does? And he would, he knew it. He'd scare Nina, or say something wrong, or do something she wouldn't be able to forget. He just knew it would happen. And he was dreading it.

But why? Nina wasn't his kid. This was a temporary situation, so why was he even thinking about long term?

He got his answer when he shut off the hall light and went to his and Sam's bedroom. She was laying on the bed, on her stomach. She was wearing one of his old Army t-shirts and a pair of bright pink sleep shorts, her long legs bent, ankles crossed, feet swinging lazily as she flipped through a sheet music catalog. And when she looked up at him, his whole world froze as she smiled brightly.

He was suddenly brought back to a memory, or more like a hallucination, he'd had in the mountains, after he'd been shot. 'We should adopt,' she'd said, looking exactly like she was now. 'I think I'm ready for that. I think we are.' Her smile wavered when she saw the stunned look on his face and her hand paused on the catalog, a worried expression building on her features. He blinked and swallowed, moving toward the bed. He reached down and plucked the catalog out of her reach, setting it aside as she got up on her knees. He sat beside her and just pulled her in for a hug. And she relented without hesitation. "Daryl, are you okay?" She asked softly, holding him warmly. He just nodded.

"Happy, is all. Jus like you." He mumbled. And he could feel the relief as she sighed. A moment later, they were laying in the dark without any covers, her back to his chest, her steady breathing a sure sign that she was fast asleep. Daryl nestled as close to her as he could get, still unsettled by the memory. The sheer de ja vu of seeing Sam on the bed like that. And he also felt... god, he wasn't even sure what the word was. Expecting? Hopeful? But of what? Of a future he'd somehow glimpsed into before he even knew Nina existed?
'We should adopt.' The memory of Sam's voice repeated in his head. And for a brief moment, before he finally drifted off, he couldn't help but think about Nina.

'Yeah, we should.' He thought to himself, and then he was out, hopefully to sleep as soundly as the kid in the next room.

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