The Restaurant

by leeeel

Summary

Despite their resistance, Rick and Michonne's family and friends are determined to set them back on the path of finding love. Are they able to overcome their own demons to do so? Or are drastic changes, and a certain restaurant needed to help them along the way?
"Nice to meet you..."

~New AU Fic ~

Chapter 1: "Nice to meet you too…"

"Excuse me Miss, are you in line for the bathroom?"

Michonne Des Vignes' eyes fluttered open to catch sight of a smartly dressed older woman staring at her inquisitively. "Oh, no," she responded, pushing herself from off of the wall she leaned against.

"Great." The woman stepped around her swiping at some sauce that stained the corner of her mouth, as she nudged open the polished wooden door to enter the ladies room.

Michonne took in a deep breath, the aroma of Italian sausages and pasta filling her lungs as she turned and placed her right hand against the sand textured wall to brace herself. Her fingers automatically rubbed against the slightly raised finish… it felt gritty to the touch. Lifting her left leg she tried to hook her index finger behind the strap of her new gold shoes. Too tight, the bloody thing was killing her, and absolutely refused to come off. "Oh for shit's sake," she muttered under her tequila laced breath. Or maybe, she was too inebriated to focus enough to slacken it. Why did she buy these death traps in the first place? They were too high, too gold, too expensive… and most importantly too-damn-tight!

'Stay calm Michonne. Don't get yourself so worked up.'

If only she had a blade she could then cut the stupid thing off.

"Hell." She almost broke a dang nail. Why was she doing this to herself? Tonight had been a horrid mistake. It had been forever since she'd been out on any sort of date, and she particularly did not want to be there. Due to nervousness, Michonne went overboard with the whole thing. Going on a costly shopping spree, she'd bought not only a new pair of fancy shoes, but also a new purse, and new accessories to match the brand new designer dress she wore… if only she could return them all…well, all except the dress. No that was a keeper. The sleeveless, black and gold printed, pencil skirt outfit looked quite flattering, if she could've said so herself.

Her stomach churned with regret…or was that the alcohol. Why on earth did Heath allow her to drink so much tonight? Such an irresponsible bartender. Oh please! Who was she kidding, how else was she going to make it through this dreadful blind date? Wait… dreadful was too strong of a word, more like bland… yes, her date with Mr. Gabriel Stokes was decidedly as dull and bland as standing in line at the 'riveting' Post Office on a Saturday afternoon. At least dinner itself was exceptional. Angelo's never failed to satisfy her.

"Looks like you need some help with that," uttered a raspy voice that, in an instant snapped her out of her rambling thoughts. Michonne's head jerked up. Her eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed at the intrusive stranger standing before her.

"No I got it." Pressing her lips together, she released the shoe she was contending with, and her leg straightened out as she rest her foot back down on to the hardwood floor. The victorious strap still in place, cutting its way into her skin.

The gentleman shrugged his shoulders, and without another word, continued his way down to the men's room at the end of the hall.
'Thank God.'

Shaking her head, Michonne then returned to her original position: eyes closed, with her back pressed against the cool, 'tangerine-dream' colored wall, arms locked across her chest.

"Tu vuo fa l'americano! Mrmericano, Mrmericano. Siente a me, chi t'ho fa fa?" She chimed in to the Italian folk song humming softly from the speaker in the ceiling just above her head. "...tu vuoi vivere alla moda, ma se bevi 'whiskey and soda'. Po te siente 'e disturba..."

Shifting her upper body from side to side in time with the catchy music, her hanging locs brushed the side of her rosy cheeks. Caught in a moment of delight, Michonne couldn't help the quiet laugh that escaped her lips. Her mother loved that silly song, and unlike Michonne, she knew the whole thing by heart. Michonne and her brother, Heath, could never get it just right.

"It's a beautiful language," her mother would always say. "You have to allow yourself to really feel it baby." But Michonne could simply never, get it, just, right. The story of her life.

"Yes Mama..." she whispered, her smile broadening at the recollection. "Tu vuo fa l'americano-"

"You waiting for the bathroom, or hiding out?"

"Oh god." Jolted back to the present, her eyes flung open and she clutched at her chest.

"Oh I'm sorry." It was the raspy voiced stranger again. He smiled at her apologetically, "Didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't."

His eyebrows rose. He then nodded his head. "So..."

"So?" Why was he staring at her?

Shoving both of his hands into his pants pockets, he cast his glance around the wall she was still propped up against, behind a large braided Ficus tree. "You waiting, or hiding?" he repeated.

"That's none of your business," she scoffed.

"Just wondering is all." Peering at her, he found himself amused by her bluntness. Besides, it was curious why a knockout such as herself was skulking all alone in the back hallway of a restaurant.

Rolling her eyes, this man was not going to budge, "I'm hiding," she confessed.

'Okay would you go away now?'

"Well..." he continued.

'I guess not.' Her arms dropped to her sides.

"... don't feel too bad. My date just started and already I had to excuse myself."

Biting her bottom lip, an involuntary grin spread across her face. "You're terrible."

"Maybe there's a back door you can sneak out of," he joked.

Michonne tilted her head at him. "The thought has crossed my mind."
"But?"

She sighed at his nosiness, "...but he's a friend of a friend of course. And not just any friend... a church friend."

"Well then no," he chortled, "...you don't want that on your conscience. Maybe you should give him a chance then."

"You think so?"

"A man of faith? Means he's trustworthy."

"Not necessarily."

"True, but chances are he is. And you could never go wrong with that." The lack of which he had much experience with, regrettably.

Nodding her head, trust and reliability were the cornerstone in any relationship. Who could argue with that?

Now craning her neck around the tree, she peeked behind the wall, "Which one's yours?"

He stepped up behind her. "Uh about four tables up ... next to the windows on your left."

"Brunette? Glasses?"

"That's the one. That's Olivia. My sister's friend." Whom she insisted could bring a little light into his tedious life.

"She's cute." Dressed in a black, silk and lace dress, her dark tresses were pinned in a playful up-do, and her nude make-up pulled together nicely with a pop of blood red lipstick. Looked like Michonne wasn't the only one to go all out.

"She's a sweetheart. Just not for me," he confessed, still hovering close behind her.

Michonne observed this gentleman's date as she fidgeted and fixed her dress repeatedly. "She seems nervous."

"I don't know about that. She's talked non-stop about anything and everything she's into. Like we're running out of time."

"Like you signed up for speed dating?"

If only, he was ready to make a switch right then and there standing so near to a beautiful stranger. But he stumbled back just as she turned to face him.

"Like I said... nervous." And why wouldn't she be. This man was... alluring. Her gaze traveled the length of him in his silver grey suit, and baby blue shirt, with the top collar button undone. He smelt like mandarin and warm spices for crap's sake. What was that? Cologne? Aftershave? Surprised at how she was even able to detect his scent above the garlic and cheese that permeated the air, she flicked her eyes away or she'd be caught gazing too long.

"Uh oh!"

"Well she's something," he added. "Got an extensive knowledge of coffee beans from around the world, cures meat in her basement, and even considering starting her very own gun collection. And
that's 'just because.'" Shrugging his shoulders he grinned at her.

Michonne smiled back. "A woman of many talents. Resourceful, disciplined, dependable… the kind of partner to have even at the end of the world. Lucky you."

"You too… lucky…"

Shaking her head, "He's too soft. I think that I've offended him at least five times in the past hour. It's just time to go," she groaned.

Furrowing his brows, "Can't be that bad?"

"No, you're right. Not that bad." Michonne just wasn't ready to get back into the dating pool. "And I'm always up for coming here, to Angelo's. It's my favorite restaurant."

"In Atlanta?"

"Period. Regular customer and everything." Old and quaint, she'd been dining at the warm establishment with her family since she was a child. "So if my dates go bad, at least I got a spectacular meal out of it. Is that sinful?"

"Absolutely."

Michonne burst into laughter at his candid response. "You should try the Tiramisu, or better yet there's a special on Friday's."

"It's good?"

"Divine." The best dessert Angelo's had to offer, in her opinion. She never enjoyed it anywhere else. Straightening herself upright, Michonne smoothed her dress, readying to return to the company of Mr. Stokes. However, she grimaced as she shifted her weight.

"I could fix that," he offered, his eyes dropping to her shoes.

"No."

Ignoring her, he held out his hand.

Fixing her gaze on his, she refused him.

Opening and closing his fist, he gestured for her to take a hold of him.

Her muscles tensed, "I, I don't know you," she chuckled.

Sighing heavily, the stranger lowered himself onto one knee. Before Michonne could step away, his fingers wrapped around her skin just above her ankle. The warmth of his gentle touch sent shivers up her leg… and her knees went a little weak. With his other hand he tugged at her straps, and then came a sudden release.

He looked up at her with a sly grin, "Name's Rick."

She raised a brow and shook her head at him, "Michonne." Her eyes bored into him, he was trouble. But still, she angled to her right giving him access to the other bothersome contraption. "Thank You."

He chortled whilst grasping her leg.
Michonne nearly licked her burgundy stained lips when he repeated the process: Fingers, warmth, shivers, release.

'Geez girl, it has been too long. Get a hold of yourself.'

He stood back up, clearly pleased with himself.

"It was nice to meet you…" Nodding her head towards the dining area, "… Time for me to get back."

"Yeah. Nice to meet you too." Rick indulged himself at the sight of her swaying hips as she traipsed away… her loose heels flapping slightly beneath her feet.

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I'm home," Michonne announced, as she entered her house. A spacious town home, located in a county merely thirty minutes north from downtown, it was a rental that met her needs just fine. With two bedrooms, two and a half baths, hardwood laminate flooring, and a gorgeous fireplace, it was Thankfully affordable on her accountant's salary.

Opening up the closet to the left of the front door, she flung her shoes in the corner and hung her coat on its designated hanger.

Carol appeared at the kitchen's archway, "How did it go?"

"Fine. Where's Charlotte?" She walked past her and set her purse down on top the kitchen island.

"She's eleven, it's ten p.m. where do you think she is?"

"Let me go kiss her goodnight then."

"Not so fast Missy. Spill it."

Michonne glared at her Uncle's wife, "Not interested in seeing him again."

"Why the hell not? Gabe is sweet."

"Now I don't think that's enough Carol," intervened Morgan, her husband, who waltzed in with a drink in his hand. "Did you see it fit to marry me because you thought I was sweet?"

"I married you because you wouldn't leave me be."

He laughed, "It's true. Those damn cookies." He pecked her on her lips and she flushed instantly.

Michonne admired her Uncle, she admired them both actually. Having found love again, at that late stage in life, especially after such loss and heartache… it was the main reason why she allowed them to coax her back into the dating game.

Carol and Morgan met seven years ago at a support group for parents whose children had died. Aunt Jenny, Morgan's first wife, couldn't take the heartbreak, and so she left to cope on her own. On the other hand, Carol was already a divorcée, whose ex-husband Ed, was behind bars serving time on charges of domestic abuse. At first, they were barely cordial to one another, but after awhile, a friendship was formed. And with a little more time, love eventually bloomed.

"Oh before I forget," Carol returned her attentions to Michonne as she went into the fridge to grab a
bottle of water. "Charlotte saw her father again on TV tonight… she asked about him."

Morgan placed his glass in the sink, "You need to have a talk with her."

"It's not so easy…" Michonne sighed, unscrewing the bottle cap before taking a sip. "… She has his eyes."

Carol folded her arms against her chest, "I understand sweetie. Things didn't end well so it's difficult. But still…"

"I think what my wife is trying to say is that your child needs to know more about the man. She's getting grown… fast… and she has the right."

"Yeah okay." Michonne's failed relationship with her daughter's father was not her favorite subject to discuss, but Morgan and Carol were completely on point of course, whatever residual feelings she had, needed to be set aside for Charlotte's sake.

"So things didn't go so well with Gabriel huh? I'm not surprised… he could be a little-"

"A little what?" Carol narrowed her eyes at him; she and Gabe were good friends. So considerate and helpful, and perfectly harmless, he was perfect for her husband's wary niece.

"A little flat, for lack of a better word."

"You're too kind," commented Michonne.

"Listen I know a fella who is just the opposite," he suggested. "Mr. Abraham Ford. He's our new football coach over at Graceway High." Morgan had been the school's principal for the past ten years. "Somewhat of a character but a straight shooter, witty, he might be your match."

"God I don't think I could do that again, not just yet," Michonne sauntered over to the trash can to dispose of the now empty plastic bottle.

"Come on, don't be stupid. Everyone needs someone," Carol said. "Trust us."

Michonne did, implicitly so. She doubted her own judgment. Other than her daughter and her brother, they were the closest family in her life. She leaned back onto her cream colored counter top and her hand swiped over mouth. "Your guy… Does he have wavy brown hair, mesmerizing blue eyes, and a tailor made silver suit?"

Uncle Morgan squinted his eyes, "No. Fiery red hair, handlebar mustache, and camouflage pants."

"Perfect."
"Que sera, sera?"

"I have a confession to make…" Rick's strawberry blonde date flashed a coy grin. "…In high school I was so jealous of Lori. When I heard that you two got together at junior prom…ugh! It just broke my heart," she grasped the pink pearl necklace she wore for the night.

"Is that right Jesse?"

"Of course. You were my first kiss Rick. So I always held a special place for you..." Leaning across the white linen table cloth, her pink manicured fingers brushed over his. "…and I think that I always will."

"Yeah well, we were only thirteen I think…" Rick politely moved his hand and took a hold of his drink. "…and it barely lasted a month."

Her face flushed. "Six weeks actually, and I know, but that was a long time in those days wasn't it?," she joked.

Lifting his glass to his lips, the tinkling ice grazed his mouth just before he took a mouthful of his husky beverage and swallowed.

'What the hell is she even talking about,' he wondered. 'I hardly remember dating this girl.'

Sitting back into her chair, Jesse picked up her fork and twirled her Linguine with clam sauce dish. "But I am extremely glad that I ran into your mother and at the University no less. I mean I just signed up for my classes and there she was. Serendipity? That's what they call it right?" She gleamed at him through her eyelashes.

With a tight lipped smile, Rick rested his drink back down, "Right."

"I mean if you think about it, it makes sense. Look at us, after all these years…to find each other now, at this time." Dropping her gaze from his, Jesse's brows then knitted together. "Could I just say something? I, I couldn't believe it you know, when I heard … about how things turned out between you and Lori." She pressed her hand against her chest, squeezing an earnest expression onto her face. "I am genuinely sorry about that. I am."

"Thank you," he sighed, growing impatient. "But that was years ago."

"Yeah." She tilted her head and pouted at him, "But still, we've all been through it somehow... loss, pain. That's life isn't it?"

"Are you enjoying that?" Squinting his eyes, Rick cut her off, the pity party was unnecessary. This woman had no clue about what he'd been through.

"Umm, oh, uh yes. It's fantastic actually." Yet she continued to shift her food from side to side. "This restaurant is just amazing, really beautiful. I've never been here before."

"I hear the special is…divine. We could try it if you'd like."

"Of course," she answered with a quick eagerness, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Rick smiled at her.

But really…What was his mother thinking? This was who she thought he could spend the rest of his
life with? Be a mother for his son? She might seem safe, seem familiar, but…she just lacked what he needed. On the other hand, he didn't need much of anything at all. Other than having a good time now and then, Rick, in reality, was content. He was living his life, day-to-day. Everything of necessity was in place. Only his relationship with Carl, his boy, was a source of mild discontent and so that was plenty enough tension for him. That, together with his demanding job at his father's successful investment firm, and the rest of his family…it all left Rick...full. So as it stood, there simply wasn't any room for a forty year old drama student, in the middle of a rough divorce, with two teenage boys of her own. What the hell was going through his mother's mind was beyond his comprehension.

As Jesse went on rambling about something or the other, Rick allowed himself to be distracted by his spirited surroundings. Back for a second dining experience, the apparently authentic Italian restaurant, without a doubt, held its own in the downtown area, as a steady stream of patrons flowed in and out of the establishment.

As he cast his glance around, he observed entire families giddy with excitement at the sight of their brightly colored, delectable desserts. Meanwhile, nestled in a far corner booth had a particular young couple lavishing each other with sweet kisses. He couldn't help but smile at their carefree display.

There were a dozen or so paintings, of differing sizes, that decorated the yellow-orange walls, depicting some variation of either Mediterranean cafes overlooking the Riviera, or Gondolas floating in the green waters of Venice. Some with gold, wooden frames-ornate and antique-while other frames were simple and modern. The eye-catching brass mosaic lights that hung overhead, together with the amorous music playing throughout, set a particular mood that even the bustling waiters couldn't resist as they swayed subconsciously whilst serving their guests.

Soon enough Rick himself was immersed by everything. His eyes searching every face… neglecting the voice from the other side of his own table trying to recapture his attention.

"Rick!"

He finally slid his gaze back over to hers.

"Are you listening to me?"

Squinting at her again, "What?" he asked, though he couldn't care less.

Just then however, Jesse's eyes lit up. "Wow, look at that."

From behind him a waitress passed with a white ceramic platter that held a single serving of a jelly-like dessert. Seemingly made with milk, it appeared as though it came out of a small mould. Tasty raspberries were positioned on the top… or was that the bottom? Rick had no clue…but in any case, it was drizzled with a red syrupy like sauce, and garnished with tiny mint leaves giving the delectable dessert an enticing element.

"Is that the special?" she inquired.

"No not that," he murmured.

Then suddenly, as if on cue, Rick indeed caught sight of "the special."

Everything else ceased to exist as his attentions zeroed in on the patron strutting her way through the tinted glass door entrance. Unlike the first time he laid his eyes on her, she wasn't dressed to the nines. Rather, tonight she wore an off-white flowing blouse, tucked in to a black, knee length skirt and a matching blazer. Her hair neatly wrapped in a high bun had her cheeks on full display. And no
strappy shoes either, no, tonight she arrived in a simple pair of comfortable heels.

The second her gaze locked with his, she recognized him, and at once halted to a stop. Her eyes went round, and her mouth fell slightly open. Only then did Rick realize that a gentleman was with her as he stumbled behind her faltering steps. His burly hands grasped her narrow shoulders. "You alright?" he heard him say in a booming voice. Nodding her head to reassure the man, she visibly took in a deep breath and exhaled. She then rolled her shoulders back, before continuing down the aisle towards him.

Pushing back his chair Rick prepared to stand to greet her.

But, much to his dismay, the intriguing woman side stepped right past him… she dodged him and didn't even stop. "Excuse me," she whispered, barely acknowledging his presence, whilst hers was the only thing that filled the room.

At first a bit perplexed, but then Rick chuckled quietly to himself. A mere two seconds after her arrival and already this woman had him captivated.

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After her initial shock, for lack of a better word, Michonne focused solely on the impressive man that accompanied her that night.

"I'm glad you waited, Abraham. Sorry again for working late," she apologized, as they seated themselves at the bar.

"No, no darling. The pleasure is all mine. And my friends call me Abe." He grinned with confidence.

They then ordered their drinks: a cocktail for her, a scotch for him. And she introduced him to Heath, her younger brother, and the restaurant's faithful bartender for the past few years.

"So your principal informed me that you're a soldier," she mentioned.

"Ex-soldier… got myself discharged on account of me wrapping my two tours."

"Good for you... What was it like over there, in Iraq?"

"A titanic shit storm." He swirled his drink, "A titanic storm full of shit… that basically sums it up."

This man had a way with words didn't he? How entertaining.

"And what about you?" He peered at her with smiling eyes.

She chuckled, "Nothing as patriotic."

"I meant, what's your story? A smoking hot lady like you... why did you agree to this date?"

"Because… I'm trying."

"Trying to do what?"

"To move forward. Well at least my Uncle thinks that I should." Resting her elbows on top the bar she sipped long on the orange and fruity, yet potent drink.

"Yeah I'm trying too… trying to get lucky."
Michonne almost spat out her drink, but managed to swallow first, before laughing out loud.

"Aww honey look at you. You gotta be careful there darling, flashing those pearly whites of yours might make me fall in love, if that's what you're aiming for."

In a fit of laughter, this man was a riot.

"Now life's a peach, ain't it? Trying is the hard part."

"It is."

"But don't give up. Trust me, it gets easier."

She looked at him dubiously.

"Sweetheart it does. It has to. If you don't believe that then you could find yourself missing out on something damn near perfect. Hell, even remarkable."

Michonne took his words to heart.

They chatted some more, and then ordered a second round. Whilst waiting for their drinks to arrive, her date had to excuse himself. As she observed him walking towards the men's room, she wondered about this character Abraham. He was a good man undoubtedly, just like Carol's friend Gabriel. But not boring by any means.Somewhat crass, yes, but level headed too. Quite outspoken and-

"Hey."

Michonne's spine straightened at the husky drawl from behind her.

'Oh no. Is he serious?'

Though the timber of his tone was deeper than she recalled, still, she recognized it just the same. Turning sideways to face him, it bothered her seeing him again. Swallowing hard, she wouldn't allow the boldness of this stranger to affect her pleasant enough evening. What were the odds anyway of running into him again so soon, and here? Unless…

With eyes narrowed Michonne studied the man she briefly encountered the week before. No suit, but dressed in a casual long sleeved, black and white plaid shirt, paired with a dark blue jeans. "Didn't expect to see you again." Maybe this was a sign that she needed to give Angelo's a rest.

"Came back for the special." He grinned, then bit his bottom lip.

"Oh really. You remembered?"

"I did," she wasn't one to be easily forgotten, "You?"

"Just drinks." She gestured to the pair of glasses that were just placed before her.

He lingered…his arms hanging loosely at his sides.

Michonne broke away from his piercing gaze, instead glancing over to his blonde date. "Where's my girl?" she inquired of the nervous brunette.

He shook his head. "Didn't work out."

"Sorry bout that. Thought she was a keeper." The blonde eyed him. "But I think this one's waiting…"
you should get back."

"I should…" Not bothering to glimpse in Jesse's direction, Rick found himself inching closer to her.

"You are terrible." Michonne chuckled with a hint of nervousness at his audacity.

"Why would you say that now?"

"Are you trying to sabotage your date?" She felt like she was being used.

Then she spied Abe returning, "Or mine?"

"Just saying a proper hello."

Nodding towards the woman now shooting daggers at him, "Well you did. And so-"

"So…"

"… you should go."

"Didn't mean to interrupt. But I uh, I hope this one is going better for you."

"Thank you. It is... Sorry that I can't say the same for you."

He tilted his head, "Who says you can't?"

"Then why are you over here?"

Rick frowned, but before he could respond...

"You'd have to excuse me my dear," interjected Abraham upon his return. "Didn't mean to take so long, but I am a large man and it takes an extra minute or two to drain the big snake, you know what I mean? The main pipe, the long horn." He winked.

Michonne cringed.

Rick coughed... or rather choked.

"I'm Abe," the crude, red haired man introduced. With a grin and an outstretched arm, he reseated himself on the barstool next to his embarrassed date.

"Rick. I was just saying hello." He obliged and shook his hand. His grip was firm as expected.

"Were you now?" With a knowing look Abe then grabbed ahold of Michonne's stool and, startling her, dragged it closer to himself.

Rick smirked at the territorial man. "Now I didn't mean anything by it."

"I don't give a monkey's nut."

Taking the hint, he glimpsed over to Michonne, there was something rather interesting to her at the bottom of her glass just then. "Guess I'll see you around," he said, before making his way back to his table.

Positioned on the edge of the pavement, Rick watched the cab he had just put Jesse in driving away.
Despite the slight uneasiness that settled on them, they managed to stick around, and pushed through, even trying that fantastic Tiramisu. When the date came to an end, they walked outside, said their cordial goodbyes, even made empty promises to stay in touch.

Soon the red lights made a turn and Jesse was no longer in his view. About to step into the bustling street, he paused, the night's events sinking in.

He felt eyes on him. Rick turned only to discover Michonne walking in his direction.

"Hey. Still around?" She raised the collar of her jacket to cover her neck from the nippy wind before sticking her hands into the pockets. "I think I should apologize, especially for Abe, my date back there. He was a little… short with you." Ruminating over their conversation during the remainder of her time with Abraham, this man before her did nothing wrong. The issue was with her.

Rick shrugged, not thinking much of the encounter. "So you like this guy?" he inquired, stepping over to her.

"I know he comes off a bit tactless…but he's simply different. Besides there's no guessing game with him. There are no games period." Lord knows she's had her full share of speculations, and self-doubt. Always having to prove herself, that she was worth it… those days were over. "I might see him again."

His eyebrows rose astonished at her choice, her taste. Why actually? It wasn't as if he knew her so well. He didn't know her at all.

"Gonna see her again?"

"You think I should?"

"My honest impression?" Michonne sucked in her full lips for a contemplative second. "She seems to be clingy, a little jealous. The type that's always in need of a hero."

"Yeah well your guy is full of BS. If we're being honest and all."

Michonne blinked at him, "Well that's harsh…" but possibly true.

"I'm, I'm sorry 'bout that." There was no point in him being a jerk to her.

"No you're not." But then the corners of her mouth lifted, and her eyes gleamed with amusement. She started to laugh. He laughed along with her.

Just then her phone went off. Fishing it out from her bag, she checked the notification as soon as she had it in her hand. A warm look of love washed over her face. It was Carol. She sent her the cutest picture of Charlotte and Morgan playing tea time. Both were in tutus, both were sipping on pink teacups. "My aunt…"

Leaning in, Rick peered at the screen.

"That's my big little girl." Michonne beamed.

"You're a Mom?" he stated rather than asked, surprised but not surprised at the revelation.

She nodded, "Just the one though. She's a handful."

"She's gorgeous…That's her father?"
"No, no. He's off somewhere, living his dream," she confessed, returning the device to her purse. "That's my Uncle. Him and his wife are babysitting for me."

Rick was taken aback by her openness, so he returned the gesture. "I uh..." shoving his hand inside of his coat pocket, he pulled out his own mobile. "...I got one of those." After swiping his screen a few times he held it up for her to see.

A wide smile curved her mouth at the sight of the picture, "He's got your eyes. How old is he?"

"Carl? Just about fourteen now." Rick shook his head at how time seemed to be flying by. "And five foot five of pure attitude. I swear..."

"Giving his mother hell?" Her eyes twinkled with laughter.

But there's a noticeable change, a switch, as Rick's demeanor disheartened, "No, he's uh with me. She, my wife, she passed away."

'Damn it.'

Shutting her eyes for a moment, "I'm so sorry. That's just..." she couldn't believe she just did that. There was no way she could've known though, but still. "I can't-" Fumbling for the right thing to say, the expression on his face struck her in her heart.

"Yeah well that's alright. It's been five years now...five years, two months."

Michonne tilted her head at him, "But you still miss her though." Loss is loss. Pain is pain.

He nodded, "But mostly for him."

"Boys need their mothers. Helps them to become a decent man."

Staring out across the yellow lit streets, they allowed themselves to go quiet for awhile.

"You know," Rick returned his attentions to her. "... this is the second time we've ran into each other."

"And?"

Throwing his gaze around, "And how about we make it a third? Would you be up for that?"

She sighed, "How about we say goodnight?"

"That's it?"

"Whatever will be, will be."

"Que sera, sera?" he drawled, his stare filled with enjoyment.

She giggled, "Goodnight Rick." And proceeded to turn and walk away.

Dipping his chin, Rick eyed the pavement as his countenance fell, "Yeah... goodnight." Standing alone now, outside of the enchanting restaurant, he couldn't help but feel a tinge of disappointment.

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"Back already?" Carl asked his father as Rick strolled into the family room. Open, bright and airy, it
was the favorite part of the house for the teen.

"Yeah. I was just half hour away." Rick plopped down on to the couch next to his son, whose legs were stretched out and crossed while watching the TV. "You ate?"

"Of course," he sighed heavily. "Why wouldn't I?" His tone a bit belligerent.

"Hey watch it." Rick turned and glared at him. Not even a minute and the disdain already surfaced. "What about homework? That English paper, it's done?"

"Aunt Denise checked it over already."

"That's good. Where is she anyway?" Rick inquired about his younger sibling.

"In her room, writing her blog. Told me not to disturb her."

"Okay alright…" Rick patted his son on his knee. "You may not think it's late, but it is. Get ready for bed."

"What? Like it matters."

"I'm not asking you Carl," he maintained.

"I'm not a little kid anymore," he huffed as he dragged himself from off of the couch, leaving behind his imprint.

"Goodnight Carl."

"Whatever… Grandma called by the way. Said for you to call her back."

"Will do."

As Carl went stomping up the stairs, Rick reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. A few seconds later he had both his parents on the line.

"Hey," Rick greeted solemnly.

"Uh, oh!" exclaimed his mother. "That doesn't sound too good."

"Deanna I told you I told you, he wouldn't like that girl," commented his father on the other line. "Rick has enough on his plate as it is. He doesn't need the added drama. What he needs is someone who'd put him at ease. Someone strong and solid. Not like that floozy from last year."

"Dad please." Rick didn't want to revisit that old wound…well not so old as his heart sank at the mere mention of her, even if not by name. "What I need is you two to get off my back with all of this."

"Dale my dear…" his mother interrupted, ignoring her son's pleas. "I couldn't agree more than if I said it myself. But the thing is, I don't see how Jesse isn't worth considering. She's a single parent, just like Rick, who could use a fresh start. And besides she's adorable. Look at the possibilities."

"He needs a woman with spunk Deanna, not adorableness," insisted Grimes senior. "And I know just the gal. She's the daughter of an old friend of mine. I think I've mentioned her before."

Rick remembered just exactly who his father was referring to, "The one from the gun range?"
"That's the one. Sassy and smart… absolutely gorgeous."

"Dale," his mother grumbled.

What? I noticed. Anyways, no messy baggage at all, so take her number and call her."

"Alright Dad, but I'm not promising any marriage proposals or anything."

"We just want you to keep your options open, that's all," his mother encouraged, her tone thick with concern. "We always want what's best for you… you and your sister both."

Then how come Denise's love life wasn't getting the third degree like his? "Yeah okay, why not? What's this woman's name?"

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"Andrea! What happened to my soy milk?" Irritated, Michonne slammed her fridge door shut.

A petite, green-eyed woman, with blonde spirals glanced up at her. "Oh yeah, I forgot. It's finished."

Turning around, Michonne narrowed her eyes at her close friend and neighbor, who currently sat at her kitchen island with a bowl of cinnamon flakes. "You know Charlie doesn't drink anything else."

"I'm sorry," the woman apologized, shoveling a spoonful of cereal into her mouth. "I'll replace it when we head out. Where's the third musketeer anyway?"

Michonne waltzed out of the kitchen and made her way to the bottom of the staircase. "Charlie!"

Peering up at the second floor, she waited for the girl to appear at the landing.

"I'm coming Mom," a voice replied, out of Michonne's sight.

Glancing at her watch, time was getting away from them, they needed to be out of the house soon. "Stop coming and come young lady. We're going to be late. Your aunt and uncle don't like to be kept waiting."

"Mom hold on…"

"The movie is gonna start without us, and you'll miss all the previews, and the popcorn is gonna be cold," she coaxed.

In an instant, as if by magic, the wispy girl darted out of her room, her two ponytail braids bouncing as she skipped down the stairs. "No, no, no. I'm ready."

Charlotte bore a surface resemblance to her mother – the heart shaped lips and high cheek bones, but her hook nose and narrow, glassy blue eyes were a direct reflection of her father's. Even down to the shy sadness behind them.

"It's just these boots… they don't fit anymore. They're getting too small." She stuck out a foot wiggling her toes under the black suede material to emphasize her plight.

Michonne huffed, "You're getting too big too fast. Okay… we'll grab a new pair at the mall afterwards."

Charlotte held up two fingers to her mother's face.
Michonne shook her head, "No."

"Aw c'mon. Please!" she begged, clasping her hands together, her bottom lip turned up as much as she possibly could.

Trying her best to ignore her daughter's antics Michonne steered her towards the front door, grabbing their jackets from the closet.

"You said it yourself…" Charlotte wasn't giving up that easy. "…I'm getting too big too fast."

Michonne helped her child slip on her red trench coat, "You have other boots." She then glanced back into the kitchen area, "Andrea, we're ready."

"Not like this one Mom. These are my favorite, you know that."

"Charlotte-"

"Mom."

Michonne hated being a push over, but sometimes it was a trial to stand her ground. Due to a lack of patience Charlotte would typically get the better of her. "Fine," she caved. "But you have to do the dishes for five days in a row this week."

"What!?"

Michonne chuckled at her daughter's horrified face, "Hey…that's the deal."

Rolling her eyes Charlotte was less than thrilled with her Mother's arrangement, she detested cleaning up anything. "Okay, okay," she had no choice but to concede. Opening the front door, she trudged her way outside to the car just as her mother disarmed it.

"Everything's okay?" Michonne inquired, when Andrea came strolling out studying the phone in her hand.

"Oh yeah. It's the text I've been waiting for."

Michonne shrugged and shook her head, having no clue what Andrea was speaking of.

"The text from the guy I have a date with?" Annoyed, she placed a hand on her hip. "Remember?"

"Sorry." Michonne blinked at her.

"You never listen to a word I say, do you? Anyway, this is a big deal for me. I mean I don't want to jinx it but I'm excited about this. It's been non-stop down at the firm. Case after case… I am so ready to just have some fun already."

Michonne smiled at her frustrated friend as they made their way out of the house. "Well you deserve it."

"Yeah. I do don't I? You're not the only one who gets to meet all sorts of guys you know," she teased.

"I hope things work out better for you than it has for me."

"Wait what do you mean? What happened with the coach guy?"
Michonne took in a deep breath. "Nothing." Linking up with Abe for a second time after meeting for drinks at Angelo's, she came to a solid conclusion: It just wasn't going to work for her. "He's too hard." Although he was stable enough, safe and seemingly dependable, the ex-soldier was indeed too rough-natured for her liking. No excitement stirred within her for the man, not in the very least. Perfection was not a requirement, but still... some spark of desire would've been nice.

"God Michonne, if I don't ask a question, I'll never know anything about you."

Opening their doors they both climbed into the car.

"It's nothing Andrea. Just tell me when you're going to see this guy. What do you know about him?"

"Richard."

Turning the ignition, Michonne's brows furrowed at her, "Excuse me?"

"That's his name... Richard Grimes. He's the son of my dad's friend. We're meeting up Friday night."

"Where are you gonna go?"

"Oh you know me...I'm taking him to the club. Good thing you lent me those gold shoes you hate."

"Ugh! You can keep 'em. You'd probably have better luck than me."
"But let's just see what this is."

Chapter 3: "But let's just see what this is."

Rick drove at a steady pace. Not too fast, and not too slow.

He glanced at his silver wrist watch… it was just after eleven p.m., the I-85 had moderate traffic for a Friday night, and according to his date's directions, he still had a ways to go.

"What is this thing?" Andrea questioned, eyeing the vehicle she sat in, her face contorted in disgust. "This truck, it's a piece of junk."

"It's a classic," he defended. "It's a 1999 Chevy Silverado." Not the best trucks on the market, but he'd had it for awhile now, and as far as he was concerned it got him where he needed to go. He had no complaints about it, so what the hell was her problem?

"A 19 what? Oh god Rick," she sighed. "Classic, is just another word for old. Just, like, you." Her speech slurred, Andrea poked a finger into the side of his cheek, and started to cackle. "I mean it even smells old... Wait, maybe, maybe it's your cologne," she snickered. Just then, a brisk, gust of wind swept in as she started winding down the window, and proceeded to stick her head outside. "Oh lord I need some fresh air."

"Hey." Rick yanked her back in. Clenching his jaw, a major headache was coming on. He put the window back up, and locked the switch.

"What? Don't be such a tight ass." Exasperated, she blew out a heavy breath. "I mean really, what is this thing? You make money don't you? There's no Mx, Xm whatever on the radio here." She reached out to interfere with it, but Rick, without hesitation, pulled her hand back.

"Don't touch anything. Just be quiet… please."

"I think... I'm gonna throw up." She rolled her head back and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Naw uh. We're almost there. You live up this way right?" Rick was in no mood to get lost with this belligerent woman, not after the disastrous night they'd had. "You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm not that drunk."

Rick side eyed Andrea as she slouched down into her seat two sheets to the wind, barely keeping her eyes open, and her mouth shut.

'Like hell you are.'

He should've checked her ID to confirm her address, but there was no way in hell he was about to wrangle with her for her purse. From the moment they'd met, at that god-forsaken, Mexican restaurant, everything that could've gone wrong, did. Doomed from the start, she was too imprudent, and he was too critical. The entire date was ridiculous. At that point, his father's choice had been more wrong than his mother's.

So, this was it. Rick was done. Time to return to his regularly scheduled programme.

Yes, he understood his parents' concerns. One of the major problems with his life, was the irresistible impulse to question, or be suspicious of, someone's loyalty… and that didn't exclude the women who
came into his life. Not a unique problem by any means, but it ensured that all his personal entanglements, thus far, would get derailed sooner or later. Hence, his preference to keep things casual, especially so after the last person he loved… after Lori that is… had proved him right.

In any case, he'd had enough of this though. No more blind dates. No more surprises.

Finally turning off the I-85 into Lawrenceville, the end of his nightmare was at last in sight.

And soon enough they were standing on Andrea's front step. Leaning back against the door, she was digging inside her bag for her keys. The Victorian-styled street lamps were more than bright enough for her to see, yet, with squinted eyes she seemed to be having difficulty.

Whilst waiting, Rick noticed that the line of stone and brick townhouses, up and down the block, were nearly all identical. Some had bay windows, while others didn't. Some, like Andrea's, had border hedging along the pathway, surrounding little flower shrubs. Whereas, others, such as her neighbors to her right, opted for river rocks, instead, around their flower beds.

All in all, the entire street, as far as he could see, was mostly in quiet darkness.

"Why don't you let me help you with that?" Rick offered, growing more impatient by the second.

"No. I know, I know I have it…” she insisted, her entire arm now immersed in the handbag. "I got it. It's in here, somewhere. I know it. It's just—"

"Well it doesn't look so cause we've been standing out here for five minutes and counting."

"God! You know what? You see this…” she circled his face in dramatic fashion, stumbling forward a bit. "…this is why tonight was so stupid."

"Are you serious? I'm not the one acting like a damned eighteen year old." Mixing drinks, talking back to the bouncer, being rude to the waiters... it was as if she was on a mission, from the depths of hell, to purposefully try to get them both into a brawl, with just about anyone.

"You think you're sooo mature. Well boo to you!"

"Just find the damned keys already Andrea." This date didn't want to end. "There's no way I'm taking you home with me." That was downright out of the question.

"Ugh, you wish."

Rick sized up the front door. He could kick it down right? If he needed to… And from the look on her face, after another minute or so of fruitlessly searching…

"I, I don't have it," she admitted, defeated and distressed.

… it looked like he needed to.

"Alright…” Narrowing his eyes he nudged her out of his way. "… stand to the side. I got this."

"What? What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna get you in." He raised his leg and angled his foot. "You wanna sleep outside?"

"Oh for Pete's sake, no!" she protested, pulling on his sleeve. "My girl lives just next door." She shook her head at him and his desperate antics. "Neanderthal…come on."
Clinging to his neck, Rick wrapped his arm around Andrea's waist, to support her as they trotted back down the front steps. They made their way out the short walkway, took a left on the pavement, and traipsed back up the next path.

"She's supposed to be up. I'll crash at her place."

"You sure about that?" The house was in complete darkness. "'Cause you were just as sure you had your keys."

"Stop being such an ass and ring the bell," she scolded, letting go of him.

He sighed heavily, as he pressed the small white button, hoping that this was going to be the end of it already.

Within a few seconds, the lights did come on.

'Thank you Jesus.'

And a short moment after, someone came and opened up the door.

"Hey I'm—" Suddenly at a loss for words, Rick squinted his disbelieving eyes at the woman who appeared before him.

It was her.

His throat went dry. His jaw went slack…

'How in the hell?'

… and so did his grip on Andrea.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" she cursed, as she tumbled to the floor.

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"Michonne these god-damned shoes nearly killed me! I should sue you."

"I did tell you."

"Bitch, don't lie to me."

'Okay, someone's wasted.' Michonne thought to herself.

"Sssh, you'll wake Charlotte." She stared in utter disbelief, as Rick helped Andrea into the living room, and then onto her couch. Wide-eyed, she studied everything he did, and every movement he made, as he bent over to place Andrea just so, raising her legs, and stretching them out, even propping her up on a pillow.

"What are you doing here?" she finally articulated.

"I lost my keys," Andrea responded, swinging her arm over her forehead.

But Michonne's gaze was solely locked onto the man before her.

Allowing his eyes to meet hers, both were perplexed, and both were unsure if the other one was even real.
"I, I…” Rick stammered. "…I went out with her tonight."

Narrowing her eyes at him, "You're Richard Grimes?"

"What a coincidence huh?"

"I guess,” she breathed. This was an exceptional coincidence. He was standing right there... in front of her, in her house. The man she decisively turned away from. It was too much of a coincidence for her particular liking. The odds were just... "Is this some kind of joke?” No matter how hard she tried, Michonne just couldn't gather her thoughts together. Sorry, but that was the best she could do. Any cohesive, logical assessment, about that peculiar predicament, was simply out of her reach. It was bloody close to midnight after all, and Charlotte had long gone off to bed, leaving her mother alone, to gorge on M&Ms, whilst binge-watching 'the Good Wife.'

Equally astonished, Rick didn't desire any more surprises, but this was one he gladly welcomed. He tried to step closer to her…

"Oh my head hurts," groaned Andrea.

They both lowered their gaze, and regarded the intoxicated woman.

Pressing her palms flat against the sides of her head, "This was the worst, night, ever," she complained.


Rick raised his hand and shook his head, "You don't want to know."

"My one, free, night, and this jackass right here screwed it up. He's such a bore Michonne. He complained about everything."

"That's because everythang we did was a nightmare." Well up until that point really.

Andrea waved him off, "Oh please just go."

Michonne found herself laughing at the pair. She was well aware of how unpleasant her girlfriend could be after one drink too many. She had learned to take it in stride.

"Oh Mich sweetie please, my head is about to explode."

"Okay," Michonne brushed her hand over her friend's messy hair. "I'll get you something. Hold on."

"I'll come help you," Rick offered, just as she turned to walk away.

Michonne stopped, and blinked back at him, over her shoulder.

He pushed his hands in his pants' pockets. "If that's alright?"

With a faint smile, she nodded. "Sure."

Rick followed her into the narrow hallway. It was well lit, and nicely adorned with numerous pictures in black frames. "So you were up?" he asked, standing back as she made a right into a half-bath.

"I was," she disclosed, flicking on a light switch, then opening up the cabinet. A few medicine
bottles and boxes were shuffled around before the aspirin she came for was retrieved. "I, I couldn't sleep."

Rick glanced her over in her sports T-shirt, and flannel pajamas.

'Golden State Warriors?'

Again, he shook his head. Was this someone's plan? Or the mere outcome of his decisions? Either way, he was currently in her house, in her home… the place where she lived, the place where she slept, where she cooked her meals, did her laundry, raised her child… where she loved and laughed and cried. And here he was… an invader into her reality. It was suspicious, and remarkable, both at the same time.

He studied her like an apparition, as she positioned herself in the doorway. Her shoulder now leaning against the frame, with one foot propped up on the other… Head tilted, slightly to the side, as her slender fingers fiddled with the little white bottle in her hand. She must be nervous. Hell, he was nervous too. Caught off guard and blindsided by the turn of events.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered, dipping his head to catch her gaze that she kept fixed to the floor.

"I'm thinking, I must've fallen asleep."

"Dreaming about me?" That devilish grin gracing his too damn handsome face.

"Maybe," she blushed.

He inched closer to her.

'Trouble Michonne, trouble.'

Clearing her throat, she slipped past him. "I should get some water."

Once more, Rick took cautious steps behind her, and they both fell silent, while she made her way into the kitchen. It was small, and contemporary, and painted all white, with the exception of the green base cabinets of her island. He stood in her archway, observing as she made haste in filling a glass for Andrea.

Closing off the faucet, Michonne took a deep breath, before turning to face him, "I am – " she began, but then found herself at a loss for words, this encounter left her jarred.

However, Rick shifted himself, and with self-assurance and an air of conviction, he walked towards her.

Raising his hand, he took the glass. "I got it."

Michonne swallowed hard at the touch of his fingers as they grazed against her own. When she breathed in deep, to slow her now racing heart, the familiar scent of mandarin and warm spices, filled her nostrils

"Hey," Rick rested his free hand on his hip. "Remember back there, that night? Remember what it was you said to me?"

Her arms moved behind her to brace her lower back, "Yeah," she responded, her eyes focused intently on him.
"You said, 'Whatever will be, will be' Do you recall that?"

"I do."

"Good," Nodding his head, he closed the gap between them, and her eyes grew large. "Because, I think this qualifies." Sucking in his lower lip, his gaze ran down the length of her, and back up again. "Doesn't it?"

"I, umm…" Her stomach was fluttering out of control.

"Michonne, I don't know if this is some kind of—"

"Me neither," she interrupted, shuffling around him. Was this some sort of sign, or something else?

"But let's just see what this is."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, have dinner with me."

"Please… you didn't say please."

Grinning at her playfulness, "Pretty please... " She liked him, he deduced that much. "We could go to your place, where you're comfortable." But, she was also put off by him. "Or, we could go clubbing," he joked, attempting to get her to relax.

She smiled, "We could?"

"If that's your thang…"

"Yeah right."

"… I'm willing to give it another try. You just have to say the word."

"Wait." Michonne couldn't help but chuckle, whilst stepping further back. "Look…" she moved around the island, and grabbed something from off of the counter top. Walking back over, she then handed him her 'Things to do' notepad and a pen. "Leave me your number and I'll call you." How could she not consider it given the circumstances?

Rick placed the glass down, relieved and excited to hear her response. "I guarantee you won't regret it."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she shot back, a teasing glint in her eyes.

Raising his hand, he boldly swept her locs away from her face, pushing them behind her shoulder, "I guarantee," his voice deepened, "…You won't regret it."

Pinned under his piercing stare, her knees went weak again. And in the pit of her stomach, she already did.
Michonne poured the last of the batter into her non-stick, medium sized, frying pan. "How's the eggs coming along Charlie?" she called over her shoulder. "This batch is done."

"Ready when you are Mom," the young girl answered, whisking away in the glass bowl that rested on the island counter top.

"So, let me get this straight – you two knew each other from before?" asked Andrea, as she scooped out two tablespoons of ground coffee to pour into the filter basket.

Setting aside the plate of golden brown pancakes, Michonne grabbed a clean frying pan, a smaller one, and set it on the lit burner. "You're up sweetie," she moved over to the dishwasher to dispose of her wares, making room for her daughter to get her job done. "We don't know each other Andrea," she answered. "...but we have met a couple of times, yes."

"But you do want to get together, that's what you're telling me?" Andrea interrogated, watching as Michonne picked up three plates, setting them on the counter, next to the three glasses of orange juice already placed there.

Michonne shrugged her shoulders.

"No… don't do that," She imitated her friend's dismissive gesture. "Speak—Explain, clearly."

"He asked me out but I said no then he asked me again— "

Andrea crossed her arms over herself, "Last night, after our date? And you said yes?"

Avoiding her stare, Michonne returned her attentions to her daughter. "Don't leave those on for too long Charlotte."

The girl shot her mother a look. This was their typical Saturday routine… minus the bacon… her aunt, for some reason, couldn't stomach the fatty smell that morning. But anyway, she had been scrambling eggs for some time now, her mother's warning was quite unnecessary.

"Michonne," Andrea pressed, joining her at their sitting area.

"I said, I said I'd call him," she confessed quietly, the conversation was all sorts of awkward. She should've picked a better timing, but for some reason she thought that casually mentioning Rick first thing in the morning over breakfast would have been… less confrontational.

"Well this guy is unbelievable."

She was wrong. Andrea was as dramatic as ever.

"So while I'm passed…" she glanced across at the impressionable young girl, as she shoveled the finished eggs onto a serving plate,"… while I'm sleeping, from tiredness," she corrected herself,"… on the couch, he didn't hesitate to hit on my friend?"

Michonne chuckled slightly, it did sound outrageous.

"This isn't funny Mich. And I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to stop you on this one."
"It's not like that. There's more to it," Michonne defended, unsure on how exactly to explain it.

"Really?"

"Listen it's just one meal."

"So you are going to call him... I thought you were done with dating and everything?"

Taking in a deep breath, the roasted aroma of the brewing coffee filled her lungs. Honestly, she thought she was done too.

"Well if it's one thing, Mich... you sure are consistent," Andrea commented, pulling out the high chair to take her seat. "You do have horrible taste in men..."

Michonne straightened up and frowned at the woman next to her... stung by her cutting remark.

"... because last night, was a disaster."

"Yeah you said that already," she bit back, dragging out her own chair as Charlotte now came over to the kitchen island to join them. "Don't forget your coffee."

Andrea observed Michonne's annoyance, and immediately her own demeanor softened. "Look I don't know what I'm thinking. I shouldn't have been so careless with my comments. I know full well what you have been through," she back peddled. "Listen... forget what I just said... I shouldn't have... I'm sorry." Andrea lowered her head into her hands. "I must still be hungover. Oh wait— Charlie, sweetie, you didn't hear that."

"That's okay, I know what it means," Charlotte answered, taking her place in the middle chair, her aunt to her left, her mother to her right.

"And you know that it's a bad thing right?" Michonne brushed aside the brown curls that tumbled down the back of her child's blue and white nightie.

"Uh huh."

"Really bad," Andrea added. "My head is reeling— Look, Michonne, call him. What do I know. It might be better for you."

With a lopsided smile, Michonne shook her head, "Thanks. Well I'm still deliberating it."

"Ain't nothing wrong with trying Mom," chimed in Charlotte.

Andrea beamed at the pre-teen. "Wise beyond her years. Did you hear that? 'Ain't nothing wrong with trying.' And... I am sorry," she insisted. "It's all strange, but I'm cool... it's cool."

"Well you have to be Auntie— you're eating our eggs." Charlotte grinned.

"Okay now, you're just being rude," Andrea swiped her hand lightly over the girl's mocking face.

"She learned that from you," Michonne chuckled, as she picked up her fork. "Alright, before this gets cold, you girls ready? Let's give thanks and then dig in."

Michonne and Charlotte snuggled with each other across the child's unmade bed, enjoying the rest of their blissfully lazy weekend in peace.
Unfortunately, for Andrea, she needed to be back in the office that day. Her law firm had a new junior partner, and she was charged with, the all-important task of, bringing him up to speed on all their current big cases. Suffice it to say, she wasn't too pleased. From whatever minor interactions she had with him, Mr. Walsh, apparently, was a real cocky, douche faced s-o-b.

Lying on her back, in her daughter's forest-themed bedroom, Michonne stared up at the white ceiling, as her music played aloud from her phone. Much to Charlotte's chagrin, Michonne began to sing along. "Buona Sera, signorina, buona sera. It is time to say goodnight to Napoli. Though it's hard for us to whisper, buona sera. With that old moon above the Mediterranean sea."

Lifting her head up, to rest her chin on her mother's chest, she knitted her brows together, "Mommy you're so weird," she teased.

"I know." Michonne's mouth curved into a smile, and her arm squeezed tighter around the girl's little waist. "All mothers are," she responded. "Besides, you can blame your Grandma Pat for that. She played this kind of music almost every day when I was growing up."

Charlotte twisted her fingers in between her mother's hair. "I wished I remembered her."

"Me too. But you were just a toddler, so…" Inhaling deeply, Michonne then sat up, shifting her child to the side. "…let's listen to what you like." Not wanting to torture her daughter any longer, she turned her music off and tucked it away inside her jeans pocket. She then reached across to the teak dresser drawers, that was right next to the bed head, and grabbed ahold of the child's phone instead.

"Wait, no. Mom that's okay."

Eyes wide with fright, Michonne detected her child's sudden apprehension. "What is on this?" she immediately interrogated. It had only been a week since she last checked it for anything inappropriate. "Do you have something graphic in here Charlotte?"

"No!"

"It's better if you just tell me." Michonne kept her calm, hoping to God that the child wasn't lying to her. Maybe it was a boy. Oh dear God no, she wasn't ready for that… not yet.

"It's nothing like that. I swear." Her voice pitched.

Climbing off of the bed, Michonne now towered over her. "Don't swear. Just answer –What, is, on, this phone?"

Due to her nerves, Charlotte lowered her eyes from her mother's blazing stare. "It's… it's Daddy's songs," she quietly confessed, shifting back, closer to the other side of her bed. "I'm sorry."

Instantaneously, Michonne's shoulders slumped forward, and her countenance fell. "Which ones?" she whispered, all of her steam dissipating.

"As much as I could get off the internet."

She unlocked it, and scrolled through. One name consistently appeared on her child's Playlist…'Cherokee Rose'. A lump rose within her throat. "Do you have a favourite?" she managed to ask, trying to put on a brave face. "We umm, we could listen to it. Mommy doesn't mind."

"'Angel eyes' is the best one," she beamed. "Do you know it?"

Michonne's lower lip trembled, and she gritted her teeth, as an unexpected wave of sadness lashed.
against her. Placing her hand on her hip, she attempted to keep it together. "Yeah," she nodded. But it proved to be so difficult just from looking at her baby girl.

"Mom… mom it's okay. We don't have to." She took the phone from her mother's grasp. "Actually, to be honest, I'm kinda hungry now."

Her eyes brimmed with stinging tears, forcing her to shift her gaze. Michonne was ashamed… but also, she was grateful, for the eleven year old's understanding. "Any requests?" she breathed, her chest heavy with guilt.

"Whatever is fine with me. Anything you want, it's fine."

That was a lie, the girl was the pickiest eater Michonne had ever known. "How about I do a Shepherd's pie? We haven't had that in awhile."

Her eyes lit up. "Really? Oh awesome. You want me to come help?" she shuffled her way to the edge of her bed.

"No, stay. Listen to your music. I'll call you when I'm done."

"As soon as?"

"Yes Charlotte…as soon as."

Wiping the corners of her eyes, Michonne plodded out of the room. And as soon as she reached the bottom of the staircase, she pulled out her phone and dialed Rick.

"This is Michonne," she announced, as soon as he answered.

"Michonne? I'm glad to hear from you."

"I wanted to take you up on that offer… When is good for you?"

"Meet me tonight. Could you do that?"

She chuckled. This man, this man. God she hoped she was wrong about him. She needed to move forward. If only for Charlotte's sake.

"I could." Besides, like she said 'Ain't nothing wrong with trying.'

Then… realization dawned on her… That was the name of one of Daryl's songs she saw on the phone. The first one actually.

'Damn it Michonne you're screwing her up.'

Pressing her fingers against her temple, "Angelo's for seven?" she suggested.

"Yeah, seven's good."

Putting her suspicions, her pre-judgments, aside, Michonne ignored whatever perceptions she may have had about Rick Grimes, in order to relax and enjoy herself. The Chef really did outdo himself with the Chicken Alfredo, and the Nebbiolo wine, her date suggested, was absolutely divine—who knew this man had such good taste. Well, so far so good… at least for now. At least she didn't ambush herself by psyching herself out and going overboard. But really, he didn't give her much
time to do so anyway.

For the night, she resurrected a fitted, purple V-neck cocktail number, that was collecting dust in the back of her wardrobe. Accessorized with her favorite silver necklace and earring set, gifted to her from Charlotte for last year's Mother's day. The child had poor Uncle Morgan drive three counties over just to get it. Her hair was styled in a side-swept up do, and she spent just about 15 minutes on her make-up… wait— no, no, that was a lie. It was more like 20, 25 minutes. Michonne really couldn't be bothered to be honest, so she'd spent just about merely 30 minutes on her face... the was just a silly date… with a ridiculously attractive man.

Back in a suit tonight, not silver, but in black, with a crisp white shirt, and clean shaven, Rick didn't seem to be nervous at all. He came across as rather comfortable, and at ease, and in his delight, especially with the way he ate his Shrimp Diavolo.

"You enjoying that?" Michonne knew damn well that he was, the way he licked the sauce from his lips, … it was sinful… simply to torture her, she was sure.

"It's great…” he grinned. "This was a wonderful choice, thank you. So… tell me more about yourself. 'Des Vignes' that's French, am I right?"

"You are."

"And umm, do you enjoy being an accountant? How long you've been doing that?"

"We're playing twenty questions are we?"

Nodding her head at him, she knew that, of course… she knew that. She just felt… on edge, now here they were, and he had her on the spot. Leaning forward, with both hands she held up her glass to her lips, placing her elbows on either side of her plate. "Being an accountant pays the bills,” she answered succinctly. "Nothing as exciting as being an investor." Pointing to his phone that rested right before him on the table, "You've checked that thing like five times already."

He shook his head, "No, sorry about that. It's this client… he's trying to get the better of me. But…” he shrugged his shoulders. "… I'll win."

"You'll win," she smirked. "You always do, don't you?"

"Are we still talking about work?" His eyes flashed with excitement at the mischievous grin on her face.

"Mmhm, what else?"

"Okay, Ms. Des Vignes. Well, it's not my dream job either, but it's my Father's private equity firm, and he needed his sons by his side."

"Sons? You have a brother?"

His eyes shifted from hers. "I do."

With his jaw clenched, Rick didn't offer anything more, and Michonne understood at once that that topic was off limits. Everyone has their sore spots, and Rick's brother was probably his. "Well that's nice," she commented, lifting the tone of her voice. "I guess it was your father's dream then to build something for his family."
He returned his gaze to hers and she graced him with a warm smile. "It was. We started back home in King's County—"

"I have no idea where that is…" She cut him off. "… but continue."

Rick chuckled, observing her sipping on her wine, "Yeah, not many people do. It's a little hidden town, so little that it didn't take long for my father to branch out here into the city. That uh, that brother of mine… he's running the business back home. Anyways…" Rick had enough talk about business. He wasn't here for that. His intentions that night was to get to know who this woman was – to uncover as much information as possible. That's how he dealt with issues and interests in his life—information and numbers and data. That's how he made sense of his world, and that's how he was going to make sense of his encounter with her. "… speaking of family and all, how's your little girl? I hope we didn't disturb her the other night?"

The debacle that led her there with him emitted a soft laughter from Michonne. "No. She sleeps like the dead. Unlike me, I'm usually up if I hear a pin drop."

He nodded, "I can relate. Maybe it's a parent thing, having a heightened sense of alertness… of awareness. We adapt, to keep them safe."

"I never, I never thought of it that way before. You might be right, I usually check in on her as soon as I get off of my bed… doesn't matter what time of night it is."

"Comes with the territory."

"Mmm," she smiled, as her mind conjured up the image of her angel sleeping sweetly. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Same." Carl might give him hell, but…that was his pride and joy.

"And what about your brother? You say he works here?"

"Yeah. We're close-ish. You can meet him after if you'd like."

"I gather he loves it here too."

"Definitely. It's really because of our parents you know. This was their special place. This was where they got engaged, and so every anniversary since was celebrated right here. Our Graduations, college acceptances—you name it. A lot of fond memories for our family. My father even became friends with the last owner, Renaldo DeLuca, he was Angelo's grandson."

"Really?" His heart tugged at him. "So it's not just the food then? This place… it's like a second home."

"Yes. Exactly," she whispered. His expression and tone were thoughtful. In a way, it was endearing. "Even this music, it managed to make its way into my life… I love it. It's so soulful and dramatic, velvety and full of heart. It's so demanding." She set her glass down. "For example, if you understood the lyrics of this song playing right now—"

"Which you do…"

"Which I do," she laughed. "It's called Luna rossa, meaning Scarlet moon… the singer is so consumed by passion, he's helpless… as though nothing else matters other than being in-love. It's a bit sad in that way."
The way her eyes shone with elation, let Rick know that she was a romantic. "The Italian way."

"Yeah… perhaps. Like I said, I blame my parents." She glanced around, "I wish we could dance in here."

He held out his hand to her, "We can."

She blushed, "No, we can't."

"Why not?"

She slapped his hand away. "Don't be silly, there's no space obviously. But if somehow magically they were able to expand, a dance floor would be ideal." Michonne studied the layout as though she could already see it being a possibility.

"Well you never know."

Her lips tightened in a straight line, "You never know."

Not too long after, in between the chit chat, they finally made it through their meals and put in their orders for desserts. Michonne was so stuffed that she vowed against pasta for a month. So for her treat, she opted for something light, Marsala-Poached Figs over Ricotta.

Rick had no idea what that was, but he wanted to try it too. Everything he had eaten there thus far was outstanding. So the Marsala-Poached Figs over Ricotta should be perfect as well. And even if it wasn't perfect… even if it turned out to be absolute rubbish, fit only for the port hounds roaming the city's filthy streets… the charming lady who graced him with her presence that evening, so far, made everything seemingly perfect. And therefore everything else was as well.

"So umm, you're into basketball?" This was something he had to broach before their time together ended—it was important.

"Excuse me?" That was a random question.

"Golden State pajamas?"

She chortled, "You noticed?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, "Of course. What… Atlanta Hawks not good enough for yuh? They're your home team."

"Well the Warriors are ranked first both in their division, and in the Western conference. I mean, what is it 45 to 8? You can't argue with numbers like that."

She had a point, but still, "Our boys need all the support they can get. This is your home team Michonne. What kind of example are you setting for Charlotte?"

"I suppose your son loves the Hawks too?"

"He don't have a choice, or I'll put him out," he laughed.

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. This man cannot be serious.

"It's all about loyalty," he insisted.

"Well if you put it like that, Mr. Fanatic—"
"Hey I'm just principled." Leaning back, he was satisfied that he'd made his point clear.

"Yeah, uh huh… what I was going to say, was that Charlotte and I used to live in California for awhile. She was actually born there. So… if it's the principle of the thing, at the very least I'm well within my rights to encourage Charlotte to support her home team."

"Touché pussycat." Grinning from ear to ear, utterly entertained, Rick reached over the table and took a hold of her hand. It was delicately soft to the touch. "Having a good time?"

"Yes," she answered, earnestly. "This is all you wanted?"

"Yes," his thumb caressed her knuckles. "And I'm not a bore, it doesn't have to end here."

Michonne lowered her gaze from his enthusiastic stare. "Say I, take you up on that offer… then what?"

"Then we do it again, on another night. That's what dating is all about."

"Yes, but to what end?"

He looked at her perplexed.

"At this stage in my life, I need more than just having fun Mr. Grimes. I— I need to be needed." And not as some toy for his amusement, which was exactly what she saw in his eyes.

"You're jumping the gun aren't you?"

"Maybe," she withdrew her hand from his and sat all the way back into her chair.

"You…" she shook her head. "… I know you— handsome and sweet, ambitious and intense. You are exactly my type," she sighed solemnly. "So I know all too well how this ends."

'For me, anyway."

Cocking his head to the side, Rick swallowed hard, masking his growing disappointment. "Meaning what Michonne?" Just a minute ago he was having the best date he'd had in a considerably long time. But now…

"Meaning, I'm known for 'courting disaster'." Taking up her glass she gulped the remainder of her drink. It was the second one for the night. "Trust me, I'm saving us both from the trouble that is bound to ensue."

A line appeared between his brows, "I don't think I can accept that Michonne."

"Well at least let's just be friends. I really enjoyed your company. But I'm trying this new thing called 'learning from past experiences'. It's not personal."

"I think you're reading too much into this," he countered.

"Maybe… But I think that I have to." Her purpose was not to come across as brass, or tactless, but this was just the first date, and she had to protect herself before it was too late.

But the man's demeanor hardened towards her, and it made her heart race. "I umm," she sucked in her lips. "I think I have to use the bathroom," she excused herself. Getting up from her seat, she then moved to walk past him, but he grabbed her by her wrist.
"Really? Or are you gonna go hide from me?"

"I'm, I'm coming back."

As soon as he released her, she made a beeline for the back hallway. Almost there, however, she realized that he'd gotten up, and was now following her. Instinctively, she quickened her steps towards the ladies room. As soon as she stood at the door she grabbed the knob and turned before he could catch up. "Shit."

It was locked.

And in the next second Rick was right behind her.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She didn't… she didn't turn around.

"I don't want you hiding from me. That's not necessary."

He was breathing on her neck. It raised goose bumps all over her body. "I'm not," she shook her head. And then, with a defiant face, she did turn towards him, and was surprised to be met by his burning gaze. Was he angry, or was he… she had no idea. But he didn't back away, he had her cornered. "Rick—"

"At this stage in your life, you should know that you can't be 'just friends' with someone you're attracted to."

"I beg to differ."

Leaning in closer, Rick suddenly kissed her on her cheek, and Michonne's eyes fluttered shut. It was almost as though he was proving a point.

Raising his hand, he gripped her at her waist, grazing his lips against her jaw line. Whatever it was she thought she knew about him, he was determined to convince her otherwise. "You are an interesting woman, I'll give you that… I'll give you that. There's a current, I can feel it."

Just then she pressed her hands flat against the lapels of his jacket and pushed him back, but he kept his hold on her. "I'm just not doing this with you Rick," she breathed.

"Why?"

"Why?" she squinted her eyes. "It's like I said… I'm trying to learn from my past mistakes."

"You don't know me."

"I do," she reasserted. "It's the chase. That's all you want – isn't it? It's the thrill." Rick's intentions were to play with her… Hell the man was playing with her right then. She felt him, as he moved his hand over her stomach, pressing into her… his thumb circling below her navel, and drifting lower. She watched his gaze trace over her face, hooded with desire… and she trembled. "Shit." Shutting her own eyes, she forced herself to stop reacting to him. Thank god they were in public. Thank god the bathroom was locked. Anything less and she would've lost that battle for sure.

He closed in on her again, his heat, his scent mingling with hers. "Rick wait." Moving her hands upwards she clutched him at his shoulders.

"Are you sure?" he breathed. His night couldn't end with her rejecting him. He had her shaking in
his hands for crying out loud.

But before she could answer, the door opened behind her, causing them both to stumble a bit.

"Oh I'm sorry," said a young, striking brunette, stepping out of the room. "Didn't mean to interrupt… but it's free," she winked at them.

And Rick flashed a cheeky smile.

But Michonne, was not amused. Released from his trance, she stormed off back to their table. He followed right behind her.

"Wait."

She didn't. Gathering her jacket and purse, she made haste to get the hell out of there.

"Can I call you?" he asked.

"Sure," she barely glanced at him as she slipped on her coat. "… but just for coffee. I mean it."

"Well what about the desserts?" Hell, like he really gave a crap about that right then. She was walking out on him.

"Hey Mich." At that moment, a young African-American man appeared beside them.

"Hey. Umm, Heath this is Rick – Rick, my brother," she introduced.

"Yeah," the man, without a smile, gave him a brief nod and a once over, before turning back to his sister. "Listen, I got something to tell you."

"Can't it wait? Call me later?" Michonne hustled her steps, aiming for the exit.

"No." He leaned in closer to her. "It's done," he whispered. "He did it."

Rick couldn't make out what was said, but from the widening of Michonne's eyes, and the scowl that grew across her face, he knew it wasn't anything good. "What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Nothing," she answered, grabbing Heath's hand, she pushed past him in the opposite direction. "I have to go Rick."

He simply nodded as she walked away. Disappointed that that was how their date was ending.

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Michonne led her brother back to the bar. "Where is he?" her voice thick with anger and devastation.

"To the back." Heath held on to her shoulders "I'm so sorry."

"No." She almost burst into tears at the heartbreak in her brother's eyes. But before she could, she pulled away from him, and stomped her way through the kitchen's doors. Fuming past the staff, all eyes were on her, but no one dared to try and stop her. They knew where she was heading, and they knew exactly why.

Established around 80 years ago, Angelo's had been passed down through the generations… and now the name's sake's great-grandson had inherited it. However, he didn't want it and he was ready to get rid of it, and sell it. After two years of searching, he'd finally found a company that was willing
to meet his price. The company, on the other hand, had no desire to keep the restaurant open. They just wanted the prime property to construct Apartments in a joint venture.

Planted in front of Mr. DeLuca's office, she knocked once, she knocked twice, three times—the door swung open.

"What the hell?" she yelled at him. Rage boiling within her at the mere sight of him.

"Well, good to see you too Michonne. Don't you look gorgeous? Hot damn! I gather your brother delivered my wonderful news."

"You asshole. We had a deal Negan!" she pushed past him and entered his space. It was large, but it was empty, with one desk, one chair, and an old couch against the left wall. It was bland, and soulless… like him.

"We did?"

"Don't play with me." She hit him with her purse. "I'm not playing with you! What happened to our deal?"

"Now come on Michonne…" he gave a flippant wave of his hand. "We both know that you were never gonna come up to scratch with the money. And those guys over at SMA and associates, well they were getting antsy."

"I was working on it. I needed more time."

"It's been a year." He roared. "And now… it's done. I gave you some consideration, but I have had enough of the restaurant business. The numbers don't add up, and it bores to me tears. Too much riding on my back."

"Yes of course. It's all about you."

"You damn right sweet cakes. Now if it is you don't have a five million dollar cheque tucked away in that fancy purse of yours, I suggest that you leave."

"Go to hell Negan."

"Yeah that's what all my ladies say. But really, it's time for you to go. And the next time you show up uninvited, you bet your sweet ass I'd be expecting you to put out."

Michonne scowled at him. "You disgust me."

Grabbing her by the arm, he escorted her out the door. "Goodnight Michonne – It's over."
Chapter 5: "… maybe I let my fears get the better of me."

Events from the night before left Michonne heavy hearted. Her failure at securing Angelo's, after all she invested, had her perturbed — so much so, that for the remainder of the night, sleep evaded her. She had spent the last year slaving away at putting things in place: Organizing a proper business plan, scheduling numerous appointments with bankers, and hustling for investors. But, at the end of the day, it was all for naught. She lost anyway.

As a new dawn made its appearance, Michonne found it difficult to even inch her way out of bed. But still, no matter how she felt, she could not allow herself the luxury of wallowing in her misery. That was out of her reach… that was out of the question. Her current state of mind, did not make her responsibilities disappear, no, she needed to remain anchored. So despite her leaden arms, and wooden legs, Michonne dragged herself into action. She found her way into the bathroom, got herself showered, dressed, and pulled her shit together. Charlotte needed to be fed, needed to be in school in one hour.

'So Get- moving,' the voice within scolded.

And now, here she was… sitting in Glenn Rhee's office. With legs crossed, her eyes glazed over the silver-framed, family photo resting in her hand. She'd been called in to see him. But at the moment, standing with his back to her, the irritated man was on the phone with a specifically wayward client.

"Are you serious? Hey, buddy… your books aren't balancing because we need more information… What do you mean on what? … The invoices you dumbass! Listen, if you can't account— hey, hey are you listening to me? Martinez! I said that if you can't account for those purchases, then we can't help you… Yeah? Well maybe you should find another firm. We'll mail everything out tomorrow, so don't even bother coming by to pick anything up!" He promptly ended the call.

"You did the right thing." Michonne supported, replacing the picture frame back on top of his modern styled desk, which Maggie, his ex-secretary and present wife, picked out for him. As a matter of fact, she picked out all of the furniture for the entire office— Thank god. Without her input, Mr. Rhee would never have cared to know the importance of investing in ergonomic chairs for the sake of his employees. "He's a waste of time."

"Not to mention billable hours." Glenn dumped the phone into its dock, and waltzed over to his mini-fridge. Opening it, he then took out an apple. "Want one?"

With a half-smile she shook her head and declined.

"Listen…" Lowering his eyes in defeat, he closed the door and trudged back over to her. "… You know Maggie and I, we have a lot on our plates with the babies and everything. But you're like family… and that's why we really tried the best that we could to help you get Angelo's."

"And I appreciate that." When she proposed the idea to them of investing into the restaurant, the Rhees were more than ecstatic to join in the venture with her.

"But with the bank, these faltering clients—"

"Things were slow, I know. Don't beat yourself up about it." Grasping the hand rests, she pulled
forward, readying to get up and leave. "Besides it's done now."

"Michonne why don't you, just take the day? Actually, I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."
Stretching his arm out, he offered the apple again which he still held in his hand.

Both the disappointment, which weighed on her like a boulder, and the lack of sleep, were apparently starting to take their toll, and Mr. Rhee could see it. The piercing pain in her head, a burning sensation in the pit of her stomach, and her reddening eyes, all added to her irritability that was steadily growing as the sickening minutes crawled by. It was the third hour into the work-day, and she couldn't see herself making it till five. But then what? Leave early? Go home and…

mindlessly prepare dinner? Help Charlie with her homework? Take a bath, read a book, fall asleep…
get back up and start all over again? It wasn't enough. She needed more…

The chance to own Angelo's was her dream of having more…

And to top it all off, like icing on the cake, a nagging regret over him plagued her.

No – Staying busy and keeping her mind pre-occupied, was her best option. Michonne reached over Mr. Rhee's desk and accepted his offering. "I'm going to get Johnson's documents finished up for his taxes."

"Michonne…" Glenn tried to stop her when she flew up from the chair to take her leave. But as soon as she opened his door, Karen, her co-worker stood on the other side.

"Look, I answered it," she said, handing over Michonne's phone to her.

"Who is it?" she asked drearily.

It was Rick.

Despite her desolated frame of mind, with a soft tone, Michonne tried her best to dissuade him, from meeting up for coffee. "Today's not a good day for me. I'm not in a particularly talkative mood." Her voice was thick with dejection. Still, the man insisted that he had some things to say. He just needed to see her, he pled, if only for a few minutes.

Observing the exchange, her friend stepped over and proceeded to take the phone from her hand, mid-conversation. "Hello… this is her boss… Yeah, listen don't worry about it, she'll be there in 15 minutes." He then hung up.

Michonne stared at him in disbelief. "What was that?"

"You don't have to go for the whole day— But as your friend, I'm telling you to just take a break."

"You don't even know who that was."

"Yeah well he sounded like someone you could talk to. So go. I'll handle Johnson's file."

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Rick anxiously walked through the southwest entrance of Woodruff park at the small public chess court. It didn't take him long to sought her out with his eyes, amongst the other passersby. Standing there, curiously studying the skilled players maneuver their pieces, Michonne was hard to miss.

Gritting his teeth, Rick braved forward, and approached her. "You play?"

That husky voice shifted something deep within her, she fought it's demand to claim all of her
attention. "Not in the least. You?"

"Nah. Not my cup of tea. Or should I say coffee? Here," He handed her a steaming hot paper cup of the freshly roasted brew. "This is for you."

"Thanks." She accepted, whilst quickly glancing at him.

As he positioned himself by her side, they stood there for a beat or two in prickly silence.

"Uh…” Summoning the courage to speak, Michonne then turned to fully face him. He was dressed in a black puffer jacket, over a navy blue V-neck sweater, with his white shirt collar peeking out. Was this his usual office attire? In any case, her questioning eyes never met his. "Could we just walk for a bit?"

"Sure."

They strolled through the busy park, accepting each other's quiet company as they made their way along the winding path.

Sipping on her coffee, Michonne's eyes focused on every step she took, on every person who walked by.

Sipping on his beverage, his eyes focused on her. Noticing the withdrawn and solemn expression she wore, her mood definitely left a lot to be desired. "You umm, you okay?"

She shrugged.

He'd spent the better part of his night thinking about her, and how wrong things went for them. It didn't sit too well with him. Was it the same for her? Was that the reason for her sullen disposition? Or… was she dwelling on something else? Someone else? "This have anything to do with your brother from last night?"

Her feet halted. "On the phone, you said you had some things to say," and she said that she was not inclined to hold any long discussions, or had he forgotten?

Rick was not a man of eloquent words… nothing deeply profound. He only had his truth, which was… "I'm, I'm sorry… about everythang. It was a… crazy date. And I wanted you to know that."

Michonne trailed her gaze up to finally meet his. "No…” she sighed, her shoulders slumping even further. "I'm sorry. I guess we both, had… expectations."

Rick nodded in agreement. His expectations were high, and hers were… misguided. "I think I misunderstood, and again I'm sorry 'bout that. Just wanted you, to be in the moment, with me. Cause that's… that's all I got— all I can offer." He liked her, but didn't think past merely finding some enjoyment with her.

For Michonne, her desire was not for him to make any changes, not for her sake— they hardly knew each other. Feelings of attraction were there, that she wouldn't deny, but… "I'm not really good at this either," she admitted. "Not anymore. Or maybe, I never was."

A grin spread across his face. "You don't say? So you've probably sabotaged all of your dates thus far."

Her brows drew together. "Meaning?"
"Meaning I've never had a woman run from me before because they thought that I'm too handsome, too intense. That my dear was a first."

Michonne was unable to control the curving of her full lips. "Then why do they usually run from you?" She took a jab at him.

"Now I never said that… I never said that they did at all. Don't go twisting my words..." he chuckled. "If it's anythang, it's usually the opposite – "

Her eyes narrowed in amusement. "What, that they run to you?" Accosted by a brisk wind, Michonne shivered, clutching her grey trench coat at her chest.

Rick observed her fingerling the loose buttons on the jacket, "You said it Ms. Des Vignes, I did not," he smirked, taking another sip of his drink.

"Yeah right. If you say so." She continued along the path, and he followed right along with her, neither saying anything else. When the levity of the moment passed, the glumness returned to her face.

"Michonne, tell me what happened last night… afterwards." He may have been out of line to demand, rather than ask, what was going on, but how could he not find out what was troubling this woman?

Contemplating for a moment, Michonne, with a heavy sigh, confessed. "Angelo's was sold. It's gonna get shut down and then demolished. Tried to prevent it from happening… but I couldn't… It's happening." Her regret touched every word that tumbled out of her mouth, and Rick swallowed hard to control his response. After what took place at the restaurant, his arms unwillingly remained locked at his sides. He preferred not to cross any lines yet again.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he simply offered. "It's a shame really. Have any idea why?"

"Because Negan is an ungrateful son-of-a-bitch."

"Negan? He's the owner?"

"Yeah. The place isn't even mine, but I could feel the love of generations reverberate through my soul every time I walk through those doors. How could he not feel that? How could he be so disloyal to his own legacy?" Menacing tears shimmered in her eyes.

"I don't know. Maybe there's bad blood there." He tried to rationalize.

"Only in his veins. Mr. DeLuca was a good man. Negan's not like you… he doesn't care about his father. He's a self-serving twit!" Her tone was bitter. So many memories at Angelo's connected her to her own parents. It was almost like losing them both a second time around.

Drawing in a deep breath, Michonne went silent once more, and subsequently, so did Rick… permitting her to retreat within herself, so she could grant her frustrations leeway to gnaw away at her insides.

Eventually, Rick led her over to a bench where they sat for awhile. Maintaining a practical distance, he watched her watch other people passing by, and as he brought his now warm drink to his mouth, savoring the richness of its flavor, it occurred to him that she hadn't been doing the same. "Hey." Jutting his chin out, he gestured to the cup fixed in her hand. "That's gonna be cold pretty soon. Not sweet enough for yuh?"
"No it's fine. Just thinking is all."

"About?"

Michonne set the cup down next to where she sat, and swiped a gloved hand over her face. "About nothing… and about everything." If that made any sense. Lack of sleep was forcing it's effects upon her. She felt muddled.

'This man must think I'm crazy.'

Rick, however, nodded his head in understanding.

"I told you I wouldn't be much company today. You, you should get back, I'm sure you've got a lot of work to tend to."

"Do you think I should?"

She gave him a once-over, Michonne had no idea what he was hinting at. But it wasn't necessary at all for him to waste his time sitting there... just staring at her the way he had been… as though she was in need of a babysitter. "Well, I have a lot of work waiting for me, so…” Retrieving her cup, she got up off of the bench.

Rick followed suit. "Let me walk you out then, to the corner or something."

"No. I'm okay. Really." She was a bit sad yes, but she was still a big girl. Que sera, sera and all that shit. She allowed him to see some vulnerability, but now, she had to get over it — had to simply move on. His piercing eyes regarded her as though she was about to break apart in front of him. It irked her.

Yet, he insistantly fell into step beside her.

Rick realized that her armor was back on. She was attempting to get away from him. "I just want to make sure that you're good— that we're good." It was important to him. "Especially after last night."

Weren't they passed that? "Yeah well... maybe I let my fears get the better of me." Shrugging slightly.

"It happens," he acknowledged. In a way, she was being proactive. Rick quietly laughed to himself at the thought. "So—"

"So I should just focus on what I do have. Charlotte and I, we're good. And when the timing is right…then everything will naturally fall in to place."

"Well you made the right call then…" he conceded, casting his gaze towards the icy water wall they now stopped in front of. "… we should just be friends… Even if you find me extremely attractive," Rick nodded his head and grinned.

Another stiff breeze blew through the park, and again she shivered. "Alright already. You are just letting that go to your head aren't you?"

Dumping his half-drunk cup in the bin close by, Rick then reached over and fastened her top button. "I'm just playing with yuh." Besides, how else was he going to get over the sting of her rejecting him... especially without just cause.

With her muscles stiffening, Michonne reminded herself to breathe. "Thank you."
He bit his lower lip and nodded.

"So comfortable with who you are, aren't you? Just doing you... I guess I envy that. You're in a good place. It's just that I've..." she sighed, fixing her gaze low. "... I've been hurt," more like discarded, if she was being completely honest. "Made the wrong choice... wasn't a one off either, and I have no one to blame but myself."

"Well you shouldn't. How long you gonna do that for?"

Tilting her chin up, she peered at him, not having an answer for him.

"We all make questionable choices. So it doesn't matter. And me... let's just say, that I'm not in a good place either. You were wrong about that." Rick hovered closer to her. "Listen, Michonne... I've, I've been hurt as well. Sometimes people don't turn out to be who you'd hoped they'd be. But that's just sometimes."

His sober admittance moved her. Reaching over, she placed her hand on his and gave him a gentle squeeze. "Thank you." That was what... the third, the fourth time she'd said that to him for the day? It didn't matter... because in each instance she'd meant it.

"For what?"

"For this." She needed this— to vent, to apologize... to get some free caffeine. "I'm glad you called."

"And I'm glad you came."

"You're a good listener Rick."

"Well you're easy to listen to." He arched a brow and smirked.

Michonne gave him a sidelong look through her lashes, a small smile of pleasure touching the corners of her mouth. "I forgot you like to win."

Even as he teased her, his expression softened. "I'm so sorry about the restaurant. I truly am."

Closing her eyes, she shook her head at the unfortunate loss, for a few moments she somehow forgot that she was in pain. "Yeah, me too." Taking out her phone from her coat pocket, the time let her know that her break was over and done. Looking across at him with regret, "I have to go now," she sighed. Taking a few steps backwards away from him, "See you around Rick. We should do it again sometime." She waved and turned away.

"Soon?" He called out behind her.

Michonne blushed to herself. "Pretty soon."

Standing at his window, Rick's office on the twenty-sixth floor gifted him with a spectacular view of the city, as it spread out before him in all of its complexities. With the sun sinking low behind the clouds, it leaked purple and pink hues across the lengthy sky — That, together with the flickering lights of the building traffic, let him know exactly what time it was, without him having to look at his watch. Back erect, hands on his hips, varying thoughts and questions were racing through his mind.

"Ricky," called Dale Grimes, his father, who sat in Rick's chair behind his desk. "We have two more years with Mr. Scroll. Thankfully, I've been here to put up with his B.S. for the majority of our
contract. But I need to know that when I'm gone, you can handle him on your own."

"Don't worry Dad. I know how to deal with Gregory." Leaving the fate of the company in his hands was a huge step. His father knew damn well that he was more than capable of running the ship successfully. "He won't be a problem."

"I'm just concerned son. My retirement is coming up real fast... and well, everything is gonna rest on your shoulders."

Rick turned and squinted his eyes at the mature man. "I, can, handle, it."

"Because you know nothing is set in stone. I could uh... push back for another six months."

Rick chuckled at his Father's predictability. His whole line of questioning was rooted in the man's insatiable appetite for work. He couldn't fault him though—he admired him for it. Hell, in a lot of ways he was just like him. "Yeah well, Mother would have both our necks. No... Everythang will be okay. I guarantee that."

Mr. Grimes shook his head and held his son's stare. "But you can't Rick... nothing in this whole damn world is ever a guarantee." He then pushed himself up from the leather chair. "Anyways... I should get going. And oh, your mother is now having a big retirement soiree."

"Soiree? Since when?"

"Since she invited almost everyone we know. You know how much she loves hosting parties on my dime. We have caterers, a band, decorators—"

"And a cake?"

"You bet your ass there's gonna be cake. I wouldn't have signed the cheque without it. You should uh... bring someone, anyone really."

Rick shot his father a knowing look. Grimes senior was conspicuously fishing for info.

But Grimes junior didn't take the bait. He folded his arms across his chest, returning his attentions to the darkening skyline. "It's getting thick out there. Better get a move on."

Mr. Grimes took the hint and bid his son farewell, but not before encouraging him to hit the road and head home also.

"Nah I got some things to take care of— some things to look into. I'll see you tomorrow."

Rick heard the click of his door as it opened and saw the reflection of a tall, fairly good looking man with reddish-brown, curly hair, and a well trimmed beard to match. It was Aaron, his assistant.

"Yeah tomorrow," said his father, just as he left them both behind.

"Hey boss, what's this?"

Rick turned and took note of the single piece of paper the younger gentleman held in his hand.

"This email you sent me... What am I supposed to do with this?"

"It's a new venture for us to look into."

"Are you sure? I only ask because your father usually is quite apprehensive about these types of
investments… as they typically fail."

"It's being sold. Gonna get shut down, and then demolished," he repeated verbatim. "I need to know exactly why and if we can prevent it."

"With all due respect Sir, but, what do you know about the restaurant business?"

"Not a damn thing Aaron. But that's what I pay you for."

"Rick this is gonna take us some time."

That he already knew. Leaning his head to the side, he took in a deep breath, "Well let's get started then." Perching himself on the edge of his desk, Rick reached over and grabbed up his office phone. "Go. Call home. I'll call for Chinese."

Aaron drew in a long breath and then huffed. "Yes boss." Surrendering to another late night at the office.
Chapter 6: "It's finally happening."

Aaron stood behind his boss' solid wooden desk, in front of a large round mirror, analyzing the image staring back at him. "Rick it's not too late you know… we can still back out of this." He adjusted his tie for the umpteenth time, and patted the sides of his perfectly set hair. "Right now, we, can still walk away."

A muscle in Rick's jaw twitched, as he paced the grey carpeted floor. "No. No we're not doing that. This is happening."

"You read my report right?" Turning around, Aaron opened the blue file he held in his hand, and began to restate the statistics. "Sixty – Sixty percent of restaurant endeavors, fail within the first three years…"

"That's only relevant if it's a brand new startup."

"The profit margins…" he persisted, "…Rick, for the past five years Angelo's has had serious issues with their growth – Inflation, the other, half-dozen or so, Italian restaurants that sprang up in their vicinity, not to mention that unscrupulous character that's been running the place…" Exasperated, Aaron dropped the file on top of Rick's desk, shaking his head at the impracticality of pursuing such an undertaking. "It all just makes this so… unattractive."

"Alright stop." Rick held out his open palm to him as he came to a standstill. "I know, okay. I know all that. I read it, I did."

"Then why are we taking this risk?"

His assistant's apprehension was logical. After all, the firm had always had a reputation for being on the conservative side. They took pride in maintaining a strict code where their business transactions were concerned.

Unbeknownst to Aaron, however, was that his boss' decision, in that instance, was being driven by a different code. And so, no matter how many pages of data he presented to him, Rick's mind was already made up.

"Our lawyers – Mrs. Jacqui Jones…she's the best, and she thinks we can do this. Besides, I told you… Ms. Des Vignes is a friend."

"A friend…" he scoffed.

Tilting his head at Aaron's impertinence, Rick narrowed his eyes at him. "What?"

Aaron cast his glance out of Rick's office window, witnessing the level of activity below in the streets. "I'm just … I mean so now we're doing business with our friends?" he sighed, whilst shrugging his lean shoulders.

Rick nodded, "This is the right thing to do okay." He then moved to collect his jacket from the back of his chair, slipped it on, and walked out of his office into the narrow corridor. Making a right, Rick then strode towards his conference room.
"Think about it…" Aaron softened his tone as he trailed behind him. "…We hound our clients so that they make back our money for us. After this, you two aren't going to be friends for much longer."

Rick drew in a sharp breath and paused, wondering if what Aaron just said could turn out to be true. "Yeah… we'll see." Still, with confidence born of careful planning, Rick Grimes then slid open the large glass doors, and entered the meeting room.

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"Where the hell is she?" roared Mr. DeLuca, as he swiveled his chair to come face to face with Rick. His antagonizing eyes regarded him with little patience. "Are we gonna start this or what?" His tone dripped with disdain.

"It's already been a half hour," noted Mr. Dwight Harvey, Negan's attorney, who sat just to the right of his client. "I'm sure you're all aware that we have until five p.m. to do this, right? His deadline for his rescission clause is today."

"Yes Mr. Harvey," Mrs. Jones responded, as Aaron took a seat next to her at the other end of the oval shaped desk. "We're all well aware."

"… and I told you, two minutes ago, that she's on her way. So calm the hell down would you," scolded the woman who stood over at the window, nursing a hot cup of coffee.

Rick locked his eyes with hers as she glanced at him over her shoulder. "But we can always give Ms. Des Vignes another call," he placated. "Just to see how far away she might be… can't we Ms. Harrison?"

Andrea rolled her eyes. "Sure, Mr. Grimes. We can."

Rick ambled his way towards her, watching as she pulled out her cell phone.

"You know that we're practically ambushing her right?" Andrea warned in a hushed voice, not wanting Negan, who was also quietly conversing with his lawyer, to overhear their conversation. As far as he was concerned, Michonne herself was the driving force behind this negotiation.

"No it's a surprise. This is a good thing. It's what she wanted."

Andrea knew better, "Not like this Rick. There's a chance she might just walk away."

"And there's a chance that she may not. You told me that this is her dream."

"It is," which was the only reason why she agreed to help him with this scheme in the first place. When Andrea got a call from Rick, inquiring if she was involved in Michonne's business plan for Angelo's, "Of course," she didn't hesitate to confirm. "I did that bad boy up myself. It's solid." Despite her reservations, the idea of gifting this opportunity to her well-deserving friend motivated her to concede to be a part of Rick's secret arrangement.

But at that moment, "And what do you get out of it?" Andrea found herself more uneasy about the whole thing. "You know what, forget that I asked… Just know that I am not here for you to pull one over on my friend."

Rick observed the petite woman's blue eyes turn a steely grey as she leered at him. Her warning was more of a threat.
"You and Jacqui went over the contract didn't you? I'm not that kind of guy." He tried to allay her doubts.

"Then what kind of guy are you Rick? Cause this is some bold shit. You two barely know each other. Bending her arm to place it on her hip, Andrea leaned her head to the side. "I did my research on you –""

"Good. Means you're a great lawyer."

A great lawyer indeed – Her firm's investigator did a thorough check on both him and his father's company. And even though everything seemed to be on the up and up, where their business practices were concerned, a nagging sensation in her gut wouldn't let up… A sixth sense, her bulldog instincts… or whatever it was, told her that Rick Grimes, had something up his sleeve.

"No, it means that I'm a damn good friend." She moved closer to him, and pointed a finger in his face. "So just watch it." Andrea turned and placed her cup down on the table. "I'm gonna go call her again."

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'21… 22… 23…'

Michonne's eyes were peeled to the floor indicator lights, that flashed red above the brass colored elevator doors.

As the cabin traveled it's way upwards, she felt excited, and wary, at the very same time, yet, more flustered than anything else. How was it possible that Negan wanted to renegotiate – Just like that? Taking in a slow, deep breath, Michonne clutched the brown folder in her arms, against her chest, her lungs burning from hustling about to get everything in order. In her haste, she didn't take the time to extract much information from Andrea. But having faith in her friend prompted her to take action accordingly.

'26. Ding.'

The doors opened up, and she stepped out into a long empty hallway. Michonne glanced to her right, and then peered to her left. It was quiet. There was no one. But what did she expect? She stood there, for a moment, alone with a single door before her.

'GEDC Ltd.'

Her eyes ran over the gold capital letters emblazoned on the entrance. She suddenly became aware, of a prickly sensation, along the back of her neck. With it came a lurch in her stomach. Michonne was now more wary than anything else.

Despite that, she braved forward and pressed the intercom.

"Hello," came a cheery voice through the rectangular speaker.

"Yes Hi. I'm here for a meeting with Ms. Andrea Harrison and Mr. Negan DeLuca."

In an instant, the door buzzed and Michonne pushed her way through.

An olive-skinned woman, with dark curly hair, greeted her from behind her curved receptionist desk.

"Ms. Michonne Des Vignes?"
"Umm, yes."

"You can go right ahead, straight through those doors and make a left. They're waiting for you."

Nodding her appreciation, Michonne proceeded to follow the simple instructions, the knot at her core tightening with every step she made.

"Oh thank god." Andrea accosted her as soon as she entered the narrow corridor. "Where have you been?"

Handing over her paperwork, "You said you needed this. It took me awhile." Michonne sighed in relief at the sight of her friend.

"Oh I know, I know."

"So… tell me… What's going on? Why is Negan doing this? And who the hell is GEDC?"

"Uh, umm, you see…" Andrea, in spite of all her 'lawyery' skills, in that instant, fumbled for words. Clearing her throat, she pulled at the collar of her blouse, about to start again.

Just then, out of the corner of her eyes, Michonne caught sight of a handsome face, staring directly at her, through a semi-frosted glass door, at the other end of the hallway. Then recognition dawned on her face. "Andrea. What the hell is going on?" Her dark eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What did you do?"

"Mich, okay…I can explain. Just listen…"

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Rick grabbed his assistant's arm, "Just excuse us," he said, to their "guests", while dragging Aaron out of the room.

"What's going on Rick?"

Rick jutted his chin over at the woman who stood conversing with Andrea. "She's here."

"Wait…" The corners of Aaron's eyes crinkled as he quickly studied Ms. Des Vignes. Dressed in a white blazer with black trim, and a pair black slacks, the striking woman had her locs pulled neatly back into a fishtail braid, fashioned with a pair of dark shades resting on the top of her head. "That's your friend?" he whispered, lifting an eyebrow at him. "Oh Rick." Aaron's mouth curved up and his pale cheeks reddened. "Oh Sir."

"What? Stop grinning like a dam cat."

"You old dog! It all makes sense now…" He shook his head, "Why the hell didn't you tell me?" Raising his hands together in a steeple, Aaron placed his fingertips to his lips. "Oh my god…Thank you Jesus." He was beaming. "Eric and I have had so many discussions about this… And it's finally happening."

"What? What's happening?" Wait, why were him and Eric even discussing him in the first place? Rick squinted his eyes in confusion, unsure on how to respond. "Aaron I, I don't know, what you're talking about, but –"

"It's okay, it's okay." Aaron grasped Rick by his shoulders and fixed his determined gaze on his, "Don't you worry Sir. We, are going, to get this restaurant." He then turned his boss around, to face
his 'friend', who happened to be boring her eyes into him just then. "...No matter what it takes. I have your back."

Michonne and Andrea began to march over to him, but he met her half way.

"I'll give you two a minute," volunteered Andrea. "Aaron and I will get things started."

"Okay thanks," Michonne nodded, without looking away from him.

Unable to discern the meaning behind her stern expression, Rick's heart started to race.

"So this is why I haven't heard from you? You've been busy," she interrogated, whilst adjusting the strap of her bag.

"I have." He couldn't help but smile a little upon hearing that she missed him. "I think I've found a way to save your place."

"Yeah well, Andrea's said as much. And you... your company, is willing to supplement the balance of funds?"

Folding his arms across his chest, he nodded. "Yes. We are. With the uh... projected net profit, and having a look at Angelo's total assets, we'll be expecting a 15% return on the investment for the first year and then—"

"Yeah I know how this works," she huffed, but immediately regretted her tone of annoyance. Lowering her head, Michonne tried her damndest to keep calm and collected at being completely blindsided. "Look. Just tell me what this is." Her tone of voice was soft and inhibited. Clearly, it had to be more than an investment, because Rick, unsolicited, went above and beyond. So she needed to know... "Is this a gift? A partnership? A—"

"A good deed." With his brows raised, he stepped closer to her. "It was the right thing to do." There was no doubt in his mind about that.

She shook her head in disbelief, lifting her narrowed eyes at him, in an effort to detect the truth. "That's all?"

Her perplexity was understandable. If it were the other way around, Rick probably would have been just as suspicious, just, as, hesitant... maybe even more so, given the situation. His gaze faltered. "You're just gonna have to trust me Michonne," he shrugged. But why though? Why should he expect her to have any amount of confidence in him, especially at such short notice? Especially as he went about making arrangements behind her back? Their encounter had to mean something. Of that he was certain. Rick wanted... maybe even needed, to have her in his life to find out what it was-- One way or the other. Or, could it have been that he felt driven to prove that her notions about him were wrong?

Michonne's shoulders fell at his request. Strangely enough though, there was little resistance within her to do just that... to trust him -- This out of the ordinary man she hardly knew. With pursed lips, she drew in a long, deep, breath. Again, she would brave forward. "I'm here..."

"Michonne, you can't be serious?"

"...So I guess I'm gonna have to."

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"I know this sounds insane," said Rick, reclining in his leather chair, his hand gesturing towards the open file Aaron placed before him.

With a deep-seated scowl Negan pounded his fist on top of the desk "You damn right it does," he hollered, his dark eyes blazed with anger. "You expect me to turn my back on five million for just one? This is bullshit."

Rick shrugged as the corners of his mouth twitched down. "You don't have a choice..." he drawled, with a tilt of his head. "Or else you're looking at being sued for fraud Mr. DeLuca. You'll be made into a scandal when all of your dirty laundry comes spilling out. And you don't want that now do you? Not to mention that you'd be so wrapped up in court you won't see a single penny."

Mrs. Jones, positioned to the left of Rick, interjected. "You've been embezzling funds, on top of misleading your brother—"

"Half brother," Negan insisted with a hiss.

"Whatever, you basically coerced him into signing this contract from S.A.M.," she continued. "He has no desire to see his father's establishment bulldozed to the ground, despite what relationship, or lack thereof, there may have been between him and his father."

Negan shot up and his chair flew back. "It's not my fault he's a simple-minded fool."

Mr. Harvey grabbed his client's arm. "Shut-up Negan. Sit down."

But the foul-tempered man yanked away from him. "This is outrageous. Besides, where's your proof?"

"Sir, Owen Singh is more than willing to fly out to Atlanta to testify that you tricked him," Andrea said.

"Yeah well we'll see about that."

Dumbfounded, Michonne sat in silence for most of the meeting. It came as a complete shock to her that Negan's father secretly had another child from an extra-marital affair with a woman who was also married, no less. Not being able to have much of a hand in Owen Singh's life, the guilt-ridden man, apparently willed the restaurant to both of his sons. However, Negan strong armed his half-brother—bullied him and terrorized him, until he agreed to sign over his rights, to his share of the property. To make matters worse, Negan cheated by promising to pay out, a mere fraction from his five-million dollar deal, not even disclosing that the property was to be closed and torn down.

"I think it's best if you listened to your lawyer Mr. DeLuca," Rick encouraged. "We're doing this now... Take the deal, rescind S.A.M.'s offer, and we'll wire you your share of the money first thing tomorrow morning."

"And that'll be that?" inquired Mr. Harvey. "No lawsuits?"

"You're a god-damn waste of time Dwight." Negan growled.

Encouraged by the look of defeat that clouded the attorney's eyes, Rick leaned forward, placing both elbows on top of the table. "No, no lawsuits. S.A.M. and Associates don't need to know the real reason for you backing out."

"It's in your client's best interests. He just has to sign over the ownership to Ms. Des Vignes, and walk away," added Andrea.
Negan's glare shifted over to Michonne. "You, have no idea what you're getting yourself into. You may be smart, sweetheart, but the commitment is insurmountable… and I don't think you could honestly handle this kind of business."

Leaning back into her chair, Michonne crossed her legs and huffed out a breath. "Do you really care?"

He chuckled lightly, "You're right… I don't. Dwight hand me a pen and let's get outta here. Sherry's waiting for me."

Andrea then wheeled her chair closer to her client. "Congratulations Mich," she whispered in her ear, trying to contain her glee. "You're now the proud new owner of your very own restaurant... Not to mention about a million dollars in debt as well."

"I know," Michonne whispered back, with a large grin, also attempting to conceal her excitement. "I can't believe this worked."

"C'mon, after this, we're gonna go get a drink."

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Paul Rovia, the talented, yet humble, head chef of Angelo's, Michonne was being introduced to each member of the kitchen staff as they all gathered around a couple of the dining tables, for their morning briefing. His long dusty-brown hair was pulled up into high 'man bun', which emphasized his gorgeous long lashes, and his beautiful icy blue eyes.

He linked his arm with hers. "Michonne I think… actually, I know, that I speak for everyone here when I say that we are truly grateful, and thrilled, to have this opportunity to work with you. We all know how much you cherish this place, just as much as we do. Mr. Adamo DeLuca, who first hired me, meant a lot to me. And so it's an honor to have you not just join our family, but also to take the lead in steering this ship towards greatness."

Her fingers grasped his upper arm. "Geez Paul, you're laying it on pretty thick there aren't you?" she smirked.

The crew erupted in laughter.

"Noah wrote that last part for me," he confessed, red faced. "I'm not good with introductions."

A slender hand belonging to a young man sitting right before her, shot up. "He needs a raise," Noah explained amid everyone's chuckling.

"I think you all do," Michonne acknowledged. "But… that would come with time, and of course patience. But really, the honor is mine. And I appreciate the warm welcome, I really do. It'll make all the hard work ahead of me that more enjoyable. So, without further ado… Paul, why don't you go ahead and get started?" She took a seat next to Noah, leaving them to commence their meeting.

"Okay. Rosita would you mind starting us off with the appetizers?"

A petite latina then stood up, and dazzled a gracious smile at the new boss. "Well today for our entrée special, we're offering baked mushroom caps, filled with feta cheese and spinach, drizzled with garlic butter basil sauce. And I think, we can recommend the Pasta Cosa Nostra as the main course to follow."

"Sounds good to me," Michonne nodded, genuinely impressed. "Then again just the garlic bread
with a glass of Merlot is top notch dining in my book, so…” Once more, her own personal dig brought about another wave of giggles.

Just then, Rick showed up, and Michonne didn’t hesitate to excuse herself from the lively group.

Her reaction at seeing him there surprised her – She went full flush. "Checking up on your investment?" she greeted in elation.

"Yeah something like that." Smiling just as brightly, he extended his hand to her. But, she bypassed it, in preference for a quick hug, stunning him for a moment in the process.

"Um, would you like to meet the staff?" she gestured to the group dressed in white seated a few tables behind her. "I mean you should, of course. But the uh waiters aren't here yet, so…"

"That's okay. We'll bring them up to speed later when they do."

"We?"

"Uh yeah. I thought that I would stick around…give you a hand in getting settled in."

"Rick," she threw her head to the side. "… We went over my business plan, you know you don't have to worry, right?" Michonne admired his sweet concern.

"I'm not worried. But…” taking a moment to choose his words carefully, Rick rocked back onto one leg and stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "Listen… I know that Negan, he may be an ass—"

"The biggest."

"But I think he had a point." Rick turned away, glancing back at her sideways.

"Excuse me?"

Moving a hand to massage the back of his neck, "Michonne you need to be hands on to successfully run a restaurant," he tried to explain himself succinctly.

Knitting her brows together, her elation steadily being replaced by irritation. "I did my home-work, you don't need to tell me what I need to do. This isn't some fly by night hobby Rick. I quit my job. I'm here, fully dedicated to this." She stepped back to create some distance. "I thought, I thought that, that was understood."

"That may be so Michonne. But what experience do you exactly have in running a business? It ain't no picnic."

"I can recite the numbers for you backwards and forwards—"

"Yes," he interrupted. "Having a career in accounting helps. But I'm the one whose whole adult life has been about running a company. So I think it's best if I'm here from day to day. Just to help."

Her indignation at his lack of confidence in her grew by the second. Still… Taking in a deep breath, she tried to regain her calm. Michonne locked her arms around herself, reasoning that that was Rick's attempt at being supportive… He wanted to render some measure of assistance, and yes, his firsthand knowledge on the ins and outs of business functions, would prove to be valuable.

'Alright Michonne, alright. Just don't overreact.'

"You asked me to trust you… and I do. But, please, won't you return the favor?" she asked.
"I do. I may not know much about you, but I can tell you're quite capable. But again… I just think that, you're in, way, over, your head."

His tone was cautious and low, as though he were speaking to someone on the verge of exploding.

"What did you just say?"

And he was right.

"Over my head?" she exploded. "I cannot believe you."

"Don't be like that Michonne."

Her arms flung out to her sides. "How am I being?"

"You're not hearing me."

"I am livid! So screw you. You haven't even given me a chance."

Rick clenched his jaw at her stubbornness. "You may not like it, but this is how it's gonna be. We'll make this work. We'll keep this place going."

"Don't you have a job already?"

"I can do both." He shrugged. "That's something you'll come to learn about me."

"Oh that's right. You always win don't you?" His cockiness was palpable.

"That's right I do. I don't take chances, that's not how I operate. And I can't lose on this investment. It's not personal."

"No…"

'That's right. Reality check Michonne.'

"…it's just business," she muttered.

"So…” Rick moved closer to her with narrowed eyes, and her entire body stiffened, as she glowered at him. He felt his pores raised under the burning intensity of her stare. Lowering his eyes, Rick appreciated how her dark red blouse complemented her fury. "Are you going to introduce me? Or do I have to introduce myself?"

Choosing not to give him a verbal response, knowing that if she did, her words would've been highly uncouth, Michonne instead turned and stalked away, making a beeline towards the office.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Rick drew in a slow, deep breath. That couldn't have gone more horribly wrong, even if he tried. "This will work. It has to," he quietly reassured himself. Then, rolling his shoulders back, he proceeded to waltz over to the half dozen pair of eyes that had been gaping at them all along. Clearing his throat, he grasped the knot of his tie. Then, extending his hand to each of them, he introduced himself. "Hi. I'm Rick."
Michonne's day was not off to a good start.

"Oh no." Her stomach clenched as she checked her wristwatch. "Charlotte come on let's go."

"Just give me two more minutes," her child hollered, still bustling about upstairs in her room.

Already over a half hour late, she had no one to blame but herself. Due to fatigue, Michonne overslept, and now, she found herself running behind schedule, which, suffice it to say, she was not too pleased about. And on that day, of all days, there was an important appointment carded for first thing in the morning. Despite the strong temptation to call Rick, and ask him to kindly postpone the meeting in preference for an extra hour or two in bed, knowing exactly what his response would be, was enough to deter her from entertaining the idea any further.

It had been almost three weeks since she'd started working with him and he'd been nothing short of demanding. Michonne found herself double checking, second guessing, every single decision she'd made. He kept her on her toes, so to speak, not allowing her to drop the ball.

But in the numerous hours they'd spent together, she'd come to know his different moods quite well. What made him grin victoriously, and what made him frown disappointedly. Right now, with her being this late, she could just about imagine the scowl plastered across his ruggedly handsome face.

Having his help did give her deeper perspective though. His business etiquette and the standards he upheld were admirable if she had to admit. His loyalty to her, business-wise, and to Angelo's was undeniable. It somehow gave her extra confidence that this endeavor was bound to be a great success. Still, his zealous ambition was one she could barely keep up with. Hence her weariness. Nonetheless, she needed to get going. Checking that her makeup and outfit were both just right, once last time, "Charlotte! I'm in the car," she announced, more than ready to leave her house.

Anxious to hit the road, Michonne hustled towards the front the door and reached for the knob. Her fingers were nearly there when the harsh ringing of her cell phone suddenly demanded her immediate attention.

"Please don't be Rick. Anyone but him," she muttered as she dug it out from her jacket pocket. The second she glanced at the screen, a stone fell to the pit of her stomach.

'Daryl? Really? Now?'

His timing couldn't have been any more perfect.

She considered not answering it. Time was of the essence, and not a second could've been wasted on an unpleasant discussion with her ex. Not to mention no energy. But… chances were that he may call back later at a more inopportune moment, and her day before her was too extensive to run that risk – In any case, the reality was that she hadn't heard directly from him in awhile. So, maybe this was urgent. Heavy hearted, she swiped her thumb across her screen with much apprehension.

"Hi."
"Hey," responded the gravelly voice she was all too familiar with. Michonne cleared her throat to disrupt the uneasy silence that fell between them. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing… just calling to say 'Hey'."

"Well you usually say hey by means of Charlotte, so… what do you want?"

Silence ghosted between them again.

"Daryl?" she huffed. "I'm not in the mood for any bull—"

"I'm, I'm getting married 'Chonne."

Reaching out, Michonne supported herself against the door. "Oh. Congratulations," she breathed. "… So what do you want?"

"I wanna come see Charlotte is all. Have her meet Sasha – that's her name."

Raising her hand to her face she rubbed her eyes to soothe the sudden pounding in her head. She then turned around, and unconsciously crouched to the floor, dropping her bag beside her. "Sasha huh? So you wanna bring one of your groupies to meet my child?"

"Stop it. It ain't like that. And Charlie's mine just the same. When you took her from me that didn't change."

"No I know she's yours." The girl looked more and more like her father every day. "But I didn't take her from someone who was never there."

"'Chonne I ain't call to go through all that again wit you, a'ight. I know I messed up… what's passed is past. But I need to come see my little girl."

"She ain't so little Daryl. She's growing faster than you know."

"I don't doubt it. It's been too long, and Sasha wants her to be a part of the wedding. It's important to her – having family around. She's something like you."

Michonne stood back up, unsure on how to respond. Swallowing hard, she opted to bypass his comparison. "When?"

"Is that a yes?"

She expelled a heavy breath. "It is."

"Well I appreciate that… means a lot." He was relieved.

"Just tell me when Daryl."

"I'll holla at ya just as soon as Sasha clears her schedule."

"Okay. Don't just show up at my house like before."

"Yes ma'am… hey, it's good to hear your voice. Really good."

'Don't start with me please.'

"I'll tell Charlotte you called – let her know you're coming."
"Okay."

"Goodbye Daryl."

"Goodbye Mich –"

Then she hung up on him. Her day definitely was not off to a good start.

Lifting her eyes upwards, Michonne at once caught sight of her daughter staring back at her from the top stair landing. "You were there the whole time?"

The little girl nodded. "Daddy's coming?"

"To visit, yes."

Charlotte couldn't hold back the excitement that illuminated her innocent face. "When? For how long? Will he stay with us?" Each question bubbled forth as she bounced down the stairs towards her mother.

"Soon… I'm not sure… and no, he won't be staying with us." 'Not even if I'm on my death bed.'

Wrapping her arm around her daughter's shoulders, she placed a kiss on her forehead and guided her out of the house. "Come, we'll talk more in the car."

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Michonne sat next to Rick, in a quiet manner, while he interviewed a potential new food supplier.

"So you've done how many years in prison?" asked Rick, as he leaned forward with his hands clasped on the table.

"Well now the total amount of years I spent in the big house came up to just about three years, five months and two and a half days, to be exact," the peculiar man answered.

Rick arched his brow at him. "And that's uh, just for identity theft?"

"That is correct. But I served my time seven years ago. That life is far behind me. You don't have to worry about that."

"Well I'm real glad to hear it, I am." Rick graced him with a sincere smile. "Now you came highly recommended by our chef, and I have to say Mr. Porter, so far so good."

Mr. Porter nodded. "I'm mighty pleased to hear that Mr. Rick sir. Yes me and Rovia, have become good friends as of recent. He's a good man."

"Yes he is."

Just then, the stout man rose up from where he sat, at the other of the table opposite from the pair. "So umm if you'd like I could just go get those samples we discussed – the grape seed oil and some of our vegetables." He gestured with his thumb to the storage room at the back of his store. "Just hold on and I'll be right back."

"And those testimonials… I'd like to see those as well."

"Yes of course Mr. Grimes."
In order to increase Angelo's profit margins, both Rick and Michonne miraculously agreed that it was necessary to explore a host of changes, such as, seeking a locally produced supplier that would be better suited for their needs.

Once the man was out of ear shot, Rick leaned back into his chair and turned his attentions to Michonne. "Well his prices are right on the button, and it sounds like his process of packing and delivering might be a good fit. Paul came through. What are your thoughts about it?"

Michonne shifted in her seat. "I like him. At least he's much cleaner than the guy you wanted to go with."

Rick narrowed his eyes at her quip, not because her pointed remarks were unusual, quite the opposite really, "That's it?" He'd just grown accustomed to her comments having more of a sting. This one – there was no bite to it. Studying her disposition closely, he thought about how he hadn't seen her come in that morning with her usual Vanilla latte latched in her hand. Maybe she needed it. He'd be sure to stop by the deli on their way back.

For the past couple of weeks, they disagreed on almost everything pertaining to how best to run the restaurant. From the menu, to the décor, to the stock, and even the cutbacks – they all brought about a measure of discontent between them. But on that cold morning, there was no fiery opposition… no determined resistance, not even one challenging offense. Rather, the impossibly defiant woman next to him, with whom he'd been fighting tooth and nail, on nearly every god damned front from day one, was simply sitting there… silently. Seemingly uninterested. With one hand fiddling her cell phone, while the other cupped her cheek, a distinct line ran between her brows.

Michonne was compliant, cooperative, and downright docile. Rick, he did not like it. Not in the slightest, for it meant that something must have happened, something so significant, that it held her attentions captive elsewhere, and not in the moment with him.

"Where's your book?" he inquired.

The sternness in Rick's tone jolted Michonne from her straying thoughts. "Excuse me?"

"For your notes… don't have anything to double check? No questions? Just gonna take my word for it?"

She sighed. "Do what you want… I trust you."

Rick’s eyebrows shot up. Well that's new. Her easy capitulation disconcerted him. Something was seriously wrong. And he sure as hell was going to find out about it.

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Once they made it back to the restaurant, the rest of the day was more or less the same. Michonne was distant and distracted. She was in no mood to spar with him.

"And what about my suggestion on saving capital expenditure by renting a water heater instead of replacing the old equipment with a brand new one?" Rick asked her, as she sat on the opposite side of the T-shaped desk he'd acquired for them to share in the single office. "Would you be up for that?"

Slouched in her chair, Michonne absentmindedly rubbed her gold 'M' pendant between her thumb and index finger. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" He dipped his head to catch her gaze. "So you gave it a second thought? Or…"
"Yeah I did. You ran through the risks versus the benefits?"

"You know I did."

"Then okay." Crossing and uncrossing her legs, Michonne shifted yet again, her eyes up till then had not come up to meet his.

"Okay? Then here, let me show you the list of the costs." Sifting through the small stack of papers on his side, he pulled out a manila folder and handed it to her. "You could take a look at that. Check it out and what not. Just give me a second." Pushing back his chair, he then got up and disappeared from the room.

A few minutes later, when he returned, he brought with him a small dessert plate and a bottle of Neggio, her new favorite red wine.

"Paul wanted us to try this. It's Rosita's new coffee flavored dessert. He thinks we should consider adding it to the adjusted menu."

Michonne sat up straight as soon as she spied the bottle cradled in his arms. "And the wine?"

"Uhh, just thought that we could use a break…"

She eyed him with suspicion as he set the items down to retrieve the cork screw from the desk drawer. Nonetheless, she didn't protest his gesture. A glass of wine happened to be exactly what she'd been yearning for since before she'd even left her house that morning.

Rick moved to collect two glasses from the mini-bar cart, off to the corner of the office, while Michonne perched herself sideways, on the edge of the desk, waiting in anticipation. As he filled one half-ways for her, she grasped it from him with both hands, then lifted it to her lips and took a generous swallow.

Waiting first, Rick observed how she closed her eyes, savoring the richness of the dark liquid, as it flowed over her tongue and then down through her system.

"Better?" he asked, pouring a glass for himself.

"Much." She opened her eyes and wiped the corner of her mouth. "I don't know what I did to deserve this, but thank you."

Strolling around to the other side, he then seated himself next to her.

Despite being faced away from him, she was till aware of his intense scrutiny. Suddenly nervous, she tugged at the hem of her pencil skirt.

"Michonne…"

"Yeah."

Rick drew in a deep breath. "Tell me what's wrong… please don't say it's nothing –"

"It's nothing."

"Hey." His tone lowered with earnest regard.

Her head snapped to the side, and she glimpsed back at him for a brief moment.
"I see that something's not right… I see it. You're not focused… you haven't been for the entire day. You're no good to me like this and I don't like it. So I'm here, I'm listening. Tell me what it is." Rick hoped that she would, just for an instant, let her guard down, and believe that she could trust him… believe that he wasn't out to hurt her – Honestly, it was just the opposite. Hadn't he proved that he only had her best interests at heart? Despite everything, he felt that, at the very least, they'd learned to be truthful with one another. In terms of business, yes, but why not more?

"Okay," she finally uttered, taking a swig of her drink. "It's something… but it's just a little thing."

Rick waited for the rest, but she held back. Bumping his shoulder into her back, he urged her to go on.

"Riiick," she groaned, craning her neck to frown at him.

"Go."

Michonne released a heavy breath. This was not a conversation to be had with Rick Grimes – Andrea, Uncle Morgan, Heath even, but not him.

He did have a point though. A lot was at stake at the restaurant. Everything they'd both invested couldn't come to nothing. They needed to succeed. She did. Being clouded by distractions at that point were a no-no, not even for a day. Keeping her head clear, and getting the job done was everything. She couldn't let him down.

"Charlotte's father… called me this morning." As soon as the words left her lips, her fingers raised and pressed against her temple. "He wants to visit."

"And?" he asked, as he took a mouthful from his glass.

"… and, he's bringing his new fiancée to meet her. That's all, it's nothing." She downed the remainder of the wine.

"Okay. I get it. So you're bothered by him getting remarried."

"No," she whispered. Daryl could get married a hundred times over, it wouldn't faze her in the slightest. "I'm bothered by the fact that my ex-husband is a permanent stain in my life. I know it's horrible to say but…" Turning to lean back across the table, she reached for the bottle to help herself to a refill. "…That's how I feel. I wish I could just forget the ten years I spent being in-love with him."

"But…"

"But with Charlotte, it's downright impossible Rick. And of course I love my angel with all my heart so –"

"So it's also confusing."

Nodding her head, she angled her body towards him and held out the wine. "Yeah it is."

After he allowed her to top him up, Rick watched as she rest the bottle back down behind them. Her thighs peeked out as her skirt snuck up some more.

Resettling next to him, they now sat shoulder to shoulder.

"Marriage is hard." His previous life with his own wife, was littered with problems as well. But to
regret the whole thing? Rick narrowed his eyes as he considered her. "Was it that bad?"

Michonne shook her head hard, raised her glass, and downed half of it. "Not at first, no."

"Right at the start it usually isn't."

Michonne bit her bottom lip and smiled, treating herself to the fond memory of when she and Daryl first met. But, she quickly let it go. "Only after we got married, and I left everyone and everything behind, to go and live out in California with him, that... that was the beginning of the end."

Chuckling a bit, she brought her gaze to meet his. "His job, as a musician, became his whole world. And because I loved him, and because I'd known only him since we were nineteen, I told myself that I could handle it... But I couldn't. And he couldn't. And things just got really ugly, really fast. I had never felt so lonely, and so disappointed in my entire life. I couldn't take it anymore." She shrugged her shoulders and lowered her gaze, nudging her shoes off of her feet. Dangling them on her toes for a few seconds, she then let them fall to the floor. "By the time Charlotte turned six, I signed his damned papers, I left, and I came back home... to start all over." Her voice descended into a whisper, almost as if she were choking on pain.

Rick brushed his hand across her back. "It was for the best?"

She nodded. "It reached to a point where we just couldn't hear each other anymore. Where we preferred to not even be in each other's company."

Rick nodded his understanding. "Before Lori, my wife, died, she spent much of her time at her parents' house back in King's County. Carl... he always held his mother's absence against me."

"Was he right to?"

"Maybe."

"How did she die?"

His forehead creased as he shifted his attentions to his hands. "There was an accident... a massive freeway pile-up, about thirty cars altogether." He looked back up at her. "Lori, she was finally coming home. She wanted to talk."

The grief in his voice flushed through her, and her face fell. "I'm so sorry."

Rick glanced up to the ceiling and took in a deep breath. "Yeah... that was a long time ago."

"You keep saying that."

"Well how else am I to move forward Michonne? I had to let it go. It hurt like hell, but I had to."

Setting his glass down on the other end of the table, he then reached for the dessert that was being neglected and handed it to her. "You know, you're gonna have to do the same."

Michonne took note of his pointed expression. Holding his electric gaze for a few moments, allowing the all too familiar advice to sink in. She was thrown that a man like Rick could be so perceptive, and sympathetic towards her.

"I've tried," she declared.

He raised an eyebrow at her, prompting her to look away.

"I've been with other men. I think you know that much."
"Do I now?" he chuckled.

"I told you…" Cutting a piece of Rosita's creation, she then placed it in her mouth. Her eyes rounded in delight. "Oh my. This is really good."

"Hey don't try to change the subject." Rick teased.

"Okay." Rolling her eyes at his impatience, she then straightened herself and smoothed her hand down her skirt. "So after about a year at my last job, there was a co-worker I started seeing. His name was Mike… he was tall, handsome –"

"Sounds familiar." He grinned shamelessly.

Michonne couldn't help the laugh that burst out of her. "Yes doesn't he? And quite ambitious too." She cut another piece of the dessert, turned the fork around, and fed it to him to taste.

"Mmhmm… you were right. It is good. Divine."

Her eyes lingered as he licked his lips, suddenly wondering what he tasted like. 'Divine I'm sure.'

Michonne tore her gaze away and set the plate down. Why was she allowing herself to entertain such frivolous thoughts? Must be the wine. The last thing she needed was to start anything with this man. Regardless of whatever sensations she may have been wrestling with.

Clearing her throat, she went on. "Anyways, Mike was really sweet and charming and yes, he had big dreams of starting his own firm which I loved, I thought it was fantastic. But eventually I found myself being pushed aside, being neglected, because his dreams didn't include me."

Rick frowned at her nonchalant tone. "Well he sounds like an ass."

She smiled. "Hmph. Through and through."

"And… What about Negan?"

Michonne's knuckles tightened as she gripped the edge of the wooden desk. "Excuse me?" With Rick's eyes boring into her, her face burned. "What the hell are you –"

He shrugged his shoulders. "That day, at the negotiation… There was just something about the way he kept looking at you. You were ignoring him, and he didn't seem to like that too much. I don't know, I just guessed is all." Also to Rick, when Negan expressed his concerns about her, something in his tone came across as genuine.

Michonne swallowed hard. What would it cost her if she denied it? Or should she just… Oh to hell with it! She was already on a roll. "Negan…" As thick regret shifted around within her, she steepled her hands over her mouth. "… He was literally a week of pure foolishness. And besides, it was too much work…"

"Alright."

"…Hardly anything at all…"

His eyebrows hitched up. "Okay."

"… It took him awhile to get me there." Her eyes lit up in amusement as she stifled a laugh.

Rick, on the other hand, was disappointed that she held it back, but returned her smile nonetheless.
"Is that right?"

"Pretty much. Like I said, hardly anything at all." She emphasized with her fingers, not feeling an ounce of shame for having a chuckle at Negan's expense.

Rick's head flew back as he roared with warm laughter. "No good huh?"

"Nope. Imagine my disappointment."

"I'm sure you were."

She beamed at causing him to be so entertained.

"Did you take out your little book? Show him the numbers with a diagram?"

"Oh it took everything from me simply not to… Came real close. Does that make me a terrible person?"

"Absolutely."

When they finally regained control of themselves, several moments passed in silence.

"But then there's you," Michonne confessed. Glancing across at him, she took stock of his reaction.

Rick squinted in her direction, unsure of where she was going with that statement. "Is that right?"

"Yeah," she bit her lower lip and shifted her attentions to her dangling feet. "I mean we haven't been… anything in that way …you know…"

His mouth widened across his reddening face. "I think, I uh, I would've remembered that …"

Emitting a nervous laugh, he nudged her shoulder with his own.

Michonne smiled as well, without looking up at him. "You're…this…" she shook her head, not knowing how to say precisely what she wanted to say. "It's…"

"Different?"

"It's something." Yes they had been on one date – One date that ended horribly. Nonetheless, Rick had somehow managed to become a remarkably significant person in her life.

Returning her face towards him, a shy expression ghosted across her features. "I, I never thanked you… for helping me fulfill my dream. And I know, I know that we signed a contract, so it's just business… But — running this place, figuring out everything…" she sighed. "It's been a lot. We've only just begun, and it's taking so much from me. I've never been so tired, so exhausted, except for when Charlotte had just been born of course," she chuckled. "But, what I'm trying to say, is that I'm glad that you're here Rick." It was a slightly reluctant admittance. The last thing she needed was for this man to feel more sure of himself than he already did. Still… she had to give credence to the truth.

Reaching across, she clutched his hand for a second. "And maybe, that's why we met... To do this. To save this place." She then blew out the breath she didn't realize she was holding in…

"Yeah, maybe."

Michonne looked up at him through her lashes. "You feel differently about it?" she asked, in a quiet voice.
Rick leaned in, as if to hear her clearer. Or was he being drawn by the look of admiration that flashed across her eyes just then? Or was it the element of vulnerability she revealed in the silky tone of her voice?

"I uh…" Rick didn't know how he felt about work, per say. But in that moment, as he permitted his gaze to trace the features of her beautiful face, all that was factual to him was how ignited he felt around her. He'd learned how to bury his attraction towards the woman next to him. He'd taught himself how to ignore the current that flowed between them. But as he fixated longingly at her red tinted lips, there was no denying that the pull was only growing stronger by the day.

When he didn't give an answer. Michonne took notice of the way he looked at her. No longer with innocence, or mere concern… No. Rick's lingering stare sparked with lust and desire. There was no denying it. It caused a sudden acceleration of her pulse…

'Trouble Michonne, trou—'

… and she inhaled sharply, ignoring the meddlesome voice in her head. The moment at hand was seducing her and she couldn't think straight— Hell, did she even wish to? At that point, the building tension in the room seemed to be coercing her into granting her attentions to his slightly parted lips. Her hand then rose upwards, and gently, she cupped his cheek, trailing his salt and pepper beard with her curious, slender fingertips.

What was she doing? Her body buzzed with excitement.

Was she really going to surrender to this? It must be the wine.

'Oh please yes, Michonne. This is what you've wanted from the night you two first met.'

Lifting her eyes to meet his, a part of her knew it was wrong to cross the line, but as her fingers brushed his skin, her arm twisting, reaching to grip the back of his neck, another part of her couldn't resist the temptation to let go, and to give in. Her heart beat did double time as she drew him closer.

Complying gladly, Rick's throbbing desire inclined him to lower his head. And within a moment, he allowed her to cover his mouth with her own wanting lips. Suffice it to say, her kiss was soft, and gorgeously warm, and sensuous. It left him breathless. Michonne, felt, spectacular.

Pulling away from the beauty, just a little, Rick peered into her soulful brown eyes.

"Are you sure about this?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No. Are you?"

"Absolutely."

His heated breath fanned across her lips like a sweet caress, and Michonne graced him with a smile, a hint of relief touching the edges of her mouth.

"I think—" she began…

… but then they heard the door open.

"So what's the verdict— "

Startled, Michonne nudged Rick away, and immediately hopped off of the desk. "Hey," she breathed, a wave of embarrassment flooding her as she made haste to readjust her skirt, and to stick
her feet back into her shoes.

Rick raked his fingers through his hair, "Damn it Paul, I said—"

"I know, I'm sorry, didn't mean to… interrupt," the chef apologized, with a distinct smirk. "But your feedback is important."

Her attentions now plastered to the floor, Michonne scurried to collect her things, before rushing to make her exit. "Dessert was extraordinary," she uttered, as she zipped by.

The chef, with a knowing grin, winked at her, "I'm sure it was."

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Standing in front of her opened fridge, Michonne's head tilted to the side with one arm set akimbo on her hip, as she studied its contents. "Pilsner or ale?"

"Pilsner," Carol answered, without hesitation, as she straightened up from leaning back against the granite counter top.

Taking out two bottles and twisting their covers off, Michonne then waltzed over to the kitchen island, handing her aunt her beer of choice.

"Okay young lady," Carol began, after taking a sip of her cold drink. "This is how I see it… Stay quiet and listen. Alright?"

"Yeah, I'm listening." Swirling her own lager, Michonne was unsure if it was even smart to be consuming more alcohol than she already did earlier at work with Rick. But, then again, their…'encounter'… left her tense and distracted. To relax and to get her mind off of him, was her utmost desire. But his distinct taste, and his musky scent lingered in her senses. So she brought the cold beverage to her lips in hopes of it helping her to forget.

But Carol – well, she wouldn't let it go. Served Michonne right. She should've withstood the pressure and kept her mouth shut.

"You've got two options to choose from – A:You can, like grown adults, either sit down and discuss what and why this thing happened, and figure out how to move forward ..." She paused to raise the bottle to her mouth again and took a swig. "...Or, you can go with option B."

"Which is?"

"Which is to pretend that nothing happened in the first place. Keep your head down, and just carry on with business as usual. What's more, you try like hell for it not to ever happen again. Stay separate for awhile."

"Option B sounds pretty good to me."

"Yeah, why am I not surprised," Carol scoffed. "Anyways, I gotta get going."

Confused, Michonne set her beer down as she checked her watch. "Not staying for dinner? That's a pretty big casserole you made."

"Aw honey I can't. Got a man of my own to see about, remember? You know if you play your cards right this could be the one for you."

"No, I think I made a mistake." But Michonne's gaze slid away from her aunt's.
How was she going to face him in the morning?

"Was it?" She placed her forearms on the island top and leaned forward. "You know what your problem is? Michonne, I love you, dearly, you know that. But honestly, you're a damned coward."

"Carol!"

"What else does this guy have to do for you? I mean he bought you a restaurant for crying out loud."

"It's not so simple..." Michonne tried to defend.

"And not just any restaurant. It's Angelo's... Your mother's favorite place. I mean how wonderful is that?"

"...There's a contract. I basically work for him. He's my boss until I can pay him back... with 10 percent interest."

"Yeah and that's why this is so much hotter," she winked. "I mean you have to make your payments one way, or the other," she smirked.

Michonne shook her head and laughed. "You're deplorable."

"No, you are. Just let the good times roll sweetie. Don't think about it too much."

Staying back an extra minute or two to finish her drink with her, Carol then let Michonne escort her out. "Alright kiss Charlotte for me and I'll see you two tomorrow, hopefully."

As she opened up the door, however, they were both shocked to find Rick standing there on the front step, just about to make his presence known.

"Oh crap," Michonne breathed.

But Carol, in an instant, grabbed her arm before she could shut the door. "Well, hello," she greeted with the cheeriest smile. "Who are you?"

"Hi, I'm Rick." He extended his hand to her.

Carol accepted his gesture. "Oh! So you decided to just show up?" She then looked over at her niece with a twinkle in her eyes. "Guess he chose option A... I'll leave you to it. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she answered, unable to comprehend just why Carol was so delighted to see her squirm.

While she kept her eyes fixed on the woman as she made her way towards her car, Rick's eyes were fixed on her. "We need to talk."

"I know."
Chapter 8: "Instead, you could give me your all."

It was obvious that Rick came straight to her house from work. Still clad in a pair of grey trousers with his dark blue blazer that hugged his lean shoulders, and a lighter blue shirt, opened at the collar, the hue perfectly accenting his penetrating eyes. Unconsciously, Michonne's senses were starting to respond to him hovering so close to her as she waved Carol goodbye. She couldn't deny how handsome his casual confidence made him. It became increasingly harder to resist. And with that awareness, Michonne already perceived what the outcome of his little visit would be… if she didn't maintain her position.

He affected her like no other man had before. It was somewhat frustrating. All the while she'd been determined to preserve a level of professionalism between them. And in one quiet moment – a moment of weakness and secret desire – all of her efforts were in vain.

If only she could go back. Did she really want to go back? To undo what already had been done? To uncross those necessary lines? Yes! Emphatically yes. To regain control, to reclaim her focus – that would be her mission tonight. Option B please!

With her hair pulled up in to a tight bun, Rick noticed how she had a few locs loose, framing her sweet face, highlighting those cheek bones and enticing lips. No trace of lipstick from before, but, invitingly kissable, nonetheless. Every second had been torture since her charitable gift hours earlier. And he was there for more. He had no qualms about that.

Michonne, cautiously, stepped back into her house.

Narrowing his eyes, Rick, like a predator, followed her in, closing the door shut behind him. And from the moment he did, he snatched her into his arms. "You kissed me," he murmured in a husky tone.

Stunned, she could barely catch her breath. "I know."

"Why?"

Pressing her hands against his firm chest, she pushed him away, whilst shaking her head in response. How on Earth did he expect them to have a level headed conversation with them wrapped around each other, with him molding her soft body into his hard frame? She took a few steps further away from him.

Resting his hands on his hips, he tilted his chin up to look down at her with a bit of awe. He'd just clocked thirty-two miles in twenty minutes for her not to have an answer for him? No, no way, he didn't think so. That wasn't good enough. "You did it because you wanted to. That's what happened, isn't it?"

Of course she wanted to, she found him irresistible. She always had. "I guess…" Michonne slid her hand down her face.

"And you knew, you knew I wanted it too?"

"I did, but –"
"But what?"
"But we can't."

"We can't? Why not?" Rick was confused. Hadn't things changed between them?

Drawing in a deep breath, Michonne stepped back again, and squared her shoulders. "Rick, it's a conflict of interest... That's why." Determination flared in her eyes. Confident that if she was bold enough, he'd concede and drop the matter, because that was the logical thing to do.

"Well I don't think it is," he shot back.

Okay, maybe not...

"I think that if we put our minds to it, we could make it work. I know we can."

Regarding him with doubtful eyes, where the hell was all of this confidence coming from? "How do you know?"

"Because we're the same, you and I. We're both stubborn as all hell Michonne."

She smiled. That was it? That was his point of reasoning? They were both pig-headed? Michonne laughed softly whilst tilting her head up at him. "More you than me, won't you say?"

"Yeah..." he chuckled, a broad smile of his own spread across his lips. "... That might be true."

"Come here." Reaching out, she placed her hand within his, and led him into the living room. "Listen," she began, once they stood in front of the couch, mindful that this whole incident was her doing. "Let's just step back, and analyze whatever it is we may feel —"

"I'm attracted to you," he declared, in no uncertain terms. "Plain and simple. More than that, I care about you..."

Michonne looked at him sheepishly. "Okay. Maybe I do too," she admitted. "But there are risks to this."

"As always Michonne. We could crash and we could burn." Rick's eyes were impatient as they bored in to her.

"And that's what I'm afraid of. I have enough regrets for one lifetime. And what about the restaurant?"

"Business is business."

"Till you mix it with pleasure," she reminded him. "Then business is no longer black and white with signatures on the dotted line. Tainted by bad feelings, everything gets grey and there's no fine print to cover that Rick."

"But I don't think that'll happen."

"Yeah but you don't know either... Not to mention, I've been broken before and I can't..." Her voice lowered in to a whisper as she folded her arms against her chest. "I'm a mother. And I can't – A broken woman is useless to her child... Dangerous even." Casting her gaze about the room, she tried her best to maintain her nerve.

"You may not believe me, but I hear you. I do." Perceiving that her fears were real, that she wasn't
just trying to be difficult, he moved in close, and took hold of her soft hands, running his thumb over her knuckles. "I know what it's like. But… who's to say that it's you who won't hurt me?"

"I could."

He nodded. "You could… Or not." He was willing to take that chance. "Instead, you could give me your all. 'Cause that's the kind of woman you are. I've seen it, and I want it. I want, you." Tilting his head back, his eyes closed for a moment of earnest confession. "I can't stop thinking about you Michonne." She'd been invading his dreams constantly, and in the most delicious of ways.

"Now I'll be honest with you, this is a bit embarrassing." His gaze eased downwards, back to meet hers. "I feel like a teenage boy hung up on his first crush." He allowed his eyes the simple pleasure of drinking in her distinctive features. God this woman was so beautiful to him! With one hand he let go of her, and brushed it against the side of her face. "But this, is a hundred times worse… Possibly because I know better. You brought up the risks – But what about the benefits?"

"Such as?" she asked, struggling not to react to his affectionate touch.

"You don't think we could be good together? You won't even consider it?"

Michonne had refused to entertain such thoughts. She was adamant with herself about not going down that road. But right then, under his sparkling blue gaze, Michonne searched within herself for an answer. "Rick, I think… yes," she admitted. "Yes, we could be good together. Great even." It surprised her how amazing it felt to voice those words. Excited and calm, at the same time, her skin prickled, her heart pounded, and a heat licked up, and down, her spine. She took in another deep breath, and her fingers clutched his as he still held on to her.

He moved closer, in spite of the conflicted expression that flickered across her face for him to see. Rick dipped his head. "So?"

"So…" Still hesitant, she could be making yet another terrible choice. And for some reason, she felt as though that with him, if she were wrong about him, it would devastate her. So why, run, the risk? Why? Because this could lead to something more? To something special? Like what? Like love? Michonne shook her head in disbelief. If that were so…

"Isn't love worth all the risks?"

"Maybe, maybe we should do the unthinkable," he whispered, as though he could read her thoughts right then.

"Maybe," Her resistance was edging away. "I mean if we do, we need to take it one step at a time. We should –"

And without warning, Rick closed the gap completely between them. Releasing her hand, he now slid his arms around her tiny waist. He watched as her breath hitched, but still, she leaned in to him, her body, suddenly, urgently, willing. Then, as her hands snaked up his burning chest, as her eyes closed and those lips parted, he caught whiff of her unique, flower scented perfume, that had, weeks ago, left its permanent mark on his senses. Rick again brought his face closer to hers, and kissed her. The muscles in his arms tightened, as his tongue brushed against her sumptuous lips, before seeking its way inside of her heated mouth, loving the taste, needling it. With his passion unleashed, a tumult of emotions erupted within him. But Rick could care less. His brain, his chest, his skin were all lit on fire. And as her fingers caged around his neck, Michonne purred into his mouth. Suddenly, Rick was walking on air.
What was that? Did that sound come from her? What the hell was this kiss doing to her? The intensity with which he worked his tongue against hers, it was almost as if Rick were daring her to deny the hunger she had for him... if she conceivably could.

Damn it! She was in so much trouble now. He tasted so, much, better than he did a couple of hours ago. God, how was that possible? Next thing she knew she was shoving his jacket off of his shoulders–

"Finally got through with that Geography research Mom –"

Michonne wrenched herself from Rick's embrace, for the second time that night. "Charlotte," she gasped, somehow the knowledge of her daughter's presence in the house was far removed from her mind.

Face flushed, eyes wide and locked onto her mother's, the impressionable young girl fell silent.

"Dinner's in the oven." Michonne swallowed hard, trying to control her breathing, trying not to look guiltier than she already did.

"Okaay." Charlotte dragged her disbelieving eyes over to the strange man before her. "Hi."

"Hello." Rick's ears grew red, for a totally different reason now of course.

"Mom?"

"Umm Charlotte, this, this is Rick."

"Rick? As in Rick from work?"

"Yes," Michonne answered.

The young girl grinned, as mischievousness danced across her light blue eyes. "Really? This is Rick the prick?"

"Charlotte!" Michonne was appalled that her daughter was taking such liberties at her expense.

"I'm sorry." Despite the apology, Charlotte's face remained insincere. Her mother's horrified expression was priceless.

"I told you never to repeat that." Michonne cringed as she moved from Rick's side over to Charlotte's.

But Rick burst out laughing, amused by the girl's cheekiness. "That's alright. It's definitely a pleasure to meet you Miss Des Vignes." He extended his hand to her.

Accepting his gesture, "Actually it's Dixon," she corrected. "And it's nice to finally meet you Ri –"

"Mr. Grimes," insisted Michonne, as she now gripped her daughter's shoulders.

"No. Rick is fine," he said, shoving his hands into his pants' pockets.

"Yeah Mom, Rick is fine. But I see you already know that don't you?" Charlotte looked up and winked at her mother, whose jaw fell right open.

Rick found himself chuckling again. "Well aren't you something?"
"Something special? Most definitely. It's the only way I know how to be. So... This is why you helped my mom Rick? Because you like her?"

Dipping his chin, "Yeah. I guess I did," he confessed, locking his gaze up onto Michonne.

Then, unexpectedly, Charlotte stepped away from her mother, and threw her arms around him. "Thank You."

Michonne was taken aback, but touched, nonetheless, by her child's open gesture.

"You've made my mother very happy," she said, as she let him go.

"Well, uh, it's nothing. I mean umm...." stammering, Rick shuffled back and lowered his eyes to the ground. "... I mean, you're welcome. Even though she did call me a prick."

"She didn't mean it." Charlotte shook her head. "If she really hated you, she'd pretend you didn't exist."

Michonne's chest tightened. "Anyway..."

"Anyway," Charlotte cut across, tucking her wavy hair behind her ears. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"I would love to but umm, I have a son to get home to."

"Oh." Charlotte frowned a bit.

"We should do that though... have dinner, together." Rick offered. "The four of us... Would you like that?"

A soft smile reappeared on the girl's face. "Yeah. Like a date."

"A date?" He smiled at Michonne who stood in silence between the two, incredulous as to the conversation that was transpiring. "Michonne?"

"Are you sure?" she breathed, narrowing her eyes at him.

Rick chuckled, "Why not?"

"Okay," Michonne conceded. "It's a date."

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"Well we all voted on it, but which one would you prefer? Michonne? Mich—"

"... Umm, yes Paul?"

Standing on the other side of the dining table, with his hands clasped in front of him, Paul Rovia narrowed his attentions on her. "Which one, would you, prefer?" he repeated.

Turning in her seat, Michonne met his gaze. "Umm yes, let's uh stick to the personalized after-dinner chocolate mints. It's perfect." For the entire morning meeting, she found it difficult to concentrate on anything being discussed – Her business partner being the sole reason.

Every time she looked at him, she discovered him staring at her from across the table. His shameless gaping proved to be a distraction. Still... she couldn't help but blush.
Their stolen glances didn't go undetected by the astute chef. "Rick, what do you think?"

"Yeah, umm, yeah, what she said," he conceded.

Paul's eyebrows shot up… as did everyone else's. "And the complimentary bottle of wine on Sundays with the special?"

Rick lowered his eyes in contemplation and then shook his head. "No. It's too expensive. We'll have to cut back on that as well… Ms. Des Vignes?"

"I agree with Rick. Let's see how the profit margins pick up in a few months. Maybe then we can take a second look at the numbers. See if it makes sense."

Again, throats were being cleared amongst the staff members. The unusual concessions between the two bosses were disconcerting, to say the least.

Before the meeting was over, however, Rick had had enough. And so, came up with some feeble excuse to lure Michonne back into the office. As soon as he pushed the door close, and locked it behind him, he grabbed her by the waist, leaning in to whisper 'wicked-somethings' in her ear.

Michonne felt a heat kindled within her, causing her body to shudder to the core.

For the past two days, while she'd been trying to keep up appearances, Rick just couldn't give a – He flirted with her every chance he got.

Unable to keep his fingers to himself, she found he'd been touching her more. Brushing his hand against hers in passing, grasping her by her arms to get her attention… Even now, taking advantage of them being alone, secluded in their shared office, his finger traced the lines of her face, and the curves of her soft lips, before finally lowering his head to tease her with light kisses that ran down her neck. Michonne's eyes fluttered shut as Rick's attentions were awakening her needs with such intensity. She drew every bit of strength to wrestle him off of her.

"Rick stop. What happened to, taking it one step at a time?" Unable to control herself, she giggled like a schoolgirl. "Not at work okay?"

Grinning shamelessly at her meager protest, "Yeah, okay," he relented.

Shifting away from her, Rick then waltzed over to his chair. "Listen, I was wondering, about dinner... You could come over to my house, meet Carl, and Denise."

"So I get to meet your son huh? That's pretty soon."

"Well I had the pleasure of meeting Charlotte so, I don't see why not? Besides, according to the contract we're stuck with each other for a few years," he smiled. "You're gonna have to meet him sometime. Don't be nervous about it."

She strolled over to him and leaned against the desk. "Well I am. Do we need to be so formal? Bring him here, tomorrow night. I'll have Charlotte. They could keep each other company." Somehow she couldn't keep her hands to herself either, as her palms instinctively pressed against his chest smoothening his grey suit jacket.

"And what would we be doing?" he teased, running his hands down her back, causing her to arch into him.

"Rick stop."
Not giving her another second to protest, or consent, he tightened his hold on her, and smashed his lips against hers in a hungry kiss. This man was incorrigible.

After a few moments of indulgence, Rick peeled himself away, as he needed to leave early to head back to his office at 'GEDC'. Big business was coming in, and he was eager to get to it.

"With my father leaving this week, I need to secure this account. It's a huge deal for our reputation." There was a thread of steely determination in his voice that matched the fierce ambition in his eyes.

Michonne folded her arms and watched him appreciatively as he strut towards the door. "Okay, I'll hold down the fort for today."

"You might have to for tomorrow as well. Okay?"

"Okay," she shrugged.

"You could handle it."

Oh please. She shook her head at him and smirked. "I've been saying that from day one." Michonne knew that he knew she was quite capable. "Go. Win. See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

The following evening Michonne and Charlotte waited patiently for the Grimes men to show up at Angelo's. They were already seated at a table Michonne designated for the 'date'.

"Mom, relax," chided Charlotte, who noticed her mother twitching in her seat.

She'd adjusted her outfit about a half-dozen times in the past ten minutes, whilst eyeing every patron coming in through the doors. With no time to run home and change, Michonne was still dressed in her work attire – a green, sleeveless shift dress that fell just above her knees. It was form fitting, with a long elegant bow to the front that hung from the deep V-neckline... simple, but not too simple, for the occasion.

A less agitated Charlotte, opted for her favourite cream-colored knitted turtleneck sweater, and a pair of jeans. Carol did her mother the favour of driving her downtown after school.

"They're late," Michonne checked her silver wristwatch.

"You think they won't show? Rick will call if there's a problem."

Michonne arched a brow at her daughter's confidence in a man she'd only just met. "Well let's hope so."

In that moment, nonetheless, the man in question had finally arrived. Michonne's stomach fluttered at the sight of the teenager who followed close behind. Even though he was a younger version of Rick himself, she quickly concluded that his pale skin, and lengthy, chocolate brown hair, could've been traits from his mother.

"Hey, sorry 'bout that," Rick apologized, as soon as they made their way over. "Got caught up at the office."

"The usual," the young man grumbled, not caring to hide his annoyance with a hard roll of his eyes.
Michonne stood, and again, tugged at her dress before leaning in to give Rick a chaste hug. "No problem. So... this is Carl?" Studying him studying her, she stretched out her hand. "Michonne, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," he responded, as he gave her hand a firm shake. His expression was stern but then he squinted over to his Dad. "You were right, she's different."

Michonne shot Rick a look of curiosity, wondering how the hell that conversation went.

A few minutes later, after everyone was introduced, they were all seated, perusing their menus. Like a typical teen, Carl opposed Rick at every suggestion and at every comment. They both exasperated each other.

"I'm not a kid," Carl groaned in frustration.

"He's right," Michonne felt like the young man needed some support. "Give the guy a chance." She peeked over her menu and winked at him.

Rick was bemused.

"Yeah Dad. Let's just order already," Carl huffed. "I'm starved."

"You know what Carl? I think your Dad is just nervous." Michonne nodded her head.

"I am?" Rick narrowed his eyes at her, as he closed his menu and placed it back onto the table.

"Yes, you are," she chuckled. "Cause the truth is, I'm nervous too."

"It's true, she is. But not me," Charlotte remarked with a shrug of her shoulders. "I'm cool as beans."

Carl's face contorted in confusion at the younger girl. "I don't think you said that right."

"Whatever, pizza face," she muttered.

"Charlotte please..." Her mother frowned at her. "Anyway, Carl... here's my suggestion. To ease your Dad's tension, and mine... why don't the two of you, both order the meals for all of us? Anything you'd like. From the main course, to the drinks --"

"Dessert too?" Intrigue twinkled in Carl's blue gaze.

"And, dessert too," she agreed, flashing a pearly white smile. "Make it interesting. I haven't had everything from this place yet."

Rick's glance shifted between them as he visibly swallowed.

"Anything? Okay." Carl looked over to Charlotte who sat directly across from him. "You up for that?"

"I love a challenge," she responded, rubbing her palms together with a wicked grin. "No allergies right Rick?"

Rick laughed, "Not that I know of."

Michonne's spur of the moment idea didn't turn out to be a complete disaster. The kids chose what they believed to be, the weirdest sounding options from the Seafood selection for the adults, and then
decided on pasta dishes for themselves.

Rick didn't mind. Turned out that the seared black-grouper filet, served over baked mushrooms polenta, was extremely delicious.

While waiting for their treats, Carl bonded with Charlotte over not liking the restaurant music that had been playing.

"Yeah it's not everyone's cup of tea," Michonne admitted.

"But it's beautiful when you get to understand the words," smiling, Rick nodded his head and reached across the table to touch her hand. Something he'd been itching to do ever since he got there.

Michonne blushed under his gaze.

But the kids rolled their eyes at the awkward adults.

"What kind do of music do you like Carl? Who are you into?" Michonne inquired, as she politely removed her hand to cup her face.

"Umm, I like a bunch of different bands. I'm actually into Cherokee Rose these days. Ever heard of them? Their new album is awesome."

Michonne pressed her lips together and dropped her gaze.

Charlotte, on the other hand, beamed "Really?"

"Yeah. You know them? You're like a kid."

Her face went taut. "I'm twelve in a few months, pizza face. And yeah, I know them. Better than you, that's for damn sure."

"Alright Charlotte, watch your language." Michonne warned.

"I doubt that," Carl scoffed.

Incensed, Charlotte leaned forward, glowering at him. "I do."

Rick gripped his son by the shoulder. "Kill it Carl. Don't tease her."

"Cherokee Rose has nine albums, six of which are platinum. Thirteen number ones, and eight Grammys you ass wipe. And I know because the drummer and songwriter, happens to be my Dad."

"Okay just drop it." Michonne squeezed her daughter's arm, as she was getting herself worked up unnecessarily so.

Carl couldn't help but laugh at the ranting pre-teen. "No way…"

"Yes way, so shut it!"

"Daryl Dixon's your dad?" He glanced across at Michonne with dubious eyes.

But with a slight shrug, and a nod of the head, she confirmed it.

"He's like a bad-ass Rockstar," he gasped.

"The baddest!" Charlotte's face was filled with pride.
Carl's eyes grew wide with excitement, and the corners of his mouth turned up. "Awesome! Can I get a signed T-shirt?"

"Depends… you still think I'm a kid?"

"Naw I, I was just teasing."

Rick laughed. "Sure you were."

"Good," Charlotte leaned back into her chair satisfied. "And I want half of your dessert when it gets here."

"Done."

Just then, Michonne received a call.

At first she was grateful for the distraction from the embarrassing conversation, but then her brows snapped together as soon as she picked up her phone. It was Daryl… As though her daughter conjured his god-damn presence.

Again, his timing couldn't have been any less perfect. She took her leave for the bathroom.

"Hey, looks like we could fly out next week. Cool?" He asked, as soon as she answered it.

Michonne's heart leaped into her throat. "Wait, already? When next week?"

"Not sure yet. Maybe Tuesday, Wednesday… Why, that ain't good for you?"

She looked back into the dining area at the three smiling faces… "No, Daryl. That's not good for me," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"I have some things going on… We do."

"…Don't do this to me 'Chonne. You done gave me your word. You said yes."

"Just give me till the weekend… please?" She was being a bit unfair, but why not? She suddenly found herself in this bubble of happiness, and… Excuse her for wanting to relish it a bit.

He blew out a heavy breath.

"Daryl please? Just a few extra days. What would it hurt anyway?"

"Alright. I'm coming out first thing next Saturday… Okay?"

"Sure… Next Saturday."

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A/N: Hmm, should Michonne be worried, or is she overreacting? We'll see. I'll update soon.
Chapter 9: "It's us now, you and me. Right?"

Michonne had seen her fair share of sunsets over the city's skyline. But somehow, the view from the rooftop of the Peachtree club was much more mesmerizing on that particular evening. Could it possibly have to do with the posh ambiance that surrounded her? She knew Rick Grimes came from money, but she wasn't aware that it was old money.

Within a week, she'd met, and spent time with, Rick's teenage son. And now, here she was, in the middle of an elegant hall, attending his father's retirement celebration, dressed to the nines, surrounded by most, if not all, of his close friends and family.

Thank God for the steady flow of alcohol.

"So are you enjoying yourself Miss Des Vignes?" asked the petite woman beside her.

At the moment, she had the distinct pleasure of conversing with Mama Grimes herself.

"Well, as much as to be expected." Michonne shifted under the matriach's intense scrutiny.

Mrs. Grimes chuckled. "Yes, I can imagine."

"Can you?" A soft smile graced her glossy lips as she dropped her gaze to the empty Martini glass in her hand. With her heart rate increasing in speed, yet again, Michonne's eyes darted around the room in search of a waiter with another tray of cocktails.

But alas – none were in sight... which was odd, wasn't it? Had someone put out some sort of warning after her second helping… a signal to stay away from the only dreadlocked woman who'd been fidgeting from the moment she'd arrived? Michonne wondered if she could, just for a moment, excuse herself to the bar.

And where the hell was her date? Rick made her a solemn promise that he wouldn't leave her side for no more than a few minutes. Well...she checked her wristwatch… it had been almost fifteen minutes, and still he was nowhere to be found.

"Over the next few years we need to be on our 'Ps and Qs' where this political neophyte is concerned," commented the staunch liberalist.

Michonne's attention snapped back to the discussion at hand as the topic took a sober turn in its nature.

"Imagine turning your back on globalization… inciting tariff wars with our global partners," Mrs. Grimes scoffed, swirling the golden bourbon in her glass. Having come from a political family, which, over the generations had produced several senators and congressmen, Mrs. Grimes herself was a former public servant. Before she met Mr. Grimes, she did a five year stint in office back in her home state of Oregon.

"Well ideals can change, if they're forced to by the reality of how things function. I mean we could only hope." Michonne always believed that positivity was key. More so when matters at hand seemed to be out of one's control.
"But would his temperament allow it?" the woman argued. "Transparency is everything Miss Des Vignes. In your line of work you should know that. 'Your image is part of your reputation,'" she recited a well known Accounting slogan.

"Integrity plus Accuracy – it all adds up," smirked Michonne, quoting another.

Mrs. Grimes then nodded. Beaming with a smile of approval.

Grasping Michonne's hand, the woman cast her glance around the intimate setting. "I know all this might seem intimidating, but you're handling yourself quite well."

"Mmm," It wasn't so much as feeling intimidated, as it was a matter of feeling that it was 'too much too soon'. She was trying her best to tread lightly with this new relationship. But here she was – tossed headlong into the deep end.

Mrs. Deanna Grimes focused her attentions to the opposite side of the room. There Rick stood with his father, and a few associates. "It does my heart good to see my son happy," she nodded over in his direction.

Thankful for his reappearance, Michonne breathed a sigh of relief. "Well we're just trying things out. Nothing serious yet."

The older woman laughed. "In case you haven't noticed, he hasn't taken his eyes off of you since we've been standing here chit chatting. And I can't really blame him, you look stunning in that dress my dear."

"Oh, thank you." Instinctively, Michonne passed her hand down the side of her, sky blue outfit. A chiffon, strapless gown that flowed all the way to the floor ... accessorized with a simple black and silver, fashion chain necklace, and matching pair of earrings. It was the best she could do at such short notice. "I tried."

"Oh sweetie, more than that... you succeeded. You have that grown man salivating all the way from across the room," she teased, right before downing the remainder of her drink. "Not to mention that you're actually the first woman I've met in well over a year." Shaking her head, she shot Michonne a look, as though she were clueless. "I know Rick. He wouldn't have brought you and your little girl here if he weren't serious."

Michonne drew in a deep breath. "Yes well..."

Just then, a waiter did pass in the nick of time. She, without hesitation, switched her drained glass for a well-deserved refill.

"Enjoying those are you?"

"Yes. I am. Very much."

"I know. They're absolutely delicious." Mrs. Grimes commented, as she snagged one herself abandoning the whiskey drink. "Where is your beautiful little girl anyway? Charlotte right?"

"Right..." Michonne looked amongst the guests. "I think the last I saw of her, she and your grandson were both making a name for themselves over at the chocolate fountain."

Delighted by the 8 tiers of flowing, sweet liquid, the duo helped themselves to everything, from the salty pretzels to the tangy fruits.
"Oh that's nice, that they get along."

Michonne shook her head. "Something like that."

On the drive over to the soiree, the two wouldn't stop competing over who'd been to the most interesting spots in Georgia. Playing referee was exhausting. Had she and Heath carried on like that when they were younger? For the life of her, Michonne could not recall.

Interesting how Charlotte didn't seem intimidated by the older boy. She wondered why. Carl, on the other hand, was quite perceptive for his age. It wasn't long before he discerned how to push Charlotte's buttons. Which he did relentlessly. He found it quite amusing, which, needless to say, ticked her off even more.

But the last time Michonne did spot the odd pair, no guns were blazing. With few persons their age in attendance, the duo must have decided to stick it out together.

Good for them.

Mrs. Grimes went on to comment on how well behaved her son was towards his older brother Phillip. Although she knew that it was more for Michonne's benefit than for his father's. Either way, she was glad that they were being civil.

When an eccentric-looking couple beckoned her attention, Mrs. Grimes excused herself. But not before encouraging Michonne to mingle with the other guests.

Deciding she needed to locate Charlotte instead, she turned to go make a search for her.

Without notice, however, the eldest of the Grimes' progeny slithered his way over to her. Donned in all black, Phillip Grimes had a distinct menacing demeanor, especially so with that damned eye patch.

"So, Miss Des Vignes is it?" he inquired, as he loomed his towering frame over her.

"It is." Michonne answered, with as gracious a smile as she could muster.

"Nice to finally meet you – put a face to the name and all."

Raising her brows at him, she wondered what he'd heard about her, and specifically from whom. Couldn't be from Rick.

"So you're the reason why my brother's been gallivanting over at that restaurant," he accused.

Tilting her chin up, she offered him a tight lipped smile in response. Already Michonne didn't take too well to this man. Rick never informed her about the exact nature of his relationship with his brother, but she knew enough that they were not on speaking terms. And in a matter of seconds, she had no trouble guessing why that was so. Simply put, the man was an ass. Entitlement and smug arrogance radiated off of him like heat waves.

With a snide glint in his eye, Phillip proceeded to open his mouth to add something further. But, Rick's sudden appearance, prevented him from doing so, as he took his place next to Michonne.

"I see you've met my date," he remarked, sliding his arm around her waist.

"Yes. She's something." Phillip wet his thin lips before gulping his glass of champagne. "Not one for much words though."
Michonne turned and planted a kiss on Rick's cheek. "Only when necessary," she responded, as she wiped away the burgundy imprint from off his skin.

With a slight blush, Rick smirked at her retort. "Now," Opening his arm to gesture at the gathering, "I'm surprised you even came here today."

"Why wouldn't I little brother? This is a big moment in Dad's life."

"Honestly I didn't think you cared Phillip."

"Oh I do. I may be back home down in King's County, but the old man stepping away from Grimes Development Company is something that concerns me… very much so."

"Well it shouldn't. Everythang is going to continue to run as smoothly as it always has."

Phillip shook his head and laughed, dismissing Rick's assurance. "Come on now, that's not what I've been hearing."

His muscles tensed. "Well what have you been hearing?"

Michonne drew in a deep breath; their trite cordiality was quickly waning, being replaced by genuine indignation.

With a shrug of a single shoulder, "A little bit of this and a little bit of that," said Phillip. "It's no secret that you've been … distracted." He trailed his gaze over Michonne.

Clenching his jaw, Rick moved to stand in front of her. Dipping his head, he raised his hand to scratch his brow with his thumb. "If you have something to say, come on out with it brother."

Phillip stepped back and set his empty glass down on the table behind him. "Alright... Everything comes easy to you don't it? Think you're special because you're the chosen one, huh Rick?"

"No I don't have such grand notions about myself." Placing his hands on his hips, this wasn't the first time he'd been confronted by his brother's delusions. "Naw... That's all you. What I do know, is that I've worked rather hard to earn, my father's, trust. That's all there is to it."

"See now, there you go. He's our father… and you know damn well that has nothing to do with it – With why you've been, handed the keys to the kingdom. Because I work just as hard Rick… maybe even harder."

Detecting Phillip's growing anger, Michonne grasped Rick's hand, suggesting that they leave. But he said it wasn't necessary.

Releasing him, she eased away from them both, as the two maintained their glares on each other.

"Not even head of the company just yet..." as his voice deepened with disgust, Phillip folded his arms across his chest. "... and there you go, making executive decisions on taking in risky business…Throwing away money on a venture you know damn well we may never see again."

Rick narrowed his eyes to near slits. "Oh you'll see it. Don't you worry. Besides, that doesn't even concern you."
"Oh I bet it doesn't," Phillip then bit his lower lip as he shot Michonne a dirty look.

"Watch it!" Rick growled.

"No. You watch it. You might just be the golden child in this here family, but I have just as much claim to this company as you do."

"Your father's retired, not dead," Michonne interjected.

Phillip nodded in agreement. "That's right he's not. So he'll get to see for himself, how Ricky boy here, single-handedly runs his legacy into the ground." Standing a little straighter, he tugged at his jacket lapels. "Now if you'll excuse me, my wife is waiting for me back at the hotel. I wanted her to come of course, but she didn't feel it would've been appropriate."

Rick laughed, "Funny how now she's got a conscience about what's appropriate."

Phillip's face went taut. "Now you, watch it," he said, pointing a threatening finger in his brother's face. "Funny how you can't seem to forgive Lilly for her … indiscretion, but you sure as hell can forgive Mom for hers. I wonder why that is… Golden boy?"

Anger flared in Rick's eyes. This was not the time nor place for that conversation. "I think you better shut your mouth."

"Or what?!"

In the next instant, Rick swung back and slammed his fist right into Phillip's jaw.

Michonne gasped in surprise and cried out, "Rick, don't!" But it didn't matter.

In a wild fury, Phillip retaliated. Rushing his brother with a blow to the stomach, followed by a solid punch to the face.

And in the seconds it took for the brawl to erupt, it just as quickly got separated.

Rick pulled away from the guest who struggled to hold on to him, and stormed off whilst Phillip continued to hurl insults.

"Phillip, calm down!" Mr. Grimes shouted, as he and his wife made their way over to the scuffle. "What the hell is going on?"

At first, Michonne hesitated, but then she gathered up her long dress in one hand and took off after her date.

She spied him as he escaped into the men's room. Breathing heavily, she waltzed over to the small lobby and seated herself on the lounge chair, waiting for him.

After some time he finally came out.

"Rick," she called out softly.

He turned towards her.

A thousand questions raced through her mind, but she asked only one. "Are you okay?"

Pinned by the concern in her wide eyes, Rick ambled his way over, taking a seat next to her. "Yeah… I'm okay," he sighed. "Didn't mean for you to see that."
She took the damp paper towel from his hand and held it to the cut on his face. "Is that how things are between you two?"

"Yeah… pretty much. But I…” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on top of his knees. "… I let him get to me."

"Why? You could have just walked away, but you didn't."

He shrugged his shoulders avoiding her questioning stare.

Was he embarrassed at how easily he had become unhinged? Or was it something else? Despite her burning curiosity about what just transpired, she decided to broach another subject – One that plagued her mind for the entire evening.

Shifting herself closer to him, Michonne leaned forward as well, to recapture his attention. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded. "Shoot."

"Why did you bring me here?"

His head tilted to face her, "Because I wanted to. So you'd know that I meant what I said about us being good together… and that you could trust me. I'm a man of my word."

"Man of your word?" Giving his shoulder a playful shove, "What happened to not abandoning me today?" she asked, with an arched brow.

He chuckled. "That was a test. See if you could handle the pressure…"

"Oh, yeah right." Her bright smile set a sparkle in her eyes.

"You passed." He returned a mischievous grin.

"Mmhm."

After gazing at her for a few beats, Rick's smile slipped away as he decided to open up to her.

"You know after… after I loss Lori, the way that I did… I didn't think that I could let myself get close to another woman for a long time –" His gaze fell to his clasped hands. "But then… I met Lilly." 

Michonne furrowed her brows. "Phillip's wife?"

"She wasn't his wife back then."

"Oh."

"She reminded me of how good life could be." Closing his eyes, a pang of regret forced him to exhale slowly. "I cared about her, I trusted her. But it wasn't enough. She still betrayed me, said that it was him she loved."

Shaking her head, she empathized with him. Understanding the pain of disloyalty. "And your mother?"

"Her and my dad went through a rough patch when we were kids, before Denise was born. But they got through it because it was a mistake – A one time thing. Her and the other guy were never
together."

"Do you think that I –"

"No." He objected to what she was inferring. "You're different. You have Charlotte."

"And your mother had both you and Phillip."

"No… you're different."

"How?"

"You just are Michonne." Also, it was the law of averages, he'd told himself. There was no way he could be that unlucky. "I know you. You're a good woman."

"So is your mother," she looked at him perplexed. "Maybe even Lilly too."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"People make mistakes… Even the good ones."

"What does that mean?"

"It means no one's perfect."

"I know that."

"Well then, you have to let it go. Forgive them both. Your brother, he has his hang ups, but he's a lot like you. An asshole? Definitely. But he cares, in a twisted way, about his father's legacy. He's just as ambitious, and just as decisive."

He scoffed. "Not as handsome…"

"No, of course not." Chuckling, she shook her head.

"Ah Michonne…" He contemplated her advice. "That ain't easy."

"I know. It's messed up. They fell in love, and you got hurt. That's hard. But, you gotta let it go. How else are you to move on?" With one hand she grasped his fingers, and with the other, she raked his tossled hair back, away from his eyes. "You said that… remember?"

He swallowed and nodded. "I did, didn't I… Okay."

"Okay?"

Rick mouthed his response without saying it. "Okay." Getting into a fistfight with Phillip was not the smartest way to handle their... disagreements. And it was downright idiotic to do so at their parents' gathering, in front of everyone they knew.

Shuffling across the chair, he turned and laid down, resting his head in her lap. Overcome by sudden exhaustion, he closed his eyes, handing over control to her, waiting to be mended. "Spend the night at my place… and let's enjoy tomorrow together. No work, just us, and the kids." Looking up, he returned his gaze to hers. "Are you gonna give me that?"

Holding her breath, she allowed her fingers to trace the shallow cut on his cheek. "No," she whispered, despite a compelling sensation, which swelled within her, to give him just about anything
and everything he desired. But Michonne knew she couldn't. She shouldn't. 'No, not yet.' Inhaling slowly, she made a conscious effort to divert from her established pattern.

Rick Grimes was more damaged than he'd led her to believe. More flawed than she herself originally perceived. She began wondering why a man that exuded so much self-confidence, would simply allow his toxic brother to suck him right in, and lose his sensibility.

Examining the man with her heart as well as her eyes, Rick was a good, kind man – beautiful even. Still… "Spend the day with Carl. We'll have other days." …There was a heaviness on her chest. She couldn't pinpoint why.

"Hey," Reaching up he brushed his finger alongside her captivating face. "It's us now. You and me. Right?"

Michonne placed her hand over his. "Right."

"Then don't worry about any of this. I don't want you to – Not my parents, or my brother, or anyone else."

"Yeah, okay," she breathed, but she was worried… about him.

He slid his gaze down to her mouth and drew in a slow breath. "You sure about not coming home with me?"

She didn't say anything further. She didn't have to. Her almond-shaped eyes said it for her.

"I'll take you home then."

Before he could get up, Michonne draped her arm around his torso. She then lowered her head and pressed her lips against his forehead.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For giving us a chance."

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A/N: Thank you CMW2 for your kind words of encouragement.
Chapter 10

Chapter 10: "I wouldn't do this to you if I didn't have to."

"Quickly, the movie's about to start."

Brimming with elation, Michonne shoved open the heavy auditorium door, hustling her way in, with Rick in tow behind her. A cardboard holder containing pop-corn for two, a big drink, and a carton of onion rings were firmly set between his hands.

Squinting, as soon as he stepped in, "I can't see shit," he whispered.

She chuckled at him stating the obvious. "Uhh, that's the point."

"Well it has been ages since…"

As their eyes adjusted, they paused in the aisle to make a search for suitable seats.

"Let's go that way," Michonne jutted her chin over to the center rows.

"Yeah alright." Following Michonne, as she shuffled her way across, he couldn't help but notice something. "Why are there so many people here?" Even the concession line was atrocious. "It's the middle of the god-dammed day," he complained, in a not so hushed tone of voice.

"Ssh! This was your idea."

"I know… but not this."

Once they quickly settled in, Rick handed Michonne her regular sized bag of pop-corn. "Here… You know we could've sprung for a medium. It was only an extra dollar – fifty."

Scrunching her face, his suggestion was absurd, "Too much butter. Could've shared just the one, I won't even eat this much anyway."

Rick shot her a knowing look. What the hell was she even talking about? He'd seen her shovel snacks like there was no tomorrow. "Yeah right."

In fact, by the time the previews came to an end, half of her bag was practically done.

Unfortunately though, within the first twenty-five minutes of the film… So was Michonne – Completely knocked out, dozing off on Rick's shoulder.

With a caress of his hand against the side of her adorable face, Rick awoke her only when the movie came to a finish.

She inhaled sharply, and her eyes flickered open to the rolling credits on the screen. Sitting upright, she then looked around at the other patrons filing out of the room. "Oh," she gasped, "Is it over?"

Rick smiled, "It is."

"The girl… did she find her father? Was he still alive?"
"Yes and yes."

"Okay… good," she yawned, mid-sentence, "I prefer happy endings." Wiping her hand over her face, Michonne gave Rick a sheepish grin. "I'm so sorry. Must've been more tired than I thought."

"That's okay," Reaching across he swiped a bit drool from her chin, "I don't mind."

Pulling back, Michonne cringed. "No, it's not. You wanted to have a fun rendezvous, and I ruined it. We haven't seen each other in awhile… Now, it's back to work."

"Yeah I know."

A few days had passed since the new couple spent any real time with each other – socially, or professionally. They were both dealing with such hectic schedules. But Rick's had become even more so, now that he had fully assumed his new position at GEDEC.

When he called her, and suggested that they 'play hooky' just for a couple of hours, she was more than willing to do so. She missed him –This man whom she'd only met less than six months ago.

Satisfied with having gotten to at least see her for a fraction of the day, Rick gave her arm a reassuring rub, hoping that his demanding work load would ease up after the transitioning period.

Michonne glanced around at the near empty space. "Maybe…" She leaned in closer and gazed up at him through her lashes, "… we could stick around. After everyone's gone, I could make it worth your while."

Rick's eyebrows hitched all the way up, almost disappearing into his hairline. Her forwardness caused his core to ignite. Drawn in by the allure in her eyes, he cupped her face, and kissed her gently on her lips. "I'd love to Michonne…but –"

Releasing a heavy sigh, "But you have to get back to the office," she finished for him with a groan. "I know," And she pulled away. Rick had to deal with a lot of pressure, and she agreed to be patient – What choice did she really have in any case? Compromising, to make things work, was, at the moment, the name of the game. And yes, she wanted to make this work… she needed it to, especially with Angelo's in the middle (like a newly adopted child).

Taking a hold of each other's hands, they then proceeded to get up, and make their way out through the exit.

"Aaron's got Gregory Scroll lined up on my schedule," Rick said. "He's not one of my favorites, but he's a big client. Gotta keep him calm, and happy."

"You will," she gave his hand a quick squeeze of confidence.

"You gonna be fine dealing with those water-heater guys this afternoon?" Despite his recent absence, he made sure she emailed him, every morning, her agenda for the day.

"Of course."

"And what about the interviews, for Noah's replacement?"

"I have two applicants coming in around four, and another two on Friday. References have been checked, resumes verified… Anything else?" She surveyed him out of the corner of her eye as a smirk played across her face.
Amused, he gave her a lopsided smile. "No, that's good. I just…"

"I know. It's fine. And thank you." She wouldn't come right out and say it, but she appreciated being able to rely on his consistent support.

Grasping her arms, he then turned her to face him, as they now stood outside the theatre, in the middle of the bustling curb.

Having to look up at him, Michonne shaded her eyes as the cloudless sky allowed the sun's brilliance to shine right through. Spring was on the verge of making its appearance, yet the wind still had a distinct chill to it.

"Listen," Rick stepped in closer, his head cocked to one side, "I should be able to come, and sit in on that second set with you at the end of week. Okay?" His unwavering gaze held absolute sincerity.

She nodded. "Okay, I hope so."

"Oh, and one other thang… I got us, some tickets, to the Hawks game tomorrow. Think Charlotte would be interested?" The corners of his mouth quirked into a smile.

"Oh my god, really?" Amazed, she slid her arms inside his jacket and around his waist. "She'd love that. She's never been." Although, thanks to her father, Michonne had had the pleasure of attending a number of games throughout her life.

"Me and Carl, we go every year a few times."

"And he won't mind, us intruding?"

"To be honest it was his idea. I think he wants to secure that signed T-shirt."

She rolled her eyes.

He laughed. "See how beneficial dating a diehard Hawks fan can be?"

"Mmhm…" she beamed at him, loving how charming this man's goofiness could be.

"Play your cards right, and there might be foam finger in it for yuh."

"Is that the best you got, Mr. Grimes?"

He enjoyed the seductive tone her voice had taken once again. "Oh I like that." Together with a craving that teased in her eyes, it gave Rick second thoughts about returning to his office – More than second thoughts actually. More like third, and fourth, and...

Tilting her chin up with his index finger, he captured her sweet lips again, not caring about the stream of people around them. His claim on her mouth wasn't meant to be for long, but they both fell into a trance that left them reeling.

Breathless, they then parted from each other.

"Miss Des Vignes," Rick's own voice now deepened, "I'm just getting started."

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"De-fense! De-fense!"
The bright lights, the roaring crowd, the animated air had all infused Charlotte with such electrifying excitement, that her innocent face lit up with pure delight.

"De-fense! De-fense!"

Michonne stared in utter amazement, as her child chanted at the top of her lungs, pumping her fist, showing heartfelt support for the home team. All of this, of course, at the eager coaching of the father-son Grimes duo seated next to her.

Both Rick and Carl were decked out in black and red Hawks fan gear, from their snapback caps, to their hooded jackets. These guys were serious. Michonne had to admit that their enthusiasm was catching.

"Who's the blonde patch guy?" asked Charlotte, as she pointed towards the basketball court with her 'True to Atlanta' foam finger.

"Oh that's Dennis Schroder," mumbled Carl, his mouth filled with candy. "He's our point guard."

"What's a point guard do?" Her brows creased, as she nibbled on a lone French fry. "Guard the points?" she snickered, feeling proud of the wise crack she made.

Carl scrunched his face, highly unamused, "Don't be so lame. It's not cute."

"Oh whatever. Geez…" She shook her head in exasperation wondering why he always had to have some annoying comment to make.

"Anyways," he continued, "the point guard is the guy who brings down the ball after it's been inbounded."

"Inbound what?" Charlotte leaned in closer to him, just as sound effects clamored from the speakers which made it hard for her to hear.

"I said in-boun-ded!"

"Oh…" She paused for a second. The amount of terminology she'd heard so far was hard to keep straight. "What is that?"

Carl shook his head. "That's when they throw the ball… from out of bounds, to put it into play… You know Charlotte if I have to explain everything to you I'd miss the entire game."

Rick then elbowed him into his side. "Hey be nice."

"Ouch Dad…" Glancing back at his father, he passed his hand along his ribs. "What I mean to say is, there'll be other games. You won't get it all tonight."

Her gaze switched to Rick then back to Carl, uncertain as to what he was implying. "Sooo you think we'll be doing this again? Like soon?"

Carl shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? You like the game, don't you?"

She cast her glance back out to the court with a beaming smile. "I love it!"

"Well you've got a lot to learn. And besides, you're kinda slow on the uptake."

Her face soured in an instant, and shot him a pointed look of annoyance.
Again, Rick jabbed him – hard.

"Ow! Dad I'm just teasing. God."

As the game came to a pause for half-time, they all shuffled their way out, along with the crowd, to the concession stand.

While standing in line, Michonne, positioned behind Charlotte, held on to her daughter's shoulders as they deliberated between getting something salty or sweet...Nachos or candy.

"Down by seventeen points... our guys are getting creamed Mom," Charlotte commented on the disappointing close of the second quarter.

Michonne shrugged. "What do you expect? We're playing Cleveland. These guys are the top dog of the Eastern Conference."

Rick, who stood to Michonne's left, turned and glared at her. His ears were burning. "Gotta have faith Charlotte," he encouraged, lowering his eyes to the young girl. There was no way he was about to just stand there and allow her to be poisoned by doubt. "Our boys... they're just getting started. You'll see. Don't listen to your Mom. Stay loyal."

Michonne raised her palms in protest. "Now wait, Cleveland has the numbers, that's all--"

"I'm loyal Rick," Charlotte asserted without hesitation. "We got this."

"Ah..." Rick cupped her small chin and smiled. "Good girl."

A sweet warmth coated Michonne's heart in that moment, and with a smile of her own she reached across to take a hold of Rick's hand, intertwining their fingers. How easy it was for him to establish a good rapport with her daughter. And she deeply appreciated his efforts.

It took them some time, but eventually, they made it to the top of the line. Just then, however, Rick got a call, and he stepped away to answer it. After a minute or two, he came back but stood off to the side. He waited till after they got their goodies before rejoining them.

"What's wrong?" Michonne asked, detecting his solemn change of expression.

"I, I'm real sorry about this..." Stammering, his eyes evaded contact with hers. "I uh, I got some things to take care of." Each word littered with caution.

Michonne shook her head and stepped closer to him. "No, Rick. Not now... I mean it's late." Her voice went quiet, not wanting to be heard by the children.

"That doesn't matter. This client just flew in and he's here only for a day. I gotta see him."

'Screw the client!' She shouted in her head. Her hand reached for her neck as the strong reaction surprised her. She swallowed it down, the ire, before it escaped out of her mouth. "Rick...Please?" She tried her best not to sound alarmed, or desperate, especially as the kids stood right behind her.

Her plea made Rick grimace with guilt. "I'm sorry," was all he could offer, "Try to understand?"

Raising her hand she lightly grasped his arm. "It's important?"

He looked up at her. "It is. I wouldn't do this to you if I didn't have to."

Her overwhelming disappointment matched the earnest regret in his eyes.
Rick was a good man, so she would do as he requested. She would try to understand. This… was just for a time period. She needed to have patience.

She shook off the cloud of displeasure that threatened to engulf her, and put on her big girl smile. "It's, okay," she nodded.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll take Carl home. You can come by and pick him up when you're finished."

He lowered his head and placed a grateful kiss on her cheek. "I won't be long."

Rick then took Carl aside and informed him of his need to leave. He made his son promise to look after their guests, and in the next minute, he hurried off.

As the now party of three headed back to their seats, junk food in hand, they stopped first for Charlotte to dart in to the bathroom. Michonne couldn't help but notice the distinct disdain in Carl's face.

"Hey." She bumped his shoulder flashing a wide grin.

But in return, he glowered at her, and her fake countenance fell.

"You agree with what he did tonight?" Carl fumed. "You think that was right?"

"Your Dad has a lot on his shoulders," she defended. "Why don't you give him a break?"

"No, I shouldn't…And you shouldn't." He shook his head. "I mean I thought I was used to it, but…"

'Used to it?' Her brows furrowed. Studying him for a beat or two, "You wanna leave?" she asked, thinking it wouldn't make any sense for him to sit and stew, when he probably would just rather go home. "We could get something real to eat."

Tilting his head to the side, not unlike his father, a pondering expression eased across his face. He regarded her for a brief moment, then the hardness in his eyes fell away. "No," he finally replied. "No not yet. Charlotte's enjoying herself. This is her first game." He shook his head. "Let's not ruin it any further than we have to."

Michonne felt something swell within her. Something like awe mixed with disbelief, at the young man's level of consideration. She couldn't help it when she got misty-eyed.

"Maybe after?" he asked.

"Sure… after." Blinking her silly tears away, Michonne playfully shook the top of his head granting him an appreciative smile. It dawned on her that his unselfishness, together with his perceptiveness, made Carl an impressive individual. Despite whatever issues Rick and his wife suffered throughout their marriage, they did something right.

A curiosity sparked an eagerness within her to find out more. "Come on," she nodded at the restroom behind him, "Charlotte's coming out. Half-time is almost over."

It would be nice to spend more time with him.
Chapter 11

Chapter 11: "So, tell me what's been keeping you from me?"

Two nights after the Hawks game, Michonne found herself sitting in Aria – a five-star restaurant situated in the affluent district of Buckhead. Snacking on marinated olives, and nursing a glass of Rose, she waited with great patience for her date to arrive.

This was her first experience dining at that particular establishment, but it was well-known, and getting a reservation at such short notice was damn near impossible. Rick must've called in one hell of a favor – Too bad it may have been wasted though.

Fiddling with her earlobe and the gold star dangling from it, her eyes took stock of the beautiful décor surrounding her. Everything screamed pure elegance. But the upscale, Roman inspired architecture, and the extraordinary light fixtures that spanned the ceiling overhead, were not having their desired effect on her.

She didn't feel special, nor did she feel comfortable.

Rather, residual feelings of frustration swirled around inside of Michonne like thick syrup. Her mind kept switching back to earlier in the day, to when she had been in an almost similar, solitary position. The only difference was, the white linen dining table she was presently seated at, instead of her office desk.

The nagging voice in her head warned her that tonight would more than likely turn out just the same, as Rick Grimes was already twenty minutes late. Would she wait a full hour again, before calling to find out where he happened to be?

Cupping her hands around the cool glass of wine, Michonne lifted it to her lips and indulged in another long, slow, sip.

As she set it back down, a voice then came from behind her.

"Hey."

Despite her ruined mood, she let out an immediate sigh of relief. "Hi."

"Look I'm sorry, about..." As she stood to greet him, Rick was rendered speechless. The black lace dress she wore, wickedly accentuated every curve and every line. With her locs pulled in a half updo, and her heart shaped lips glossed in ruby red, Michonne was jaw-dropping gorgeous. His face burned at the sensual vision before him.

However, as he pulled her close for a kiss, he didn't miss the stiffness defining her eyes.

"About?" she asked, returning to her seat.

He cleared his throat and sat opposite her, resolved to quickly make amends. "About this. Didn't mean to be so late."

"At least you showed up," she retorted, the words jumping off of her tongue despite her wanting to be cordial.
"Don't look at me like that." He shook his head, already feeling bad for having kept her waiting. Especially after the incident that took place back at Angelo’s that same afternoon.

They had a scheduled appointment with two interviewees, and he’d promised to be there to assist. But Rick never made an appearance, and he never even called. It was she who had to contact him, only to be told, by Aaron nonetheless, that he wasn't going to make it.

"How am I looking at you?" Michonne spoke softly and with deliberate intent. Shifting his focus from her icy glare, Rick reached for his glass of water. "Like you're mad… like you wanna run me through with a sword." Thank god there weren't any sharp knives around, but he had half a mind to check beneath the table, just in case.

"Why would I be mad Rick? Tell me, what's wrong with this picture."

"Don't do that… Look, about earlier today –"

"Yes…" Her eyes widened at him, hoping that whatever explanation he had, would come up to scratch.

"Work… It couldn't be helped. Things got carried away on an acquisition I've been working on, and I'd simply lost track of time." This date was supposed to remedy that.

"I shouldn't have even agreed to come tonight with that shit you pulled," she spat out. Rick dipped his head and narrowed his eyes at her. "You know what's been going on… what I've been dealing with."

"It's your first week as CEO…"

"That's right."

"… And you have to prove yourself. I know." She drew in a deep breath. "I see that, Rick. I get that." Moving forward, she leaned into the table, her arms stretched out before her. "But let's not forget what we're doing here... And it's not just us."

Rick's expression dulled, "Yeah I know that. I get that too."

"Do you?"

"I do, Michonne. It's just…" he sighed. "…The truth is, thangs are much more complicated than I initially thought they were. Besides… I thought you said you could handle it."

"I could handle it. And I am," she snapped. "Just don't like being set up is all I'm saying Rick. The lateness, the unreliability, having to be 'fit in'… I don't like it." She drew back as disappointment clouded her features. "Don't get me wrong. I believe in you, I trust you. And I, will do, whatever I can to support you. But let's keep this thing between us balanced. Please? This isn't going to work if it's one-sided."

"Is that how you feel? Like things are, one-sided?"

"I, I don't know, but it could so easily end up that way."

He nodded in agreement, "Okay." It was better to have that conversation early on, before everything got critical. And Rick felt that there was a chance that things were going to get critical, unless he acted with force at the company.
He then held his hand out to her across the table. "I'm sorry." He understood her frustrations. He'd let her down twice in one day – it was a bit much.

First she closed her eyes for a moment, whilst drawing in a deep breath. Then, returning her gaze to his, she leaned forward again, and placed her hand within his. It was warm and calming, and her irritableness melted away. Mere physical contact with him was like an antidote. How did that happen?

"Anyway," she began, wanting to start over. "I'm glad you could make it tonight. So, tell me, what's been keeping you from me?"

Rick lifted her hand and traced her knuckles with his index finger. "I got a lot eyes on me. All sorts of questions out of nowhere over nothing."

"That's to be expected," she whispered, as she watched him bring her palm up to his lips and ever so gently he kissed it, as though her skin were a rare delicacy.

"It's Phillip…” he began to explain, staring into her eyes. "He's not making things easy for me, not by any means. He's out for blood. Wants to see me burn." Placing her hand back down, he emitted an exasperated sigh. "Today, I got into a battle with this client called Semaj Consultancy. We had an agreement that six years after our initial investment, GEDC would offer their equity on a public stock exchange."

"But they want to buy it back themselves?"

"Exactly… at a lower rate of course. And my brother, is backing them up. Acting like their god-damned savior. I cannot slip up with these people. I won't. Not once… I didn't plan for this. I had to work twice as hard this week and I know, Michonne, it's not what you signed up for."

"No... but we'll get through it. This is what you do. You don't give in. It's a curse and it's a blessing." Smiling at him, Rick's ambition was what led them to becoming a couple in the first place. But then she secretly hoped it wouldn't tear them apart. "Just no more flaking out. Promise me that."

"I promise... Being here with you, tonight… well this is just everything. You look so amazing."

Her cheeks got full. "Thank you."

"That dress for me?" His eyes descended to scan the plunging neckline where a gold chain dangled tauntingly.

Michonne drew her lower lip between her teeth. "Who else Mr. Grimes?"

"Oh I like that."

She chuckled at his flirtatious tone as she threw her glance around the fancy restaurant, finally at ease. "This place… You're trying to…"

"Impress?"

"Butter me up."

"Guilty as charged." Rick grinned. "Is it working?"

Tilting her head to one side, "Doesn't matter where we are," she answered honestly. "I just like being with you." She observed how his face went red, and she simpered.
"But," picking up the menu she perused her options, "I appreciate the gesture… So I'm getting whatever's most expensive, if you don't mind."

Rick couldn't help the hearty laugh that burst out of him. "By all means." Picking up his menu as well, he felt relieved that the air was cleared between them. He would try his utmost to keep it that way. She could order whatever the hell she liked.

"Wanna tell me about your day?" he inquired, after awhile.

"No. Had enough talk about work."

He nodded his understanding. "Of course. Well what about tomorrow? Wanna talk about that?"

"Neither," she huffed at the mention of her ex's visit. "Definitely not. I've done everything in my power to avoid dwelling on seeing Daryl."

"I could be there, if you want."

"No. Too much too soon. Besides, it's about Charlotte. I have to grit my teeth and bare it."

"Okay," he said. "Well let's just order then, try to enjoy the rest of the night with each other."

"The rest of the night?" She arched her brow at him, together with a coy grin. "How late does this place open?"

He laughed at her quip. "That's not what I had in mind, Miss Des Vignes."

"Mmm." That wasn't what she had in mind either.

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Gazing at Michonne, Rick knew that she always had a strength in her eyes. It spoke to something at his very core. Something, he forgot existed. It was easy to discern that she was special. One of a kind.

"You ready to go in?" Rick asked, as he sat outside of Michonne's house with her in his truck. Having had one too many glasses of wine, he had no choice but to drive her home – Not that he had any objections whatsoever. Right now, leaning towards him, she was giving him the 'look'. He couldn't help but be amused by her squinting eyes.

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

Shrugging her shoulders, "Maybe," she replied, allowing her gaze to rake over the length of him.

"I thought you had too much to drink? That's what you said."

She threw up her palms with a naughty expression and shook her head. "I lied."

Rick chuckled even harder at her endearing mischievousness. Earlier on, she wanted to bite his head off, and now… "You want me to come in Miss Des Vignes?"

She nodded, "The thought has crossed my mind." They both had had such a topsy turvy week, and from the way things were going, for him specifically, she perceived that it would be more of the same in the days to come. "But… Carol's there. We have to come up with a story." She scrunched her nose.
"You're a full-grown woman." He peered at her in disbelief. Not to mention that that was her house.

"Yeah but still..." This was nobody's business, "...It's embarrassing."

"I know..." Resting his head back, he pondered on a solution. "Okay, okay. Here's what we're gonna do...You got a back door at least? I mean, I don't mind, long as I don't have to wait out in the cold for too long."

Michonne giggled. "It's not that cold, but no..." she sighed, thinking how he was right. They were both adults, and no shenanagins were necessary. "...We'll just go in and act normal. Just a night cap, to talk about things, business – I actually do have some ideas to run by you." Her brows shot up as she turned in her seat to fully face him. "Remember that space we talked about expanding? How long –"

"Are you serious?" Rick narrowed his eyes at her, wondering what was happening – Finding it hard to believe that she just made a switch on him, in the blink of an eye.

"I have the plans saved on my laptop..." she persisted.

"Michonne..." He shook his head at her.

"...We could take just a quick look at it..."

"Michonne..."

"...Tell me what you think about the design, about how we could make it work."

He placed his finger on her lips. "Business, is the last thing, on my mind... well at least not that kind." He cupped her face and she blushed, a bit discomfited by getting side-tracked.

Drawing closer to him, she lightly clasped her hands around his neck.

The caress of her cool fingers made a fervent sensation spread right through him. Bowing his head, Rick took a taste of her tantalizing lips.

Michonne went into a daze as Rick began consuming her, drinking her in. His hands roamed everywhere, igniting everything. And she loved it. It had been too damn long. Her brain switched off, and her body moved on instinct. Within a single moment, she found herself straddling him.

"We could stay here," she breathed. Hell at that rate she would've climbed into the back seat if he wanted to.

"No, not like this." Rick, breathless as well, found himself hypnotized by the rise and fall of her exposed chest in the silvery moonlight. Her dazzling skin was gorgeous. "Let's just go in." He was damn near pleading.

Pulling back, she bit her lower lip and did a mental check. Charlotte definitely would be asleep, but Carol...what plausible excuse could she concoct to explain Rick's visit? But like it mattered anyway. She wouldn't believe a single word Michonne said.

As she felt Rick draw her back in, flush against his chest, Michonne inhaled deeply – his mandarin and spice cologne assailing her senses.

"Hey." Waiting for her answer with his heavy-lidded eyes, his hands found their way beneath the lace fabric of her short dress. At the graze of his fingers, he watched her gasp and felt her legs quake.
"Okay yeah," she moaned, it had been too damned long. "Let's go in."

How they made it from his truck to her front door was beyond her – the memory hazed in a fog of need. As soon as they were inside, they bid Carol an extremely awkward farewell and within minutes they were entangled between her cool white sheets – Wanting, taking exploring, with such heart stopping intensity the searing pleasure made them both shudder.

Rick marveled at how this smart, interesting, and head strong woman was now so openly vulnerable with him. It made him want her that much more in every possible way. He wanted her trust, her faith, her loyalty, her love – He wanted her whole, with nothing to hide.

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Hours later, Michonne's eyes fluttered open after a heavy slumber to greet a new day. Her body twitched at the distinct warmth weighing on her lower back. Lifting her head, her neck twisted around, and through her blurry gaze she glanced behind her. Discovering Rick sleeping soundly, her mouth curved into a contented smile.

"Hey." Reaching backwards, her fingers stretched out to tousle his curly hair.

"Mmm." He only snuggled closer to her and rubbed his stubbled cheek against her skin.

Michonne giggled in response. "What time is it?" she asked, with a raspy voice.

Rick raised his head, opening his gem-like eyes to see her. "It's early," he shrugged.

"It is?" She took in how her room was awash in sunshine, "I don't think so." Her phone was left on her bedside table and so she tried to reach for it. But Rick's arms tightened their hold around her, tugging her down while simultaneously shifting himself up.

Michonne smiled as he passed his hands along the side of her hips. "Why is your skin so smooth?" he asked, with a playful grin.

Raising her hand she caressed the side of his face. "Why are your eyes so blue?"

He laughed and pinched her chin before brushing his thumb across her mouth. "Why are your lips so soft?"

"Why is your voice so husky?"

Enjoying their little game, he dragged her back on top of him. He felt like he couldn't have her close enough.

Michonne then tilted her head, and he buried his face into her neck. "Why do you smell so good?"

She sucked in her lips as his tongue grazed along her collarbone.

"Taste so good?" he whispered, before making his way down towards her chest. "Think we can go again?"

Despite her happy soreness that swept across her abdomen, she knew that they could especially as his fingers dug deep into her upper back.

In response, she found his mouth with a hungry kiss. But then, there came a knock at the door.

"Mom? Are you up?"
The timely interruption caused them both to giggle. Michonne placed her hand over Rick's mouth. "Yes sweetie."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Not really…"

"Mom… You gotta get up."

"I know Charlotte. Could you just give me a –"

"No you gotta come down now because Dad's here. He's early."

In an instant, panic rose in Michonne's throat like bile. She flew out of the bed, her sights set on the white satin robe hooked on the back of the door. Yanking it down, in a second she pulled it on. "Charlie baby, would you take him into the living room? I'll be down in fifteen minutes," she instructed, through the door.

As her daughter's footsteps trailed off, Michonne spun around, snatched Rick's strewn clothes up from off the floor, and flung them onto the bed. "You have to go… Now!"

He stared at her in disbelief and started to laugh. "This isn't necessary." What was her plan, to sneak him out?

"Rick this isn't happening, not like this!"

His shoulders fell. The vehemence in her words had him taken aback. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." Wide-eyed, she nodded vigorously. "You gotta go… Right now."

He moved to the edge of the bed and pulled on his pants before getting up. Rick then turned to face her with a defiance in his eyes. "No… I'm not doing that," he responded, in a dismissive matter of fact way. "I'm not going anywhere."

Michonne swallowed hard against the knot in her throat, her stomach clenched and she couldn't breathe.

'Shit!'
Chapter 12: "Don't feel bad that you're starting a new life."

The mood in Michonne's bedroom was no longer serene. It had shifted from blissful to confrontational in the blink of an eye. The two lovers steeled themselves as they stared at each other from opposite ends of the room.

"Wha- what did you say?"

Bending forward, Rick reached to retrieve his shirt from off of Michonne's bed. "You heard me."

"We discussed this, remember?"

He remembered. But the degree and the severity of her rapid reaction triggered his suspicions. He couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it than she'd initially explained. "Is there something else going on here?"

Now her heart raced wildly in her chest. "Something else? Like what?" What the hell was he insinuating?

He shrugged, as he pulled on his clothes. "I really don't see what the big deal is." Stepping around the bed, he then grabbed a hold of his jacket, and moved closer to her. "Are you ashamed, of having me here, now?"

"Rick no, of course not." She looked at him with sympathetic eyes. How could he say that? How sweet and satisfying and completely delightful it was to wake up with him wrapped around her that morning. "I just want today to be uncomplicated is all babe." She shook her head. "There's nothing else."

Lifting his chin, his eyes narrowed down at her. "Being with me is complicated?"

"Yes. I mean no…" She blew out a breath of frustration. 'Oh my god what is happening right now?' Was she being interrogated? "What I mean is, the situation is… Daryl doesn't know about you yet, and I just can't have some man come out from my bedroom first thing in the morning to meet him. Not like this." What was so hard to understand? If she could only get through this day without incident. If she could just make it through by playing it safe. Surprising him with Rick, was not playing it safe.

"Are you still in-love with him? Is that it?"

Michonne's jaw fell right open. "I can't believe you just asked me that. After last night? Have you lost your damn mind?" Why was he being so difficult? Why now, when time was of the essence. Having a full-fledged argument right then didn't make any sense. "Listen… this really isn't your decision to make. So… could we do this later?"

"Yeah, no. This, is what's gonna happen. I'm gonna go down there with you, and I'm gonna introduce myself. But I, I won't stay. Not if you don't want me to." His hands then came up and cupped her face. "You're nervous, now I get that… this isn't simple." Peering at her, he tried to discern what it was she was hiding from him – And he felt like she was hiding something from him. But, whatever it was, he needed her to understand that despite the annoyance she felt towards him –
the annoyance that was clearly etched across her face – that despite that, she had a point the night before – This relationship couldn't be one-sided. He had a say too. This decision wasn't just hers to make.

"There's no way I'm sneaking out," Rick maintained. "You could forget that."

Michonne clamped her eyes shut and pulled away. "You don't know what I know. It's been three years," she hissed. Her insides recoiled, as she thought back to the emotional roller-coaster her last encounter with Daryl had been.

"Yeah you told me…" But not much else. She never let him know exactly what took place that time before. He figured she would, of course, when the timing was right. And the timing, right then, wasn't right. She had guests, they were waiting… her daughter, was waiting.

Resigned in his decision, Rick pulled himself together, made up her bed and sat tight, while she showered and got dressed. Once Michonne was finally ready, they began to make their way down the stairs, and, instinctively he grabbed a hold of her hand.

Michonne came to a stop and for a couple of seconds stared at him in silence.

Rick saw the uncertainty written all over her face, "It's better this way," he reassured with a small smile.

She nodded and even gave his hand a quick squeeze but apprehension weighed on her like a heavy stone as they continued into the kitchen.

Once they stepped into the living room, Rick realized that he never paid much attention to the room's décor. It was quite cozy and sophisticated with the bright white interior and contrasting dark hardwood floors. A square, glass framed coffee table sat in the centre of a silver-grey furniture set that added a touch of elegance.

Charlotte, in her polka dot pajamas, was nestled in-between a brown haired man dressed in a dark, V-neck sweater over a white dress shirt, and a striking woman with a caramel colored complexion, and thick black curly hair framing her features. Streaming rays of golden light poured through the window illuminating the threesome on the sofa as the adults doted on the young girl. They were greeted by a picture-perfect scene fit for a catalogue.

Charlotte jumped up when she became aware of their presence. Her feet were surrounded by shiny gift bags in an assortment of colors and sizes. "Mom, finally… Oh! Hey Rick."

"Morning Charlotte," Rick replied, as the couple stood also to meet them.

A serious demeanor in an instant, slid across the man's face as soon as he saw them, or more specifically… him.

When Michonne didn't hesitate to let him go, Rick glanced over to her. There was an indescribable look in her eyes, as she stared at her beaming daughter clinging to her father's waist. Her arms instinctively wrapped around herself.

"Hey," Michonne's ex-husband greeted as he passed his hand affectionately along his daughter's hair.

"Hey, Daryl," She refused to meet his gaze as he peered at her, and neither one attempted to touch the other.
"Who the hell are you?" Daryl shifted his attentions to the stranger next to his ex-wife. Stretching out his hand, "Rick Grimes," he introduced himself, as he looked him over.

"Huh, is that right?" Daryl grunted, taking Rick's hand and releasing it in a nanosecond, not hesitating to size him up as well.

"It is." Rick nodded at Michonne. "We're together."

"Yeah Daddy," Charlotte chimed in, too excited to pick up on the uneasiness between her parents. "This is Mommy's friend."

"Well… alright." Daryl's eyes shelled a hundred other questions at his uncommunicative ex-wife. After an awkward silence that ensued, the woman, who stood behind Daryl, cleared her throat and stepped forward. "Hi. I'm Sasha."

"Oh, sorry 'bout that," Daryl apologized as his face went crimson red. "Michonne, Sasha. Sasha, Michonne."

"Hello, nice to meet you." Michonne literally grit her teeth, pursed her lips and presented a plastic smile at the bright young woman who stood prideful at Daryl's side.

Rick could only imagine the barrage of thoughts blazing through her head, as Michonne shook the other woman's hand.

Not wanting to over stay his welcome, being a man of his word, Rick, nonetheless, made a quick exit. He wasn't supposed to be there. He felt it. It displeased him, but he left. In any case, if the prickly tension between the two exes was any indication of how the visit was going to be, he doubted that it would last for very long.

For the next fifteen minutes, Michonne found herself sitting on the two-seater with her daughter, their arms linked, listening to Daryl's fiancé as the couple reseated themselves on the sofa. Sasha raved about the bakery where they purchased the croissants they'd brought with them. Apparently, she loved bread and pastries, a love that was passed on to her from her grandparents. But white flour raises your risk for diabetes, so, she only indulged on special occasions.

"Mom, you okay?" Charlotte whispered, taking note of the glazed look on her mother's face.

"Yes sweetie. Just… exhausted," Michonne nodded with a reassuring smile. The truth was she couldn't help but wonder how this woman fit with Daryl, other than the tight cut black leather jacket she wore over a white T-shirt and jeans. What was it that made her agree to be his wife? Of course she knew why she herself married the bastard, but Sasha had nothing in common with her. This woman seemed to be Daryl's opposite, flashing her pearly whites every chance she got. While Mr. Dixon had a permanent scowl on his face.

"Can I just say, you have such a beautiful home. I adore the layout," Sasha complimented, her hands gesturing at the space as her eyes trailed up to the ceiling then back down to the floor.

"Thank you. It's comfortable," Michonne said.

"Sasha, she's into real estate so she's got a good eye." Daryl threw his arm around her shoulders.

"That's how we met actually," Sasha added. "I helped him find his new house in Hollywood Hills. It has an amazing view, so of course it was an easy sell," she chuckled.
"Really Daddy?" Charlotte beamed.

"Yeah, you'll love it out there," Daryl commented, glancing cautiously at Michonne.

"Mmhmm. Okay," Was all Michonne could say, as she clutched her daughter closer.

Not too long afterwards, the front door opened, "Hello. We're here." Carol and Morgan had arrived.

'Thank you thank you thank you God!'

Michonne had all but forgotten that she requested their company. They would buffer her from the stress of the day.

"Hey there's my pookie," said Carol, as she and her husband entered the living room.

"Who the hell is pookie?" Daryl creased his forehead.

"Well it sure as shit isn't you, now is it?" Carol scowled at him. It didn't take much for this young man to irk her. By the time she'd become Mrs. Jones, his marriage to her niece, unfortunately, was already on the rocks. Therefore, their encounters were typically terse at the very best.

"Damn. You still got a mouth on you, don'cha?" Daryl rose up from the sofa once again, and his fiancé followed suit.

Carol flashed him a fake smile before turning to give Charlotte a kiss on her forehead.

"Daryl my boy," Morgan interjected. "It's a real pleasure to see you." He shook his hand. Always so cordial. The epitome of Southern hospitality. "And aren't you gonna introduce us to this lovely lady?"

"Yeah. This here is Sasha… Uncle Morgan," Daryl shifted allowing them to greet each other, "… and that succubus over there, is his wife Carol."

Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise. "Daddy, seriously?"

"Sorry princess, I'm just messin' around. Ain't that right, Carol?"

However, taking a seat in the recliner the woman kept silent. The looks of disdain between the two were so severe, it was downright laughable.

Yes, ideal buffer indeed.

As Morgan settled on the arm rest next to his wife, the conversation changed to, and revolved around, the younger couple's plans for their upcoming June wedding. Everything from the venue to the dessert table was mentioned. Even details such as Sasha's favourite flower, white calla lilies, would be a prominent aspect in the reception's décor. With four bridesmaids and grooms men, she would've also liked for Charlotte to join the bridal party with her seven year old niece Kendra, as a flower girl. And their guest list? Well they preferred to keep the gathering small and simple – Just around two hundred and fifty of their closest family and friends.

"Two hundred and fifty? That's small?" remarked Uncle Morgan. "I didn't even know Daryl had that many friends to begin with," he chuckled.

"Hmm," Michonne responded with bare interest. Friends? Or his entourage? His groupies perhaps? He most assuredly had his hands filled with those.. Same difference she guessed. They could throw the rice after the ceremony at the happy couple… or their pregnancy tests…
"Well…" Sasha began to explain, "… honestly, most persons invited are from my side of the family. We're a big group. My Dad alone has eight brothers and sisters. And my big brother just had kid number four."

"All live out in California?" Carol asked.

"No. Actually I'm from Florida originally. Moved out west for college, and well… I never looked back. I mean L.A. is so fascinating. The most interesting people I've ever met. I love it out there. And so does Daryl. It's his favourite place to be." She then raised her hand and caressed the side of his face. "Isn't that right honey?"

"Yeah… interesting people, lots of them. I love it." Daryl replied, in his usual monotone voice, yet with a half smile and a quick nod.

Michonne quirked a brow at him. "Hmm. Is that right?" she repeated. It definitely didn't seem so – well, not when she lived out there. No there wasn't anything or anyone interesting enough that could've kept his lily-white… sorry… his calla lily-white ass at home. Not even a brand new baby.

Daryl rubbed his palms together, perturbed by Michonne's caustic question. "It is." His reply held a notable acidic tone as he knew instantly what his ex-wife was implying.

"Yes, interesting people. Hmm," Michonne glanced away from him.

"That your damned answer for everything now?" he spat out.

Michonne swept her loose locs to the side and chuckled. He was so easy.

"Okay… well," Morgan spoke up, "My Carol brought a scrumptious fruit salad that's really out of this world. So how's 'bout we take a break?"

As Carol made her way off the chair, about to dish out, Michonne stopped her, insisting that she would handle it instead. So Carol opted to take Charlotte up to her room to get changed, and also to put her gift bags away. Sasha sweetly volunteered herself and Daryl to assist with carrying the dozen or so bags. And if Michonne didn't mind, she had a keen interest in the layout of the rest of the house, not to mention that Lego set collection the pre-teen had been dying to show off.

Michonne shook her head. "I don't mind."

However, "Give me a moment aight? I'll be right up with you. Promise." Daryl lingered behind, joining his ex-wife in the kitchen.

"Come on 'Chonne, what the hell?" he said, as soon as everyone else was out of earshot. "Don'cha know you gotta give me a heads up? You just gone and spring some dude on me?"

Opening an overhead cupboard, she reached up to take down six ceramic dessert bowls. "I didn't plan it this way," she hissed. "It just happened. Wasn't thinking about you. Besides… you're two hours early."

Daryl moved to the kitchen island and uncovered Carol's serving dish. He picked out a blueberry and slipped it into his mouth. "Well we caught an early flight. Didn't think it would've mattered. Why you ain't mention him before?"

Michonne turned and stepped over, just in time to slap him on his wrist as he tried to swipe another berry. "It's none of your business, that's why." Removing the dessert from his grubby fingers to the other counter top, she then pulled open her cutlery draw and retrieved a serving spoon.
"Like hell it ain't Michonne. Can't have some perv hanging around my girls."

"What did you say?" She slammed the spoon down and whirled partially to face him.

He shook his head. "Nothin'"

She regarded him in silence for a few moments, choosing her next few words wisely. "Rick and I, we work together. He's a good man."

"How long?"

Turning her back, she grabbed up the spoon and continued filling the bowls. "Not long. We're just starting out."

"And he's met my baby girl already?"

"We work together Daryl," she huffed. "Besides, she likes him."

He stepped over and appeared beside her.

Her body went rigid. She froze. Unable to help herself, she even held her breath. Slowly, she allowed her gaze to meet his, in between the lengthy strands of his hair. When she did, doubt, mixed with a dose of suspicion, was swirling in his eternally sad eyes.

Michonne shook her head at him, waiting for the response that was on the tip of his tongue.

"I don't," he said, in the next moment.

She sighed. "Don't what?"

"I don't like him." He shook his hair away from his face as he stared at her.

"You've just met him. We can arrange some –"

"It don't matter," he insisted, "Still won't like him."

She gave a bitter laugh at his childishness, some things will never change. He wanted to have his cake, and eat it too. "Well I like Sasha. So get over it."

"You do? Could have fooled me."

Neeing a bit of space, Michonne moved towards the fridge, opening it to search for a can of whip cream. "I do." Her issue with the woman was if she knew just what the hell she was getting into.

He took up one of the bowls. "Yeah well, she's likeable."

With narrowed eyes she spun around to glare at him. "Excuse me, what is that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Give me a break Daryl. Enough with the bull –"

"Hey!" Waltzing in right then, and thankfully so, with a sing-song voice, and a bottle of wine, was her savior and best friend. "Like a good neighbor, Andrea is here."

A good neighbor indeed. She came in the bloody nick of time…although, to be honest Michonne never invited her. But still… Her heart lifted, and she grinned at her. "Took you long enough."
"My apologies girlfriend." Handing over the bottle, Andrea then looked between the two before surveying Daryl. "Mr. Dixon, you're looking… better."

"Yeah right. I'm gonna go check on Charlie." He turned and exited without delay. Only been there for an hour, and the place was like a damn circus. Who else was gonna show up next? Bobo the clown?

The petite blonde held her friend's hand and winked at her. "Don't worry Mich. I've got your back."

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After all the chit chat, while everyone feasted on fruit salad, croissants and juice, Michonne was ready for the visit to be over and done. Despite the glass of red she and Andrea gulped down, she'd had enough. Enough of the wedding talk. Enough of her daughter gushing over her father. And enough of holding her tongue, swallowing her resentment. She didn't know what this was, but it proved to be a true test of strength and willpower to stay calm and get through this sickening ordeal of pretense for the sake of her angel.

It was time to get back to Rick anyway. Twice she'd excused herself to use the bathroom so that she could call him. But the man refused to answer. And even more alarming, there were no return calls either. Like he couldn't be serious, could he? Was he that upset? It began to bother her.

When time came at last for them to leave, Sasha wanted to go sightseeing downtown, and so Daryl requested if he could take Charlotte along. Michonne agreed, but on the conditions that her Uncle accompanied them, and that her daughter was to be returned home before dark. Morgan and Carol, to whom she was very much indebted at that point, did her the favor and went along.

Just as everyone filed out of her house Daryl told Sasha to hold on in the car for him.

He hovered in the kitchen's archway as Michonne decided to help herself to a second serving of the leftover salad.

Attempting to ignore him, Michonne's thoughts were focused on trying to get a hold of Rick again.

"Why you got her taking after that crazy woman?" he finally uttered. "I don't like her talking that way," Daryl was a bit shocked to hear some unsavory words pass his daughter's lips as she conversed with her aunt Andrea.

"That Dixon blood is why she sometimes has no cover for her mouth," Michonne excused, with an impatient. Besides, the apple never falls too far from the tree. There was some truth to that. In any case, Andrea and Charlotte loved and understood each other. "Don't worry, she's fine."

"No. She ain't…"

Michonne stopped and glanced up at him. After having made it through the past couple of hours without incident, this man was determined to start something. Like an itch he needed to scratch.

"… Not when her folks carry on like we do," he continued. "She texts me, you that right?"

"Yeah. I know that." Nodding her head she studied him, wondering what was he getting at.

"I mean like every day. Every morning, I've gotten messages like 'Hi Daddy, hope you have a great day!' But now it's more like 'Daddy, hope you think about me all the time, because I'm thinking about you.' Or, 'Daddy I miss you. Please, come see me?"
Michonne's heart clenched at the strangled sound in his voice. It compelled her to draw in a long breath.

"Our baby girl's been hurtin'," he asserted. "What we been doing… it ain't right. Letting our feelings about each other take precedent over what's best for her, is messing her up. Don't stand there and tell me BS that she's okay… cause she ain't! If you can't see that..."

"I see it! Okay." It crushed her spirit, knowing that she failed her child. "Our situation is not perfect Daryl, there's no need to remind me of that. Because I'm struggling with my shortcomings too, everyday. But this is just the best that I could do." Her solemn confession poured out thick with grief. This devastation was not what she envisioned when she decided to have a family. Her parents, they never taught her this. She knew better.

Daryl's own guilt forced him to lower his head. He had no response. He could only acknowledge within himself how difficult their failure must be for her as well, and the huge part he played in destroying their family's happiness.

He slumped back against the wall, and Michonne stared at the top of his head.

"I don't know…" he whispered, after awhile of going quiet, "...if I could, say the same…If this is my best. Back then, when I still had the two of you, I didn't know how, to be better for you and for her." Lifting his gaze again, this time he focused beyond her. "With all this, me getting married again… she's smiling but…"He shrugged his shoulders.

Michonne shook her head. "Don't feel bad, for starting a new life. Honestly I thought you would've done this sooner." Michonne offered with genuineness. The truth was that Daryl was a loner, much like herself when they'd first met during her days at college. Having that in common granted them an innate understanding of each other right off the bat.

But deep down to his core, in spite of his aloofness, he craved that familial level of intimacy. When she ended things, she knew it would hurt like a bitch. He'd be stuck with his asshole brother Merle for love and support. And that's exactly what she wanted – to leave him alone, and in need. Just as he had done to her, amongst other things, when he chose to spend so much time away. For the past five years she paid him in kind. No wife, no child, no happy home.

But he found his way out, she supposed. He was moving forward.

Michonne scooped out an extra spoon of fruit for herself. "Charlotte's happy for you. She is."

"That's what you're doing with this Rick, starting a new life?"

Michonne stared at the pegs of mandarin that filled her bowl. "Maybe," Their uncomfortable exchange replayed in her mind and everything else after that, right up until he left. She wondered if there was any way it could've been avoided – If she could make it up to him. She hated that he wouldn't answer his damned phone. Was he trying to prove something by avoiding her calls? Her brows furrowed, "I want to," she admitted, looking up to Daryl to say something equally encouraging.

Instead, his expression closed off from her. His glass-like gaze went blank before it dropped again to the floor. In a flash, he'd bottled up his emotions, and with an air of resignation Daryl straightened up, gave her one last nod, and like a wounded bird, he walked away.

'Typical.'

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Chapter 13: "… you had your reasons…"

Not being able to get in touch with Rick, Michonne made a quick decision to borrow Andrea's car and head over to his house. She hadn't been there before, but she had his address, and Andrea's Civic came equipped with a damn good GPS. He lived out in Marietta, a few counties away from her, covering the distance would take her about forty-five minutes. She didn't mind though. During the solitary drive, she ruminated on the perfect words to say that would reroute them back onto the right track. Michonne released a heavy breath. Was he even going to be there?

In any case, she had to get back home so that her and Andrea go and retrieve her own car back at Aria's restaurant, before Charlotte returned.

As soon as she pulled up outside of Rick's residence, however, she spotted his silver truck parked in the driveway, right next to a hybrid vehicle. 'Okay so he's not dead.'

Michonne jumped out of the car, and for a minute she faltered, uncertain as to how Rick would respond to her just showing up. What mindset would she find him in? How difficult would it be for them to rectify their issue? Regardless, rubbing her palms against her thighs in an attempt to control her quickening heartbeat, she decisively approached the front door of the two-story, brick and stucco house.

Not long after she rang the bell did someone come and open up.

"Oh hey Michonne!" greeted a cheerful Carl, "It's so good to see you."

"Nice to see you too." Observing his attire, "You, umm, you on your way out?" she asked, while stealing a peek over his shoulder. "You and your Dad?"

"No. Aunt Denise. She's taking me to a book reading. Not my thing…" he shrugged, "… but she promised a trip to Game X, so there's that."

Michonne grinned. "Good for you."

"If you're here to see my dad…" He paused and shook his head with slight embarrassment. Of course that's why she was there. "What I meant to say is, I could take you to him." He gestured for her to come in.

"He's okay? Not busy or anything?" she asked, as she crossed the threshold.

Carl scrunched his face as he closed the door behind her, a bit perplexed by the anxious look in her eyes. "Dad's fine. Just out in the back, by the pool. Come on."

Michonne paced her steps following the teenage boy throughout his home. The house was quite beautiful – open, bright, and airy, with a peaceful feel to it. Ideal for hosting dinner parties and family gatherings. Was Lori into that? Being a hostess? As they stepped into the Eat-in kitchen, she admired the granite counter tops of the breakfast bar, and the mahogany table and chairs of the formal dining room. Through the French windows she caught sight of Rick in the backyard fiddling with some equipment, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.
Carl noticed her hesitancy. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it will be," she responded with a quick nod. "Have fun. Oh… wait," Michonne remembered his request just as he turned to walk away. "Charlie didn't forget you, by the way. She got you that signature you wanted."

"Yeah? Awesome!" His face broke into a wide grin. "Can't wait to see it. Tell her I said thanks." Now he had no choice but to cut out all of his teasing. Well… maybe not all of it.

"I will."

In the next moment Carl went on his way, and Michonne pushed open the glass door that led out into the sprawling concrete patio.

Apparently in the middle of doing some maintenance, Rick hauled out from the pool a long hose attached to a vacuum.

"Carl told me you were out here," she called out to him, as she strode in his direction.

Rick stopped what he was doing and spun around, completely surprised, and confused, to see her there. "Hey." Stumbling a bit over the contraption, he placed the equipment down on to the ground. Rick then leaned over and reached for a cloth from off of the diving board to wipe his hands before moving towards her.

"So… you've been busy?" Michonne folded her arms as she came to a standstill a couple of feet away, surveying the various nets, brushes and chemicals laid out behind him.

Rick's feet halted as well. "Yeah." He turned to the side, and adjusted the brim of his cap, as he cast his glance across the clear blue water. "I know it's a bit early, but I had some time… thought I would get ahead of this for Carl when he has his friends over."

Following his gaze, Michonne smiled at his pro-activeness. They were just barely out of March. "Makes sense. I guess that's why, you haven't been answering my calls then?"

"Left my phone inside," he responded within a beat, facing her with a tilt of his head.

She avoided his stare. "Didn't have it with you for this entire time?" That was new. The device was forever with him. Heaven forbid it wasn't within reach for more than two minutes.

"Just been pre-occupied Michonne… with one thang or another."

His blunt curtness made her suck in her lips. She didn't come over there to fight. "Rick –"

"Look, I did see the missed calls," he confessed, as a flicker of annoyance flashed across her face. "I did. I'm sorry about that. But, seemed to me like you needed some space, and some time to deal with… you know, everythang." Truth was he needed some space and some time to clear his mind. Like a drug, she had been consuming his thoughts. He couldn't get over how things played out so awkwardly that morning. "Was thinking maybe, it would've been best to call you back at the end of the day. Didn't occur to me that you would've made it out over here."

"Well I needed to make sure you were okay. If only you'd answer the phone, then I wouldn't have."

"And if I did, answer the phone, what exactly would I have said?"

She shrugged. "How did things go?"
"Wouldn't have to if you'd let me stay…"

"Rick!" Must he be so impossible? Maybe it was a mistake driving over there.

"But you… you had your reasons…"

"I thought I had made myself clear." And what other reasons did he think she had. "Did you listen to anything I said? I am not ashamed of you, or of us. It's just…” she sighed, exasperated by her inability to satisfy him. "Listen, I, I may not have handled things perfectly today. But you, I wanted you to stay and be with me. I did. But I couldn't let you."

"Why?" Rick narrowed his eyes at her in frustration. Did she realize that the situation made him feel a bit humiliated? "This have anything to do with what happened the last time?"

"Yes." Her face contorted at the memory of the embarrassing incident. Lowering her head, Michonne stuck her hands in her back pockets and nodded. "Yes, it does."

Rick folded his arms and peered at her, patiently waiting. "I'm listening."

Perceiving that this man was not about to back down, her only option was to divulge all of the sordid details, whether or not she was ready to do so. But she went quiet. And Rick did too. It took her a full minute before she finally spoke.

"Three years back…There was an altercation… between Daryl and me," she began in a quiet tone, moving nearer towards him as though someone else was lurking around his privacy hedge.

Rick's jaw stiffened. "What kind of an altercation?"

Her eyes shot up at him when she heard the harsh shift in his voice. "He came to my house one night, unexpectedly… he was drunk and I wouldn't let him in. Didn't even know that he found out where I lived. I was furious, and we were both emotional. It was a new low for us. We made a spectacle of ourselves, arguing out in front of my neighbors. It was, insane. Andrea was there… she took Charlotte to her place for me. And I ended up calling for the police. But when they came, we both got arrested and they took us in." There was nothing to be proud about, in fact she regretted that wretched night and it depressed her to no end. Losing the most important person in your life was one thing. But having them constantly make you feel like shit for it was more than anyone should have to handle. And that was exactly what Daryl came to her house to do that night. She shook her head. "I didn't know what to expect today. There is just so much ugliness between Daryl and me, you have no idea. I was afraid for the worst. I didn't want you there to see me at my worst."

Closing the gap between them he raised his hands and cupped her sad face.

Leaning her cheek into his consoling touch, "But you were on my mind the whole time," she admitted further.

"And how did things go?" he asked with sincerity, grateful that she recognized the need to open up to him.

"Well…" Smiling appreciatively, she pulled her hands out of her pockets and held him by his arms. "…Carol and Morgan were there. So they maintained the law and order," she joked.

Rick let out a light chuckle. "So no trips to the jailhouse?"

"Not today, no."
"Good, glad to hear it," he responded still grinning. "And… I'm sorry for not picking up. I –"

"No, I get it," she interjected, regretting that her panicked actions caused him to feel slighted. "Just don't be mad anymore."

"I'm not, okay?"

She nodded, "Okay." Grasping his hands she then placed them around her waist as she shifted her body closer to his. "Wish we could start over… have a breather. Seems as though we're not getting a real chance to just be, you know?"

"Yeah," he nodded, "I know. Seems that way." Their new start met with some turbulence, he couldn't deny that.

Michonne then looped her arms up around his neck. "We should go somewhere..." she whispered, her gaze flickering down to his lips. "...just the two of us."

"And leave everything behind?" What about the kids, Angelo's, his company? Things were at a critical point, for them both.

"Not for long babe, we could take a couple of days, maybe three..." Tilting her head to the side, she stared up at him with adoring eyes. "We could."

'More than that, we should.' She thought to herself. Life, somehow, kept tugging at them. Robbing them of the simple joy reveling in the newness of a relationship brings. Instead of gleefully immersing themselves in the discoveries of each other, their attentions were being stolen elsewhere. How easy it would be to let their bond slip away. If they got stuck in the chaos, they might never make it out. "Just a few days… so we could catch our breath," she tightened her hold on him, "Are you gonna give me that?"

The warmth of his touch then seeped into her as his hands ran up the length of her back, drawing her closer still. Allowing her eyes to close for a moment, Michonne inhaled deeply. 'Please, say yes?' Her desperate heart pleaded.

Rick pressed his forehead against hers. He wanted to find happiness with her. He didn't want to lose his chance at that. This precious woman wanted to give him her all, and what was she asking of him in return? Time to catch their breath? "Yes," he vowed in a whisper. He had to give her that. ~0~0~0~0~0~0~0~0~

Rick lay on his side on the bedroom floor propped up on his elbows, legs stretched out but hooked at the ankles. Lying across from him, on top of a large sized, cream and black patterned rug in the homey guesthouse they'd rented, was Michonne. Mirroring his position, she gazed at him with a taunting light in her eyes that matched, to perfection, the mischievous curl of her soft full lips. He anxiously wanted to wipe that smug smile off of her face. Her arrogance was cute and she knew it. But to Rick, it was also distasteful. It brewed enmity in the pit of his Alpha-male stomach.

Calculating his choices, recalling all of hers, Rick was determined to proceed with accuracy. His current position demanded it.

What does she think I have? What does she have? How am I going to protect myself?

He wasn't about to let her get away with all of her mind tricks.

"Do you have…"
He cleared his throat, and leered at her, trying to catch her in a lie.

"… any threes?"

"Hmm, let me see." Peeking out from behind her hand of cards, she pouted her lips feigning pity. "Oh shoot! I hate to disappoint you Rick, but… Go fish!"

"Are you sure? C'mon now, this is not how it's supposed to be!" he complained.

"Come on Grimes, pick up, pick up, pick up," she smirked. "Could be the one you're looking for."

Rick’s hand reached over and selected a card from on top of the deck placed between them. "Think you got everything I'm looking for," he flirted with a devilish grin. Surveying the new card in his hand, it didn't match anything he'd already had. "This is a damned disgrace, is what it is," he groaned in despair. "Besides, you're not playing fair."

"Rick oh please. Don't be such a baby."

"How in the hell am I supposed to concentrate with you dressed like that Michonne?" Wearing only a peach colored tank top and her white laced undies was utter cruelty. "I can't win like this. My strategic moves are shot. I'm not at my best," he rationalized on his three game losing streak.

"No good huh? I didn't hear you complaining before," she teased.

"Yeah well that was before, alright, when we were playing a different game." He winked. "I won that one. I know that for sure. Actually, I think we both did."

"Mmhm," Michonne bit the inside of her lips to keep from smiling as the memory of how he had her writhing at his mercy flashed into her mind.

Admiring her beautiful form Rick recalled how they'd spent the better part of the past three days intertwined with each other. Licking his lips, he wouldn't have mind it one bit if they'd abandoned the child's play and get back to that - their intimate sessions.

"Got any nines Mr. Grimes?"

Snapped out of his reverie, his flirtatious countenance fell. "Now you're just flat out cheating."

Michonne burst out laughing "How?"

Flicking across three cards towards her, his bruised ego couldn't take much more. "I don't know how, but this bothers me."

"Oh shush. Rules of the game my friend."

"Hey," Rick's hand reached across and slipped in between her velvety warm thighs to give her a quick squeeze. "I'm not just your friend, alright?" he reminded her with a husky tone of voice.

"No, you're not." A provocative smile crept across Michonne's face as she savored his touch. A spark lit up her gorgeous brown eyes and she found herself leaning forward to kiss him full on his lips. "Now who's the one cheating?"

Just as Rick's arm slid around her waist dragging her alluring body towards him, there was a 'ding' from the toaster oven in the kitchenette.

"Dinner's ready," Michonne pressed her palms against his chest and gave him a slight push back.
"We're going to have to wait and finish this after we've eaten."

Rick narrowed his eyes at her. "Playing cards or…"

She laughed and glanced across at the opened box on the night stand. "We're running low on supplies Mr. Grimes so… you figure it out." Jumping up, she then made her way to retrieve the four mini-quesadillas she'd prepared.

Rick grinned, ogling her swaying hips and bare legs as she ambled away from him, looking even more delectable from his low angle. His pulse sped up and already he was eager for her to get back to him so they could end this silly game. He needed to enfold her softness in his arms once again. It soothed and reassured him that she was real. Seemed like it had been forever since he felt so excited and contented at the mere sight of a woman. He wondered if he was having the same effect on her.

Being on their own for the last three days – once they'd both let their guard down – getting to know each other came natural and effortless. Yet, strangely electrifying too. That's why the beginning of a relationship is such a high. The mystery of what you'll find, the thrill of what you'll discover, sends flutters through you. Passion so overwhelming, that you feel locked in a state of perpetual intoxication. You can't get enough of it.

Michonne, she couldn't get enough of Rick. She was insatiable for him, and vice versa. If he happened to be a couple of feet away from her grasp in that bed and breakfast apartment, he was too damn far. Like a teenager, she indulged every impulse to place her possessive hands all over him - To embrace him and breathe his magnetic aura in, wanting to be absorbed in his confidence, and his goodness, that made him so desirable.

Their escapade was going to be brief. And in no time at all they'd have to step back out those doors in to the real world, where they spent more time apart than together. Which, more than likely, wasn't going to change in the weeks to come. So, if she could just hold onto this, these selfish, stolen moments, it would help her to persevere. Whenever those crippling doubts threatened her bliss, then she would remember that what they had was real – she'd cling to it.

That morning, when he held her close in the shower, he'd whispered, 'I love you,' as his lips caressed her shoulder under the hypnotic drumming water drops.

Michonne's own heart slammed against her chest, and her fingers clutched at his neck. In response, she'd managed to confess, 'Me too,' as he slipped inside her soul. She didn't breathe those words because she felt he expected an avowal in return, or because she was caught up in the euphoria of the moment. She said it because it was the truth – Somehow it clicked that she was no longer petrified of being vulnerable with this man. She earnestly desired to give him her everything. Rick was compassionate, had a strong sense of integrity, and held sacred the concept of loyalty. He had a strong spirit, yet sweet and boldly affectionate. Rick was one of the best things to have ever happened to her in her life. She couldn't deny that. He was her second chance at everything. May have been cliché to say, but why the hell not? Why shouldn't some things be that simple? Life was overloaded and weighed down with a plethora of complications anyway.

Their little getaway was very much needed. Not drifting far off, they'd remained in Marietta, hidden in a cozy guest house just on the other side of town. The day before, Rick took her for a stroll through the popular Marietta square, visiting a specialty store, antique shops, and a fine arts gallery. She loved every minute with him feeling giddy with happiness, she wasn't going to trade in that clean slate for anything or anyone else.

As Michonne sat back down onto the floor, with their piping hot meals, Rick put the cards aside and she handed him his plate. While enjoying their Mexican inspired food, their conversation flowed
with such ease, and settled on the topic of their childhood. Including what is was like growing up with their parents.

Michonne learned about how as kids, Rick's mother would sooner pick up a novel for them at bedtime instead of story books. Everything from John Steinbeck to Nancy Drew mysteries to Harlequin romance novels, Mrs. Grimes believed in broadening their vocabularies and their minds. Reading with his mother, became one of Rick's favorite past times. As for his father, well both Phillip and Rick would spend almost every weekend out hunting with him. Dale Grimes had inherited an impressive gun collection when his old man passed away, and he took delight in passing on his extensive knowledge about firearms to his boys.

Michonne's own Dad, on the other hand, was a quiet man who preferred the indoors. A shy photographer with a 'unique' sense of humor, he was an avid theatre-goer. That's how he actually met her mother – the Arts were their main shared interest. For Mrs. Des Vignes, doing sketches of her own in her free time, brought her immeasurable joy, as did indulging in her love of diversified music, a love which she passed on to her children. In a lot of ways Michonne's mom was a dreamer, but a practical woman nonetheless. For the most part of her adult life, she worked as a Manager at a Department store. Hence, Michonne's degree in Accounting, despite her personal love of literature and poetry.

"How did you lose her?" Rick asked, as he set aside their now empty plates.

"Cancer. It was quick, she didn't want to make much fuss with treatments. Besides, Daddy's mind was already going. She was sad, I think, depressed even. She liked Daryl, he was sweet with her." Michonne wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin as she recollected the day she'd introduced them to each other. He cried at the funeral…which was a rarity - him showing his emotions in public. "Heath moved in with daddy for a few years," she continued. "But with Alzheimer's it goes so quickly. He couldn't be left alone. Would get lost trying to find the bathroom. I was out west, so Heath couldn't do it alone for much longer. We decided to put him in a home."

"When last did you visit?"

"It's been too long," she confessed, "My parents' last Anniversary I think… I'm a stranger to him anyway."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "But still…"

"I know," she sighed at her poor excuse. "Heath and I could never find the time to go together. And I hate doing it alone."

Rick nodded his understanding. "Where is this place?"

"It's in Brookdale, close to where I live."

"I could go with you. If you're up for it," he genuinely offered. "Would you, would you like that?"

A lump caught in her throat as his eyes took on a softness when he looked at her. "I would." Warm appreciation touched the edges of her mouth in a small, tender smile. Oh god, what did she do to deserve such an incredibly sweet man? "Rick?"

"Yeah?"

"Could we go today?"

"I don't see why not."
Her smile broadened, and in the next second she shot up from the rug. "I'll go pack our bags."

The visit to Michonne's father was heart rendering as it always was for her. He kept calling her 'Ms. Patricia Jones', his secret crush and her mother's name, as all memories from his life as a husband and father seemed to have been wiped clean from his ailing brain. She couldn't mention Angelo's being hers now, and it was pointless updating him on how bright and amazing his only grandchild had turned out. Still, it was nice to see his face... to hear her daddy's voice. And Michonne was grateful that Rick met at least one of her parents.

Afterwards, they decided to pick the kids up and head out for dinner together. However, Rick got a call from Aaron just as he pulled his truck in front of Michonne's house. "I'll be in the office tomorrow," he responded to his assistant. "Whatever it is, can't this wait till then?"

"Forgive me for the inconvenience. But Sir, I am sorry to have to tell you this, your brother, Phillip, he's here. Actually he's been here the whole day."

Rick groaned at the nuisance. "Phillip? And just why is that? This have anything to do with Semaj Consultancy again?"

"Well that's what he's been claiming. But Rick... he's been spending a lot of time on the phone with several members of the board – Williams, Davidson, Downey, to be exact. I, I think you need to get down here as soon as possible. I have a bad feeling about this."

The muscles in his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth. Rick then shot Michonne a look of distress. "You should go." She didn't object. Duty called, as to be expected.

"Thank you," he mouthed with a quick nod of his head.

"Alright Aaron. Give me about a half hour or so. I'll be there." Rick hung up the phone then leaned across his seat to kiss her. "I'm sorry about this, but it's my brother."

She shook her head, "No, don't be. Go fix this. Whatever it is. I'll see you tomorrow."

He nodded, appreciating her patience and consideration. "Hey, I meant what it is I said this morning. You know that right?"

Michonne gently cupped one side of his handsome face and smiled. "I know. I meant it too."

Grinning from ear to ear, Rick's heart felt like it would explode with joy, and he pressed his lips against hers again. "Good. Okay I'll call you when I get home."

Storming into his office, Rick's irritableness increased as he discovered Phillip sitting pretty in his chair. Taking in the view, his brother stared out at the city with a superior look on his face.

"What the hell are doing here?" It took everything for Rick to show some restraint.

Phillip swiveled the chair around angling himself forward. "Just checking up on you little brother," he chuckled. "Making sure everything's A-okay."

Shifting his weight to one side, Rick placed his hands on his hips and dipped his head. "What you mean is, you're here to campaign for my job." He had no desire to play any games, so why waste
time beating around the bush? "The board of directors sanctioned off my promotion a long time ago. Now I know you know that."

"Because that's what our father wanted. Not because that was in the best interest of the company. Trust me, they weren't all on board for that crack shot decision. No pun intended."

Rick's expression hardened as he took a step towards his desk. "Phillip you sure you wanna go there with me? Because if you do, I guarantee you won't win."

His brother burst out laughing and Rick's chest filled with white hot rage.

Phillip then leaned forward placing his forearms on the Cherrywood table before clasping his hands together. "Listen, whether you like it or not, I'm gonna be here in Atlanta for a little while." He paused for moment gauging his brother for a response. Rick stared at him with defiance in his cold eyes, as a distinct vein popped out of his neck. "Come on don't look so worried. Who knows how things are gonna turn out? Might even stop by that Italian place you got. It's not too far from here, is it? I could go take a look around. If that's okay with you of course."

Phillip was trying to goad him and his intentions were clear. Rick wouldn't allow his bastard brother to deprive him of reaping the fruits of his own labor. It would be a fight every step of the way.

But not today.

In that moment, Rick had a change of heart. Less than an hour ago he was elated and stress free. But now, here he stood at work, on edge, his blood boiling, and the tension rising in the muscles of his neck. He needed to get back to her.

Without uttering another word, Rick turned from his brother's menacing look, and made his way back out the door.

In a flash he left the office building, scurried towards the parking lot, and jumped into his truck. With one hand he turned on the ignition, and with the other he grabbed his phone to dial Michonne.

"I miss you already," he declared, as soon as she picked up on the other end. "Let's head out with the kids. We still got time. I'm leaving work right now."

"Oh. I, I can't," she replied in a whisper.

His grasp dropped from his keys. "You can't? Why not?"

"Daryl called, said he had some things he promised to get for Charlotte. Said he also wanted for us to talk."

Rick's head hung low and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "So he's there now?"

"Yeah."

"Just him?"

"Just him."

He heard her sigh. "You okay? I could be there in twenty minutes."

"Thank you, but no, Rick. Go home, I'll handle it... I'm going to get dinner ready, Charlotte's waiting to eat. Call you tomorrow?"
"Call me tonight. Doesn't matter the hour, just, just call me okay? I'll be awake, waiting. And I promise to answer this time." Her beautiful laugh came through the line and Rick's stomach twisted with regret as he imagined the cute way her nose probably wrinkled right then. He should've been with her. Daryl being there instead, and without his fiancé, didn't sit too well with him. "Okay?" he asked, after she'd gone quiet.

"Okay."

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Chapter 14: "Retribution." Part 1

Staring at her daughter and her ex-husband as they smiled and laughed, and gabbed about books, bffs, and bullies whilst eating the spaghetti and meatballs she'd made in her own kitchen, in her own house, Michonne toyed with the idea that it was possible that she could have been having either an out of body experience, or stuck in a dreamlike sequence, or having some sort of vision.

"All this pasta is gonna make you big as a horse." Daryl teased his eleven year old girl.

"That's alright Daddy, I'll still be awesome. You ain't gotta worry about that," she replied.

Amusement colored his face. "Well aright, Miss Sassy Anne?"

This was unreal. It was strange – sweet, but, oddly unfamiliar. This was not her reality, and neither was it Charlotte's. She'd indulged Daryl long enough. Michonne glanced behind her at the clock on the wall. He needed to get the hell out of her house.

"Okay Charlie, you got through with all of your homework already?" Michonne interrupted the duo seated across from her.

"Yeah. It wasn't much," Charlotte responded.

"'Kay, then it's time to hit the shower and get ready for bed." Michonne then pushed her chair back, got up and began collecting the dishes.

"Moom! Really?" she whined. "But –"

"Come on you heard your Mama. Let's go. Vamanos." Daryl pinched his daughter's chin and they both rose up from their seats. "Besides I'm here till the end of the week."

Michonne's shoulders dropped and her mouth set in a hard line. When was he going to reveal that bit of information? Guess the bastard just did. "Charlotte, tell your father goodnight, and thank him again for your Specialty Lego set."

Charlotte grinned as her father stooped to her eye level. "Thanks Dad."

Affection squeezed Daryl's heart. "Sure thing sweet face," he replied, brushing the back of his hand along her rosy cheek. "Was nothing. Maybe you could show me how to put it together next time. Let me see how smart you really are." He then glanced up at Michonne, after the fact, realizing that he hadn't checked with her first. "If that's okay with your mother?"

"Mom? Is it?" Charlotte's face lit up.

'Thanks Daryl.'

Well Michonne was not going to be made out to be the bad guy, so… "Mmhm. Why not?" she conceded with a half shrug and yet another fake smile. She dished out quite a few of those since he'd been there.
Daryl stood up and shook his head bemused at the plastic expression on his ex-wife’s face. "See that. I could come by—"

"We," Michonne interjected, "Your father and I, will discuss when it would be appropriate." Although she knew damn well that any further visitations would be properly scheduled by her. No more random, last minute phone calls, or disruptive drop-ins.

"Okay Charlie, goodnight." Daryl pulled his daughter into a hug and planted a kiss on her temple.

When he released her, the girl then turned and embraced her mother as well. "Goodnight Mom. Goodnight Dad." In that instant, she scrunched her nose and shook her head before ambling her way out of the dining room. The strangeness of the situation was affecting her too.

Surveying her daughter, Michonne’s chest tightened and she released a guilty sigh. "Umm, so… what do you want us to talk about?" she asked her ex as she trudged into the kitchen.

Daryl followed her. "You know... I'm still a bit thirsty. You mind?"

Rolling her eyes, she dropped the dirty dishes in the sink, and stepped over to her refrigerator. "Still drink Gatorade?"

"Got any Melon?"

"Just Rain Berry. Take it or leave it."

"Yes Ma'am. Rain Berry it is."

After retrieving his beverage of choice, she pitched it over to him as he stood on the opposite end of the island. Her body tensed as she observed how he took his cool time unscrewing the orange cap, and then leisurely sipped from the bottle.

Tilting her head, an impatient breath escaped her lips. "Alright Dixon. Would you just spit it out already?"

"What? And make a mess on these fancy tiles? 'Cause you won't get me to clean it up."

Was he trying to make a joke with her right then? Michonne’s face went taut and she stomped over to the kitchen sink. Pushing up the faucet handle, she couldn't believe she turned Rick down for this. It was stupid of her to allow Daryl to use Charlotte to get to her so easily.

As she began washing up, something brushed against her arm causing her to shift her gaze downwards. Daryl's hand was touching her.

"Hey." He stepped back as she turned to face him with a glowering expression, and a dripping plate clutched in her hand. Daryl's stomach knotted. Where should he start? Did it really matter? As long as he began somewhere. "Sasha, before she left for L.A. this morning, she said that I needed to resolve our issues… for good." His hand gestured back and forth between them. "We need to. Said for me not to come home until it's done."

Michonne scrunched her face at him. "I just don't know if it's that simple."

"Of course it isn't. But... I gotta try."

Michonne turned, switched off the running water, and replaced the dish inside the sink. "I'm listening," she said, reaching for a paper towel to dry off her hands.
He took one last swig of the lilac colored water and then closed the bottle, lowering his gaze to the floor. "Yeah well..." he murmured, "... I'm sorry. I'm not proud about what I've done. I said it before, you've heard it all before, but I'm saying it again... I messed up. And I'm really, really sorry about that. Been torturing myself you know. But I don't want you to be angry with me anymore. About how things went down the last time I was here. And about everything else that's happened."

Michonne contemplated the man she used to be in-love with. So far nothing he said impressed her. Yes he was right, those words— his contrite excuse of an apology – she'd heard it all before. But if this was what he needed to gain closure? Then she was willing to be as cordial and as honest as was possible for her. If it meant she could get him to leave without things escalating. "Hey," Dipping her head to catch his gaze, "I'm not angry," she reassured him. "I was, but not anymore."

Daryl shook his head. "That's bullshit," he muttered, placing the bottle down on the island countertop.

Her brows snapped together at his audacity. "Seriously?"

"What? Well it is," he maintained.

"No Daryl, you're bullshit. You think you know me but you don't. There is a sweetness in wallowing in your own self-pity, isn't there? Playing the victim somehow empowers you."

"Same goes for you, don't it? Takes one to know one and all that?" he spat back.

"God, this man could be so childish! "Daryl! We were never good for each other. You were right that time, what you said before – What's passed is past. So drop this."

"Well I can't..." he confessed, as he threw his arms in the air. "We need to get shit settled."

"Why?" Michonne's own arms then came up and crossed over her chest. "Because your boo told you to?"

"Because I need to move on."

"By reopening old wounds?"

"My wounds ain't never been closed 'Chonne! Standing here wit you is hard as all hell." He shrugged. "Damn it, it's hard for you too, I know it. You standing there looking down at me telling me you ain't angry no more. That's bullshit Michonne! That's why you didn't want to see me all this time... When I came back, three years ago beggin' like a, like a damn lost puppy... crying and shit for my family to come home..."

"And do what!? Huh Daryl? Live on the road with you and your band, and your sixteen year old groupies?" She scoffed at how ridiculous that would have been. "I'm sure your manager would've been thrilled to have your 'Nubian Queen' riding shot gun on your tour bus. And I sure as hell wasn't about to go back to how things were before. So I don't know what it is that you're talking about. I had enough of that life. That life... it wasn't working for me."

She paused and bit her lower lip. "I wanted my husband home, that's what I wanted – You, with your arms wrapped around me every night." With that admission Michonne suddenly, found herself fighting like crazy to hold back her tears, not understanding why she still had any at all to shed for this man?

'Shit!'
Daryl shuffled his feet as he rubbed his fingertips against the seams of his jeans. "Hey, I knew you weren't happy... You know that right?" Stepping right in front of her, both his voice and his features softened as he locked his gaze with hers. "The thing is, I wasn't happy either. But you, you never fought for me."

Michonne's eyes widened at the accusation. "What?"

For a second his brows knitted as he shot her a piercing stare. "I would've left it all if you wanted me to."

Her hand came up and clutched her chest in disbelief. "I would've never asked you to do that... to give up what you loved?"

"I wished you would've Michonne." He swung his arms around as he started to pace her kitchen floor. "I wished you loved me enough to fight harder for us. But you didn't."

Michonne dragged her hand over her face, more confused than ever before. "So everything that you did is my fault?"

"No, but you just packed up and left." He shook his head at her, allowing his countenance to crumble. "That's messed up. You didn't give me a call or nothin'. I came home and everything was just gone. Just some god-damned papers on a sheet less bed to sign."

Her chest caved and he observed her as she turned away from him. "I don't know who you think you talking to, but I can still read your mind. You hiding your angel eyes from me, but that don't matter Chonne. We've been through enough for me to know when you're full of it!"

Exasperated, her fingers massaged her pulsating temples. He had his say, that was it, she'd heard quite enough. They weren't getting anywhere. And she hoped and prayed Charlotte wasn't hearing a single word being said. "I think it's time for you to get out of my house," she breathed.

"Oh is that right huh?"

Due to his irritated tone of voice, Michonne simply nodded keeping her back to him.

"How about I take my little girl with me if I do?" he growled just behind her ear.

In a heated second, a shocking fury swept over her, and Michonne drew in a sharp breath. Her muscles tensed and she swung around to face him. "What did you just say to me?" Before she could even think about it she shoved him and he flew back. "Don't you threaten me! How dare you? I want you to get out, right now!" It all came flooding back – the flashing lights, the siren, her baby girl crying. Just as she feared, they were going down that same road once more. "Get out Daryl."

But he didn't. His gaze zeroed in on the tears that shimmered in her beautiful eyes, and it filled him with such self-loathing remorse that he moved back towards her in a single stride and held on to her arms. "Hey, I'm, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Don't know why I just said that," he whispered frantically, knowing that he couldn't take the venomous words back.

There was no denying it, as frayed as it was, that connection to his first sweet taste of real love, and acceptance, was still there. Along with a deep seated aggravation with himself over his inability to resolve their issues.

Everything was his fault. It was a simple fact, and he knew that. He'd accepted the responsibility for tearing his marriage apart a long time ago. But, somehow, he kept going back to the hurt... and allowing himself to be consumed by it. "I'm sorry. Let's just calm down alright? I don't want Charlie
to come downstairs and see us like this." She squirmed within his grasp. "Just stop. This isn't me anymore. I'm not like this. I just wanted you to see that," he pleaded.

"It doesn't matter," she said, managing to pull away from him, panting.

"It does. We gotta let this go, these awful feelings that's been eating us alive. I, I have to let you go..." Interlacing his fingers, his hands came up to cradle the back of his head. "Goddammit I need to!" It was his turn now to turn away from her. "I'm getting married Michonne, but I'm still clinging to yuh. To the pain and the disappointment…"

"And the guilt?" Michonne nodded as she felt a tear slip down her cheek.

Daryl's arms fell to his sides. And his own vision blurred. "Yeah. All of it." His voice broke, grateful for a little bit of understanding.

Moving towards the island, she leaned forward to brace herself against the smooth counter top, needing a minute to collect herself.

There was a long pause between them.

"Do you know how?" Michonne finally uttered. "Because I don't."

"We gotta start somewhere... Maybe with some real honesty. And Sasha, she says that I need to forgive myself."

Michonne glanced back at him for a moment with a dubious look. How much of real honesty could he have handled when confronted with the bare naked truth? But if that's what he wanted…

"You know Daryl, Charlotte…" she began heavyhearted. "Took forever to walk. You remember that? I was worried about it, but you…" she shrugged. "You weren't. Neither were my parents. You said that when she was good and ready, she wouldn't just walk, that she would run. She was gearing up to it. And then, when she finally did it, when she stumbled over herself taking her first few steps, it was incredible. I laughed so hard… because you were right. Your child tried to run, just like you said."

Daryl nodded. "That's how it was with me. I remember getting the video you sent for me."

"And I cried because of that." Michonne frowned at the bittersweet memory. "The joy I felt, it didn't last. Not just because you were in Europe somewhere, but because… that's the same day when Dana showed up —"

Michonne's body in an instant jerked forward as she felt Daryl's arms swallow her whole from behind.

"Don't. Please don't!" he begged, burying his face in the back of her head.

Her fingers gripped the edge of the surface. "That was the end Daryl. The ultimate betrayal."

He tightened his hold on her, and as she felt the thumping of his heartbeat against her back she wondered what the hell did he want her to fight for?

"We don't gotta go there," he said.

"But you wanted this, to close old wounds. Having a child with some other woman…" Michonne closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just couldn't take that. Especially as you tried to hide her from
"I was trying to protect you."

"It didn't matter, she still came after me Daryl…and Charlie. Despite her miscarriage, the damage was done."

His head rolled forward and he kissed her on the side of her neck. "I wished I could take it back. All of it."

"I know." The final days of their life together flooded her mind – the lawyers, his publicist, the god-damned paternity tests. "How could I trust you after that? What did you expect? I just stopped loving you... That was it for me. I know it's hard to accept, but I had to go my own way, I had to. Not just for me, but for Charlotte too." Nothing he could've said or done thereafter, would have mattered at that point.

"So you do hate me?" he asked, releasing his hold on her.

She twisted her body to face him. "No. I don't. I thought that I did, but that felt impossible to do. Because of Charlie, and because, because..." she drew in a long breath realizing what the sad, simple truth of it was. "... A part of me still missed you. What I hated was the loss."

"And how long till you forgive me?"

Lifting her hand up to his head she smoothed down his silky hair. "I forgive you." Her sincere words were more for her acceptance of the end of their relationship, in order to begin to attain some semblance of peace between them.

Stepping back he blinked at her with his own watery eyes. "I was wrong."

"And I really did try to make things work."

He nodded. "You tried your best. Thank you for that."

"Thank you for Charlie, " she whispered, swiping away the wetness from the side of his face and tucking his hair behind his ears. "I'm sorry too that we didn't make it."

"And that's on me. Didn't appreciate what we had. You think I could make it this time? With Sasha?"

"Of course, but that's up to you. Treat her better. She's smart, and she's nice. Seems perfect... especially for the likes of you." She poked her index finger into his chest and smiled.

"You're one to talk. Got that dude eyeballing me like he's god-damn law enforcement."

To Michonne's amazement, she laughed– they both did, together.

"He got honor?" Daryl asked.

"He does," she nodded. "And I'm different now, with him."

"Yeah, I can see that." He reached over and held one of her locs, curling it around his finger, before letting it go. "Your hair is longer... and you put on a few pounds. It ain't just Charlotte, with all that damned Ricotta cheese."

Again she chuckled softly, but this time Michonne felt the need to drop her gaze. This was all too
familiar. Swallowing her discomfort she was about to move, requiring some distance between them. Before she could take a step, however, he leaned forward, placing an immobilizing kiss on her forehead. Michonne's mind went blank.

In the next moment, his rough hands reached up and cupped her neck, and she felt his thumbs pressing lightly at the base of her throat.

"It don't matter what you say," His gravelly voice was barely audible, "For me I still –"

"Daryl stop," she said, snapping out of her temporary daze. Pressing both of her hands against his chest, she forced herself to lift her gaze to meet his.

For her it was the same. When all was said and done, she could read his mind too. To her, he was an open book, and Michonne didn't have to try too hard to read the pages of his soul. "Daryl, just, stop."

His curious touch slid down and moved outwards to her shoulders, lingering there. "Maybe I always will," he finished.

With an immediate sense of urgency she brushed his hands away. "Daryl?"

"Yeah?"

"You could see Charlotte tomorrow after school… when Carol's here. But now, I think you really should go. Please?"

This time, with a nod of his head, he quietly acquiesced to her request.

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Michonne waited, with bated breath, to hear Daryl's rental car drive away.

As soon as she did, she darted into the living room and retrieved her cell phone from off of the center table where she'd left it.

"Hey, you okay?" Rick asked, the second he answered her call, relieved that she kept her promise.

"Yeah I'm okay." She couldn't believe how much better she felt the instant she'd heard his voice. "Umm, everything is okay. Daryl just wanted to… he just wanted to…" 'Confuse the shit out of me,' was what she wanted to say. Instead, Michonne buried her forehead into the palm of her hand, deciding to cram those last few minutes of his visit to the back of her mind. "He wanted to let me know he'll be here, in Atlanta, till the end of the week. Wants to spend more time with Charlotte."

Rick went quiet.

Her heart thudded, anticipating what he would say next.

"And you're good with that?" he eventually inquired.

She sighed. "Yeah, I am. He loves her. She got caught in the crossfire, and I need to be better than that." The mess between her and Daryl shouldn't deny Charlotte the right to know her father. This flawed man was not a monster. He was her blood, her family. The other half that created her soul.

"You're right about that." As much as Rick was uncomfortable with the idea of Daryl sticking around, he couldn't have any objections to her decision.

"He was actually pretty great with her tonight. She was happy." Seeing her own father that day, reminded Michonne of how crucial that was – A relationship with your parents.

"Yeah, no I get it. Can't imagine how hard it is for Carl not having Lori around. He won't say it but he'd give anything to have more time with her."

"You're doing a pretty good job with him though, you know that right? He's an amazing kid."

"He is, isn't he? But I can't take full credit for that. Lori did her best by him, and Denise helps me out a lot."

"Mmhm." She shared his sentiments. They were both fortunate to have people around who wanted to help out.

Moving over to her recliner she slumped back against the soft cushion. "Anyways, tell me about Phillip."

"The bastard 's actively trying to push me out." Rick groaned. "It's more than just trying to make me look bad."
Michonne frowned at his predicament. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty much."

"Well then... you gotta push back."

"Yeah," he drawled, "I know that. I didn't want it to be like this though." Rick was against dragging his father's legacy through the mud. His efforts were to be solely focused on building and expanding and strengthening his father's vision for the company. That was the plan. "But Phillip, he's forcing my hand."

"I understand. You won't be able to do it alone, you'll need help. Probably gonna have to get your own team outside of the firm."

"That's true. Got any ideas? You think you can help me with that?"

Michonne straightened herself upright, and paused for a few moments of consideration. "Actually yeah," she replied. "I think I can."

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Rick sat in a brown-leather lounge chair at the center of a reception area, the only sound that could be heard, other than his own breathing, was the constant patter of the secretary's keyboard, and the occasional ringing of his desk phone. Seated two feet away from Rick, in an identical chair, was Michonne. He cast his eyes across to hers – Deep, brown, inquisitive pools, contemplating him in all earnestness. Legs crossed, her body angled towards him, as she reached over and allowed her fingers to capture his.

"Hey, this is just a discussion," her tone was soft and comforting. "We don't have to decide on anything today. And whatever it is you choose to do, then I'll support you."

"I know," he responded. Yet, Rick bowed his head low, and for a few seconds his eyes closed shut.

Michonne detected that he was struggling – Struggling with the position his brother had put him in. This was a strong man, smart and impressive in every way, fully capable of fighting his own battles, and even the battles of others. Yet, she knew he needed to hear those words just then, and not just from anyone, but from a true friend. Despite their grievances, Rick was disturbed by Phillip's persistent course of treachery. His already shaky belief in loyalty being tested, yet again, by his own flesh and blood.

Not too long after, Andrea appeared before them.

"Hey Mich, Rick. Sorry about the wait." Without hesitation she escorted them into a large contemporary conference room. Beautifully designed, the lavish space boasted a flat screen on one wall and an aquarium on the other. There, they met a Mr. Shane Walsh, Attorney-at-law, and junior partner of the reputable Roosevelt West and Associates law firm.

"Hey it's a real pleasure to meet you both," he greeted, as he smoothed his red silk tie that accentuated his dark colored suit, gesturing for them to take a seat opposite him. "Especially you Ms. Des Vignes. Andrea... I mean, Ms. Harrison here, my associate, has spoken rather highly of you."

Michonne's brows knitted together as she shot her friend a questioning look. Hardly ever a word was said about this particular gentleman, and whenever she did mention him, it almost always was never in a kind way. The phrases 'off the hinge lunatic' and 'old fashioned sexist bastard' were usually used in connection with the firm's newest hotshot partner.
"Okay, so let's just get to it, shall we?" Mr. Walsh opened a folder Andrea slid across to him as she positioned herself in the seat to his right. "Now Sir, we already have this profile on your company…"

"You do?" Rick arched a brow at Andrea.

"Of course," she huffed. "I told you, I did my research when you first came to me about Angelo's."

"Right I forgot," he nodded.

"Don't worry about it," Mr. Walsh waved his hand dismissing Rick's concerns. "There's only good things in here. Ms. Harrison, she's one of our best, always prepared to shoot, if you know what I mean." Turning slightly he then winked in her direction.

To Michonne's utter surprise, Andrea's cheeks went bright red and her fingertips pressed into the side of her neck, as she did her utmost to avoid her friend's stare. With pursed lips, Michonne made a mental note to do an interrogation of her secretive friend later.

"Anyways," Mr. Walsh cleared his throat, "Now Sir –"

"Rick is fine," he interrupted.

Mr. Walsh smiled, placing a hand against his chest, "Okay – Shane – Good, I like that. Cut out all the formalities and BS. Real glad to hear it Rick. Now as I was saying, what I've been told is that you got yourself a real problem. You've got your hands full with a Judas type brother, who is dead set on destroying you. Rolled right into the city and wants to see you burn... Is that right?"

Rick released a heavy breath and shifted his weight in the leather seat. "Yeah, it is."

"Well, let me ask you something," Shane leaned forward with a piercing look. He placed his forearms on the desk, and then cocked his head to the side. "What is it, that you want?"

Pausing for a moment, Rick's gaze shifted from the intensity of Mr. Walsh's stare over to the gentle concern lodged in Michonne's. She nodded at him, a sign of her encouragement. He mulled over the best way to sum up an apt answer to the question, as all eyes stared at him, gauging his response. "To be honest," he began, leaning back into his chair as he regarded the attorneys who sat across the desk, "I want to fix this before it gets out of control. I simply want what's mine. Everything that I've worked hard for, everything that I've sacrificed for. Helping to build this company, is my life's work. Phillip, now he just wants to take that away from me, as though it's his right – My blood, my sweat, my tears? I cannot let him get away with that... I won't."

The corner of Shane's mouth lifted with approval, as he bobbed his head. "Are you willing to do whatever it takes? Because once we go down this road Rick, you won't be the good guy anymore."

Swallowing his apprehension Rick lowered his eyes.

Michonne, noticing his hesitation, reached over and grasped his hand. "He is."

Rick flickered his gaze over to her. "I know it's gonna be a fight," he responded. "I know that."

"That's right," Shane pointed his finger at Rick. "You want retribution, that's what you want! And I guarantee that you've come to the right place." He pushed back into his chair, displaying a huge smirk of confidence on his face. "Because we here at Roosevelt West, we play hardball. That's the only way to fix this."
"Phillip wants to make a mess of things?" Andrea added, "Leave it up to us. He won't know what hit him because we'll make sure that whatever it is he's up to, will be dead in the water. All you've got to do Rick, is to make sure that there isn't any issue he could hold over you as leverage. You think you can manage that?"

"Yeah. I can."

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"Let me get that," Rick insisted, removing the shopping basket from Michonne's grasp.

"Thanks," she answered, handing it over. Her eyes scanned the practically empty convenience store they were in, trying to decide which aisle to hit first. On the way back to work, she'd kindly ask Rick to make a quick detour as she needed to re-stock some essentials at home. Also, the extra time with him would allow her to pick his brain – get a better idea of how he really felt about the meeting they'd had with Mr. Shane Walsh, and to make sure that they were on the same page.

"So what are we looking for?" Rick asked as they made their way down aisle two.

Michonne glanced up and down the shelves. "First, peanut butter," she replied, just as she spotted the section. Her hand came up and grabbed a large bottle of the Extra crunchy variety.

"That for you, or Charlotte?"

"Carol, actually," she answered with a small smile, as she double checked the label making sure it was the right brand. "Can't get enough of this stuff. You know she can make her own Snickers bars with this?"

He laughed. "Oh so this is really for you then?"

Michonne bit her lips to hold back her mischievous grin, "Maybe."

"More like definitely," he said, giving her a playful pinch on her cheek.

Satisfied she'd made the right choice, they then continued to stroll through the other aisles, with Michonne, from time to time, selecting and tossing items into the basket.

"Rick…" she began, "Mr. Walsh,"

"Yeah?"

"I know he comes across…"

"Like a maniac?"

She chuckled, "Yeah that."

"I was never one to back down from confrontation, but maybe this guy…” He blew out a heavy breath as he reset a tin of green peas back on the shelf. "I don't know, he seems a bit extreme – might take thangs too far."

"This is how it needs to be." With raised eyebrows she gave him a knowing look.

And he understood without question what she meant by that. His brother was proving himself to be like an infectious disease. And the best way to handle that, is by eradication. Not just for him, but for his family, for Carl, his future.
"But, you know... Andrea trusts him," she encouraged. "And I trust Andrea."

"Think Andrea more than trusts this guy," he suggested with a distinct smirk.

Her eyes lit up with intrigue. "Hmm you saw it too?"

"You didn't know?"

"No, I didn't," she huffed in disbelief. "Usually she isn't shy about filling me in on her dalliances, but I guess..." She sighed, "I don't know." Did Andrea feel that Michonne was too preoccupied to confide in her? She then came to a stop, and braced him. "You," she swatted him on his chest, "...it's you! My world has been turned upside down."

"Ouch," Rick touched the spot she hit him, feigning agony whilst chuckling. "For the better right?"

"Mnhmm. Anyways, Andrea knows how much I care about her, why else do you think she said not one thing?"

"Maybe there isn't anything to say, and we're just speculating. Or, the two of them aren't supposed to be together...rules and all that."

"Trust me, she's broken those before, all those long hours spent together with her colleagues. It isn't uncommon for lines to get blurred."

"Well, maybe he's married." Even though Rick himself couldn't recall seeing a wedding ring on Shane's finger, with the brashness of his character, Rick wouldn't put it past him. Not that he should be assuming the worst of him though. He hardly knew this man.

She frowned. "No not that. Andrea is a lot of things, an adulterer is not one of them." Giving in to a moment of weakness was one thing, but actively carrying on a full blown affair? No her girl didn't have it in her... to be so selfish and cruel? Andrea knew the consequences, and she damn well knew better.

Rick observed the slight shift in Michonne's demeanor. There was a hint of... something behind her downcast eyes over the topic at hand. As though she was somehow taking it personal. In the beginning of their relationship, he'd shared with her his own experience with unfaithfulness, and he recalled how she indicated that she could relate. So what was her story? No doubt it probably involved Mr. Dixon himself. Rick kept it in mind, promising himself to inquire about that later, at a more suitable time.

"Listen," With one arm he then hugged her around her shoulders, and they continued down the aisle in step with each other. "We've all been preoccupied. When Andrea's ready she'll come out with it. There may not be anything to talk about anyways. What we're doing, is just gossiping sweetheart," he said, in an effort to recapture the easiness between them.

"Yeah, you're right." Just then his arm snaked all the way down her back, and the next thing she knew she felt him give her a firm squeeze. "Rick!"

A devilish gleam flashed across his eyes. "What? As I recall, you liked that back in the antique store," he said, deepening his husky voice.

"True," she giggled. Their overt, public display of affection during their brief getaway, was similar to that of two hormonally charged teenagers. "Still, no one knows me in Marietta," Not wanting to indulge his shenanigans, Michonne removed herself from his flirtatious hands. "I'm a regular here at this store. Why don't you save it for later?" She leaned in and gave him a full kiss on his mouth.
"Later?" Rick asked, as she drew away from him, already growing warm with excitement. "Is that a promise?"

Her shoulders shrugged, "We'll see," she teased.

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"I do." His eyes danced across her face with fondness, loving the way she blushed. "You gotta get back to the restaurant after this?" He had an irrepressible need to steal her away.

"Rick," Picking up on the suggestive tone inflected in his voice just then, her eyes narrowed at him. "Don't you think we've spent enough time ditching work to fool around?" Her palm then flew up to his lips before his obvious response could escape from them. "Forget it. Besides, I know, that you know, where you're supposed to be. You heard Shane."

He nodded. "Alright. Let's go then, you have everything?"

"Almost. Could you grab me some apples?" she asked, as they were now standing in the produce section.

"Which ones?" He surveyed the selections, hovering between the Gala and the Fuji apples. It probably didn't matter, so he decided to pick out a few of each. Just as his fingers were reaching out to collect them though…

"Not those," she warned with a touch of sternness.

Rick glanced over to her curiously, and she pointed his attention to the first set.

"The green ones. Bag about five or six. And make sure none are bruised."

He smiled at her bossiness, tempted to challenge her, but then decided against it. "Yes dear," he remarked instead.

Her eyes widened at the insinuation of his comment. "Are you giving me attitude?" A broad grin lifted her cheeks and her eyes sparkled with a childish delight. "Am I exasperating you?"

"No, not at all. You're perfect."

She laughed. "Oh stop."

"Five or six you said right? Not seven? Eight? See I wanna get it just right, don't want to incur your wrath now."

Her whole body shook with riotous laughter.

Once she got her desired fruit, they began to make their way up to the cashier. But then something caught her eye causing them to pause once more. Rick's phone suddenly vibrated. Retrieving it from his breast pocket, he glanced at it to discover he'd gotten a text from Aaron.

'Where are you? You're needed urgently. Your father is here.'

His thumb rubbed against the lit screen as he studied the brief message again.

'You're needed urgently…'
His chest tightened…

'Your father is here.'

… His shoulders tensed.

And without giving it a second thought, he shoved the device back inside of his pocket.

He could just about imagine what was taking place – the conversations being had, between Phillip and their dad. What was it that made his brother so confident in coming after him? More than indignation, something else had emboldened him to pursue such an aggressive, bold faced attack.

"Hey babe, did you hear what I asked?"

Michonne's voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Sorry 'bout that, my mind wandered," he shrugged.

She gave him a little nod. His stresses were evident by the distance in his blue orbs. He looked sullen, and it worried her a bit. "That's okay," she whispered. "I um, I was just wondering about Carl… what kind of cereal does he like?"

Then he noticed she was holding two different boxes in her hands.

"Honey and Nuts? Or Fruit and Nuts?"

The corners of his mouth quirked up with appreciation. On the drive over to the law firm earlier, there happened to be a lively discussion on the phone between him and his sister about missing items from the fridge. She'd had enough of his son devouring her Almond milk and Granola bars. But he'd forgotten about it. "You don't have to do that. Was gonna make a big run to the Farmers Market this weekend."

"Carl is a growing teenage boy Rick. And you've been distracted. Besides, we're already here so… which is it?"

"If it's food, he'll eat it." Leaning forward, he kissed her on her temple, pausing for a moment to inhale her scent – her sweet, flowery scent. It made his heart dance. Her womanly aroma worked like an aphrodisiac, and he couldn't help but brush his lips against her skin once more. How amazing that this incredible woman loved him.

Michonne lifted her gaze. It held a softness to it and she smiled. "Okay so both?"

"Both." Rick chuckled as the two boxes were dropped in to the already filled basket. "Think we should've gotten a cart."

"Yeah, you could be right." She surveyed the items checking off her mental list. "Still need some soy milk... and yogurt, and…"

He sighed. "I'll go get us a cart, stay here." It was turning out to be more than just a little detour. And honestly, he didn't mind – not in the slightest – as his feet strolled leisurely his lips curled into a smile.

"Thank you dear," her voice called out to him like a melody.

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Later that night, as Michonne pulled into her drive way, her rearview mirror gave her a direct view of a particular black sedan parked on the other side of the street. Her eyes peeked at the radio display, the fluorescent blue lights read precisely – '8:00 p.m.' She shook her head and sighed, realizing that
she didn't give herself enough time. Grabbing her bags, Michonne stepped out of her vehicle and made her way into the house.

Just as she entered the front door, she dropped the bags by the entryway closet, and with a deep sigh promptly kicked off her heels. Right then, Daryl came trotting down the stairs, but his steps slowed once he caught sight of her.

She drew in a long, deep breath, and then exhaled to steady her disruptive heart. "You're still here?"

With his thumb he gestured upstairs. "Carol said it's okay."

"It is."

"But it's time for me to leave?"

"Didn't say that."

"Didn't have to."

With him standing in front of her at the bottom landing, Michonne found herself fixating on her hands as she toyed with her keys.

"You now getting in from work?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I um, never mentioned it before, but congratulations and everything on the restaurant. I know how special that place is to you."

Michonne cleared her throat. "Thanks." It was unintentional, her being so curt with him, but she couldn't help it.

A heavy silence then descended on them both. It was suffocating, and Michonne wasn't sure why. So she moved to collect her things from off the floor.

However, Daryl extended his arm and stepped closer offering his assistance.

But she jerked back, "No I got it." And for a few seconds she permitted her eyes to connect with his, but this time, with a look of bewilderment he was the one to glimpse away. Somehow they both simply couldn't bear to allow their eyes to meet. It was as though, they were two strangers forced to stand there exposed in front of each other.

Nevertheless, Daryl, for some odd reason, felt compelled to linger. Whilst Michonne gritted her teeth wishing like hell that he would just leave.

So much for closure. Seemed like things were that much more awkward between them. But without the animosity. Conflicted, Michonne sucked in her lips. Just a couple more days… no, actually less… and he'd be gone and this whole ordeal would be over.

At last, Daryl moved around her and thankfully, reached for the door readying to leave, but, just as quickly, he pulled back. "Hey, Charlie… I'd like for her to come out to LA for the summer. She could, you know, see the place, and get everything she needs for the big day."

Michonne shifted back towards the staircase, allowing her bags to slip down into the crook of her arm. "How long?" she asked, filled with an immediate sense of dread of having her baby so far away.
"I was hoping a week, or two."

Her eyes grew wide, she'd never been more than one hundred miles away from Charlotte for more than a few days – forget two thousand for two weeks! "You can't be serious. Won't you be in the studio?" It was the quickest excuse she could come up with.

"Naw, won't be recording anything till late August."

"Oh," At the moment tiredness washed over her and she was in no position to negotiate. "Let me think about it," she sighed, "I'll get back to you."

"Okay," He nodded and rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Umm, one more thing… thought I could get her something nice too, before I leave. Saw this necklace with a little locket pendant… think she'll like that? I mean all girls dig that kind of stuff, but I don't know…" he shook his head, "… I mean I'm still getting to figure her out."

"Daryl if you can't tell by now, she'd love it if you gave her a brown paper bag with gummy bears in it. She adores you. She does. So it doesn't matter."

"Alright," he said. And finally, he began to make his way out. "See ya."

"See ya," she answered, as she made a beeline towards the kitchen, not even waiting to see him out. But as she placed her things on top of the counter, she realized that she didn't hear the door shut behind her. She spun around to find him still standing in the doorway staring at her. Tilting her head to the side she met his dejected gaze and whispered, "What is it?"

"We good?" he asked, hopeful.

Michonne pursed her lips and nodded, "Yeah Daryl… we're good. Goodbye."

"Okay. Bye."

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"Oh Damn it," Rick cursed, as he grabbed up the water bottle that just spilled across his desk. He snatched up his napkins from his deli sandwich and started to sop up the mess. But the measly tissue wasn't enough. Aaron kept paper towels at his desk right? Darting out of the office, Rick opened his assistant's door that was right next to his. "Oh sorry…" There happened to be someone else present in the room. "I uh made a mess think you can lend me some towels?"

However, recognition then dawned on him as his eyes trained on the visitor. "Wait what the hell are you doing here?" Stepping inside the office fully, his voice grew loud at his assistant. "Aaron what is this?"

Aaron shot up from his chair. "Umm, Rick, Sir… It appears that Mr. Dixon here is interested in doing some business with us."

Folding his arms across his chest, Rick narrowed his eyes down at the curious individual. "What kind of business?"

"Ms. Des Vignes debt to GEDC, he wants to absolve it," Aaron responded.

Rick's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me, what?"
"Hey, just calm down alright," Daryl said, as he rose up from his chair.

Taking a determined step towards the audacious man, "Naw, that's not happening. I don't think so." Rick answered, as he leered at him.

Aaron then rushed around his desk and pulled his boss to the side. "Sir can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Rick shrugged away from his assistant, "No. Cause this isn't happening."

"Hey," Daryl said, "What's the problem?"

Tilting his head, Rick's face twisted in disbelief. But before he could say anything further, Aaron guided him out into the hallway.

"Boss, look at me, this isn't as crazy as it seems," Aaron reasoned, as he pulled the door in behind him.

"This is insane," Rick retorted. "Do you know who he is?"

"Of course…"

"Doesn't it strike you as odd and inappropriate, not even in the slightest, him being here?"

Aaron gripped both of Rick's shoulders as he was accustomed to doing whenever he wanted to convey an important fact to him. "He's Michonne's ex-husband, yes. And he showed up here without her to pay off her million dollar loan… plus interest mind you. Yes it is odd. Quite so. However, Rick, if his money's legit, you should at the very least, hear him out."

Rick drew in a deep breath. Aaron had a valid point, of course. But… "This isn't just business," he said.

Aaron lowered his gaze briefly, "Maybe not for him. But for us, it sure as hell is," he said, as his eyes lifted once again and shot Rick a pointed look. "Right now you're the CEO of an investment company, that's your priority in this moment. Do you understand Sir?"

He understood, and to a great extent he agreed. Everything Aaron said made complete sense. Rick deliberated the unexpected opportunity, as his assistant's calculated words sank in. This was how he trained him to be – To coldly set aside all emotions and attachments for the almighty dollar. Without a doubt that's how a successful company of any kind is run. As Michonne herself liked to say, 'It's all about the numbers.'

With that, Daryl Dixon was escorted to Rick's office.

Rick was going to hear what he had to say.

Leaning back at the edge of his desk crossing both his arms and his ankles, he stared at Michonne's ex-husband who remained standing. "So… what is this really about?"

Daryl shoved his hands inside of his jeans pockets. "Just trying to make things right between me and my girl is all."

"First of all, let's get this straight. She's not your girl anymore. Matter of fact, Michonne happens to be a grown woman."

"And she's with you, I get it aight. It ain't all that. I'm not trying to come in between the two of you. I
mean I can't. What's passed is past man. This is about me redeeming myself. This ain't no damn soap opera. So calm the hell down. I love Sasha. She's been good to me...the best.

Bowing his head Rick's hand reached up to scratch his beard "And she knows about you wanting to do this transaction?"

Daryl went quiet and glanced outside the window.

Rick scoffed. What woman would approve of their husband spending that kind of money on their ex? "Don't you think this'll be a problem?"

"The truth is, Rick," Daryl lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug, "Michonne... she's family. That ain't gonna change."

Rick shot him an incredulous look.

"You won't understand, but she changed me. When I met her, I knew she was different – not just some stuck up, college chick. And me? I was just some guy, right, just some nobody playing in a dumb band for next to nothing. From campus to campus, and whatever hole we could get into around the state. Late one night, after our set when she agreed to stay back and have a beer with me, that's when my life started for me. I'd hit the jackpot." He shrugged and shook his head. "She became my everything man. And I didn't do right by her which I'm sure she told you."

"Not all of it. But I get the idea."

"Yeah well the thing is I got caught up... in what other people wanted me to do, my brother, my bandmates, my producers, seemed like I let everyone else control a piece of me. I hurt her real bad, so her leaving me, it was what I deserved. This..." He pulled out his checkbook from his back pocket, and held it up, "... This ain't nothing but a drop in the bucket, for the messed up shit I put her through."

Rick paused for a few moments, contemplating his offer and the rationale behind it. It was clear to him, even though he didn't come right out and say it, that this man, filled with regret, still loved Michonne. And to an extent, he could relate. "You came here to make amends?"

"It's the only way I know how."

"Why didn't you go to her with this?"

Daryl humphed. "You must not know her very well to ask me that."

Rick shook his head, the stubbornness of that woman could be a force to contend with.

"Just let me... please? I'm trying here. And besides, business is about money ain't it? My money's clean, you ain't gotta worry about that."

"That's not what I'm worried about." Rick knew that Michonne would detest being kept in the dark about this decision. But, the smart thing would be to accept Daryl's offer in a heartbeat. Aaron was right about that. Not just for GEDC, but for her as well. Not having this substantial loan on her back would grant her the freedom to focus solely on shaping the dining experience at Angelo's to exactly how she wanted it to be. She could allocate the profits to accomplish that, without her debt at the forefront of her mind no more cutbacks, tightfisted budgets, and keeping a strict eye on margins. Maximized profits would stay in-house and the restaurant would flourish.

Not to mention, it wouldn't hurt either that this investment would no longer be an issue that Phillip
could use against him. So…

"Come on man. For her it's worth it," Daryl encouraged.

"This is just business, Okay?"

Daryl nodded. "Okay. And keep this between us alright. You and Mr. Smarty slim-pants out there, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Rick sighed. How long would he be able to keep this a secret from Michonne? Not very, that he knew for a fact. He'd have to figure out the best way to let her in on it. But for now... "Alright, first of all, its not so simple. Can you get ahold of your lawyer?"

"Which one?"

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Chapter 16: "I underestimated you…"

Rick rolled his neck to ease his burgeoning tension, a major headache was coming on. In fact he'd been struggling with persistent migraines for the past few days. Ever since he struck a deal with Mr. Dixon behind Michonne's back, his brain had been on overdrive. He had to talk to her about it and somehow convince her to see things his way.

However, that issue had to be placed on the back burner for the moment. Something else more pressing needed to be dealt with.

"I can't believe you brought me here." Surveying the shadowy parking lot he found himself standing in, Rick started second guessing his decision to drive out into the middle of nowhere in the late hours of the night.

Andrea narrowed her blue-green eyes at him and smirked. "Get it together Grimes. We're going in for the kill." She ran her hands down the red corset she was strapped in, gripping the black laced hemline to adjust it over her short and tight skirt. "How do I look?" she asked, a little too excited about their mission at hand.

"Fan-friggin-tastic!" replied Shane from behind her with a lopsided smile. His fingers raked his wavy dark hair whilst taking the liberty to ogle her smooth legs.

Andrea turned and winked at him. "Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself," she said, her smoldering eyes just as appreciative of the vision of her co-worker in his black leather undershirt and matching pants that clung to every inch of him sinfully.

"Alright, alright you two," Rick huffed at the flirtatious couple. He allowed them to bring him there to handle business, not to chaperone some date. "Let's just get this over with. You ready?"

"Definitely," answered Andrea. "But you know it wouldn't have killed you Rick to at least try and play along." Placing one hand on her hip, she scrunched her face at his simple outfit of a fitted brown t-shirt and dark jeans.

"She's right brother. We gotta look the part," commented Shane, as Rick shrugged off Andrea's remark. "Anyways we're already here. Now remember, let me do all the talking, alright? You and Andrea are gonna just follow my lead. My intel is solid on this one."

Their law firm's efficient private investigator discovered that Phillip succeeded in blackmailing three of GEDC's board members, coercing them into backing his plans to force Rick out. They intended to assist the older Grimes brother in sabotaging all of Rick's decisions and make it look as though, that without his father's guidance, Rick was radical and unfit to be CEO. The company's biggest clients would have no choice but to question the value of his input in the running of their businesses.

Their agenda on that night was to shut it down.

Shane fixed his gaze onto Rick's, "I know that this is personal, but stick to the script."

After Rick nodded his compliance, the three proceeded towards a secluded, unassuming building. Shane went ahead and opened a black metal door that then led them to a second door where they
needed to be buzzed in. Welcomed by two extremely amicable hosts, also clad in leather, the trio flashed their Ids, paid their fees, and signed waver forms before being ushered into the secret club.

The space inside was large, the layout design elaborate, and the air thick with sweet scented oils. As Shane made quick work to locate their person of interest, they encountered public scenes of men and women alike being paddled, prodded, and flogged, all to a steady soundtrack of techno music.

Keeping his head down, Rick did everything feasible to not gawk. He felt, without a doubt, completely disoriented, and every cell in his body begged to get the hell out of there. How on God’s green earth did Andrea talk him into this?

Soon, however, they found themselves in a long, narrow hallway with smaller, intimate rooms on either side. Amongst the spectators leaning against the various open doorways, enraptured by the highly imaginative role-play taking place, they thankfully spotted the individual they were on the hunt for.

"There he is," Rick nodded over to their sleek-looking target standing a couple doorways away.

"Okay I got it," whispered Andrea, as she stuck her chest out and strutted over to him. "Hey handsome. Dom… or Sub?"

The man in his shiny black dress shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his elbow, and the top buttons undone, flashed a confident smile. He raked her over with his eye approvingly. "Well aren't you a pretty little thing. Dom… you?"

"Follow me and you'll find out," she purred. And in the next second she had him traipsing behind her to a seating area on the other end of the corridor.

After a minute or two in hushed conversation, they were suddenly cornered.

"Hey hot stuff," said Shane as he came up behind them.

"Hold on now, I saw her first. You'll have to wait your turn," the man responded without bothering to turn around.

"Actually I was talking to you Phillip Grimes," Shane grabbed him by his shoulder and spun him around to face them.

"Their eyes met, Rick watched as all the color drained from his brother's face.

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Phillip soon found himself outside in the parking lot, more incensed than perturbed over the ambush.

Rick stood on one side of Andrea's car, glaring at his older brother across from him. Placed on the hood, in between them, was a large brown accordion folder containing files and pictures, some of which were spread out on top of it.

Shane, with a torchlight in his hand, propped himself up next to Phillip. He went through each document making sure that Phillip was aware that they had a serious case against him and his conspiracy plan. "Hey, let me ask you something. You see this?" He held up two of the photos of him in a compromising position with a redheaded woman. "And this? That look like your wife to you? No it don't. Now you think an honorable, respectable company like what your daddy built, and the honorable and respectable men on that board, are gonna want a man like this to be in charge? A man who, on any given Sunday, is prone to step out on his wife with a variety of strange women no
"You have no right!" Phillip retorted through gritted teeth.

"Ssh. Hush up!" Shane stood straight up from leaning against the front of the vehicle and pointed a finger up at the man, not intimidated in the slightest by his towering presence and venomous stare. "You think you're an honorable man Phillip? Respectable? Holdin' to old-fashioned values? I mean come on now… at least come on out with it. You a man aren't you? Don't be ashamed if this is what you're into. That's your prerogative. But I tell you what, it'll be a cold day in hell before your father, and every member of that board let you take the lead at GEDC. That ain't happening brother. You best believe that."

"What do you want?"

"I want you out," Rick hissed, stepping around the car moving closer to his brother.

At first Phillip chuckled, and then took a few contemplative moments. "Fine, alright? Fine. I'll leave Atlanta first thing in the morning."

Andrea grabbed Rick's arm and pulled him back, there was no need for this confrontation to get physical. "No lover boy. What he means is that we want you out of GEDC entirely."

"Now wait a minute…" He threw his head back and laughed with an air of arrogance, "That is not going to happen, golden boy."

"You wanna bet?" Andrea tapped on the photos. "We have copies ready to be mailed out to everyone you care about… including Lilly your wife. Now when I spoke to her on the phone she sounded like such a sweet woman, it'll be a real shame to break her heart like this."

"How dare you!"

"No, how dare you. I won't spend the rest of my life, like this. Always looking over my shoulder? I've had enough." Throughout his childhood Rick had to contend with Phillip's rebellious nature. His brother liked to take risks, do things his way, refusing to be molded into a 'puppet' by his parents. Unlike Rick of course, who happened to be quite the opposite – obedient and respectful – the perfect boy scout.

For a time however, Rick looked up to Phillip – his bigger, older brother, commissioned by God, and their father, to look out for him. His adventurous and astute nature earned Rick's naive admiration, and on numerous occasions he confided in him, sought out his advice, trusting every word that came out of his big brother's mouth.

But, all that changed as they got older, when Phillip's true deceptive nature couldn't be suppressed any longer. Due to a sense of entitlement, he lied and schemed in the worst possible ways, just to attain whatever it was he wanted, regardless of whoever got hurt or humiliated.

"You think you can replace me? Dad wouldn't let you."

"Oh but he already has. Told me that this decision is in my hands." Rick cocked his head to the side with a smug smile.

Phillip's jaw visibly twitched. "You won't go through with this. The company needs me. You'd put it at risk to settle an old score?"

"Well you gave me no choice. I didn't ask for this, but you forced my hand."
Taking a couple of steps back, Phillip started to realize how serious Rick's threats were. "I underestimated you… Honestly didn't think you had it in ya to pull something like this. Then again…” He paused and pointed to his eye patch, "… didn't think you had it in you to do this to me either."

Rick shook his head, his brother was incredible – Always looking to place blame, always holding a grudge. "I'm not going down that road with you Phillip, it's been over twenty years – get over it."

"Get over it? You disabled me you god, damned, bastard!"

"It was an accident. How many times are we gonna go through that? Besides, it wasn't me who wanted to sneak off without Dad to go out hunting … we were just teens."

"Alright boys! Now that's enough!" Shane hollered, a bit anxious to get things settled. "Do we have a deal or not? You wanna go quietly Phillip, or you wanna try your luck with us?"

Phillip was not a man to give up when his mind was set on something, but gauging the iron fisted determination in Rick's sickening stare, he decided it would have been best to pull back and lay low in order to fight another day. "This isn't over brother," he warned.

"It is," said Rick, disgusted by his brother's relentless disposition. But for now, as he watched Phillip slither away, Rick would take this as a win.

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In the weeks that passed by, things settled down at GEDC after the disruption caused by Phillip's 'sudden' resignation. Grimes senior stepped in to assist his younger son to do damage control and to find a suitable replacement to take up the open post back in the offices in King's County.

Without the threat of being replaced looming over him, Rick felt more or less at ease, and he focused his attentions on spending more time with both Michonne and their kids.

It was a Saturday night, and Rick and Carl were in the middle of cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. Proceeding with caution, Rick brought up a discussion about the possibility of inviting Michonne to come and stay with them, during the week when Charlotte was supposed to be visiting her father. Rick thought it would be a nice gesture and nothing more, as it would be the first time she'd be in her house all alone. He didn't want Carl to think that he was trying to replace Lori. She could never be replaced – as Carl's mother, and as Rick's first wife.

After placing the last glass inside of the dishwasher, Carl paused and turned to look back at his dad. "Does that mean Michonne's going to be your second wife?"

Rick swallowed hard and shifted his stance, leaning back against his breakfast bar. "We haven't reached that far. But I, I love her," he admitted for the first time to his son. "Would that be something you'd be okay with?"

"Seriously? I'd have to think about it." Carl shut the appliance door and switched it on. "I mean this house, Mom picked it out. It was her dream home. We still keep sunflowers in the dining area because those were her favorite. Is Michonne going to be living here? Wouldn't that be weird? I mean…” he sighed and shook his head."…I don't know what I mean."

"Listen I get it." He understood that their home still kept him connected to the memories of Lori. Moving to a new house would sever him from that. But how would Michonne feel about that, stepping into another woman's life? So to speak. "But you like her don't you?"
"Yeah. She's cool. She's one of us."

"And Charlotte?"

"Well... I'm still trying to figure her out," he joked. "Michonne may not want to ditch her just yet."

Rick threw a slice of cheese at his giggling son. "Hey, that's not funny. Listen, it's like I said. We haven't really reached there yet."

"But you want to, don't you?" Tilting his head, Carl observed his father. He was aglow with a different spirit, a changed attitude. His mind was young and inexperienced, but for Carl it was plain to see – his father was more than just happy. It was almost as if he'd been replaced with a new version of himself, and for the better.

Rick didn't want to lie to his son. He was becoming a man. "Absolutely."

Carl nodded with a smile. Every night as of recent his dad was home before seven. Things were going great. They just had homemade pizza for dinner, after having spent the day in the pool with Michonne and Charlotte who were staying over for the weekend, taking advantage of his aunt Denise being in Minneapolis for a Bloggers convention. Their guests were currently in the living room eating ice cream and setting up video games. Carl, he could get used to this.

As the night progressed, the adults settled themselves on the couch watching the kids who were sitting on the floor playing Carl's favorite space combat game.

"Charlie you're not watching what you're doing! Your strategy is all wrong." Michonne coached, as she sat on Rick's lap cuddling with him, her full weight resting effortlessly against his warm chest as both their legs stretched out in front of them.

"Mom, how am I supposed to concentrate with you hollering at me? Like seriously," Charlotte retorted a little too harshly.

"Hey watch it young lady," Rick warned.

"Sorry..." she sighed, as her fingers tapped the control's buttons vigorously. "But I'm just saying."

"Yeah well your mother's right," he continued, as he draped one arm over Michonne's shoulder and hugged her torso with the other. "You're playing the game all wrong. The objective of the game is not to get shot out of the sky."

"Is no one else on my side?" Charlotte shook her head at the teasing.

"Don't worry Charlie," Carl piped in. "You keep doing what you're doing. Cause it means I get to keep on winning."

She shoved him and the control fell out of his hand.

"Hey," he laughed, "Don't be mad at the player be mad at the game."

"Carl, do you know what it is you're even saying? Where did you get that from?"

"The guys at school."

"They sound like douches – Aww c'mon! I can't believe you did me like that! You just shot me! I wasn't prepared."
"I'm just saying Charlotte, you always have to be ready, no matter what," Carl shrugged his shoulders at her with a wicked grin.

Michonne and Rick chuckled at them, amused by their harmless banter.

Later on upstairs, after the kids went to bed, they stayed up a bit longer talking in his room. All the while he kept it in mind that tonight was the night he'd confess everything to her concerning the pay off of her debt. He never intended to wait this long, but a piercing fear kept holding him back. He'd convinced himself that he made the right choice for the sake of his battle with Phillip, but a part of him knew that he took a huge risk. Unshakable pangs of guilt ached within him ever since. Would she forgive him? Would he be able to persuade her to understand?

Michonne rested her lotion bottle on top of Rick's dresser and then placed her duffel bag inside his walk-in closet admiring how huge and well organized the space was. "We owe Andrea and Paul. He's been great since you've been gone."

"Not gone, I'm still here," Rick replied.

"You know what I mean," she sighed. "He needs a raise. Let's do it as soon as it's feasible. Besides that Taurus he drives is way past its prime. One of these days it's going to explode on him."

"Anything you say dear."

She looked down at him to find a teasing slant on his lips. "Think this is going to be a thing now?"

He pouted his lower lip and nodded, "Probably."

She grinned at the boyish sweetness in his eyes and moved to join him on the edge of the bed.

Rick's breath hitched as she sat across his lap, hugging his shoulders with one arm, whilst using the other hand to gently caress the side of his handsome face. He pressed his bearded cheek into her warm touch, his heart racing with trepidation.

"You okay?" she asked, her index finger lightly tracing the contour of his nose bridge, as she stared at him with such sweet affection in her smiling eyes.

His arms instinctively tightened around her tiny waist, "I just love you. And I'm happy. Happy that we're here together."

"I love you too Rick," she breathed, as her heart fluttered within her, enveloped by tremendous joy and immense pride over letting her guard down and choosing him. She took a risk and it paid off – she'd found love again. Love that burned her chest and left her breathless with each tantalizing kiss, and with every scintillating touch.

Tilting her head, she leaned in close and brushed the tip of her nose against his. For a heart stopping second their gaze locked as something intense passed between them. Michonne drew in a slow breath before pressing her soft, full lips against his mouth, yearning to pour out her desire for him now and forevermore. No more second thoughts. No misgivings. Not a trace of crippling fear. Allowing her mind, and her heart, and her entire being to be thoroughly exposed to the willpower of this man, she moved to pull her top off up and over her arms and her head. His sizzling fingers gripped her waist, and driven with excitement she twisted her body at the invitation, bringing her legs up now to straddle him. Her mouth reclaimed his with a fervid kiss and her hands captured the back of his neck as she raised up onto her knees.
Rick's head angled upwards to indulge her sweeping tongue as she forcefully pushed herself against his heaving chest causing him to fall backwards onto his cool cotton sheets. His body's hunger was taking over putting his mind's concern to rest. Gliding his hands up the smooth skin of her back, he felt her strap and unhooked it, then he flipped her over dragging her body beneath him. This woman was his. They wanted and needed each other.

His confession would have to come later.

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After a quick trip to the bathroom, Michonne, partially dressed, crawled back into bed and recovered her position of comfort within Rick's embrace. Nuzzling her head in between the nook of his neck and his shoulder, a contented Rick entangled her once more in between his possessive limbs.

He lowered his head to place a quick kiss on the side of her head. "Everything okay?"

Nodding slightly, "I want it to always be like this," she answered with a small smile.

"It can be. That would be up to you." His fingertips found their way in between the locs of her hair. "You know, I spoke to Carl before, and let him know that you and I are serious. And that what I want is a future for us."

Her stomach flipped, "What did he say?"

"That you're one of us," he replied, filled with pride.

She smiled, ecstatic and grateful for the young man's acceptance. She was growing more and more fond of Carl. He made it easy for her to comfortably be herself around him. Not once did she ever detect a hint of resentment as though she were trying to replace his mother. She loved his father and she wanted to love him too.

"He even seems to be okay with you staying here while Charlotte's away," Rick added. "When is she supposed to leave?"

Michonne cleared her throat, "The uh, first week in June… Her father's really excited. He's got a lot of things planned…"

"What is it?" Rick asked, after she'd suddenly gone quiet.

Straightening up, Michonne turned to face him. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but Daryl…he's been keeping in touch more and more with me for some strange reason."

Rick in an instant became agitated. "How?"

"Texts, emails – He's been asking about work at the restaurant. It's a bit off-putting, but I suppose he wants to keep our relationship good. Doesn't want things to…" she sighed, "…deteriorate I guess. Anyway, I'm telling you this because, well because it's like you said… we want a future together. What we have is special to me Rick, I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that."

A severe constriction seized his rib cage and he dropped his gaze from hers.

Michonne pressed her hand against his bare chest and she dropped his gaze from hers.

Although her soft tone of voice carried mere concern and honesty, her openness and loyalty hit him like a sledgehammer. His shoulders slumped forward and his stomach churned wickedly. Pushing
through his anxiety, Rick forced himself to lift his gaze. The sooner he released his secret, the sooner he could fix it. He'd held back for far too long. "I have to tell you something..." he began. "I, did something, and I need to talk to you about it."

She detected the seriousness in his eyes and shifted closer to him. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

"About three weeks ago, before Daryl left – just before actually – he came to see me at my office."

"Okay..." Her brows drew together. How did Daryl even know how to find Rick? And why was she now being told about this? "And?" she whispered.

"And he made me an offer."

"An offer? For what?"

His gaze faltered once more.

"For what Rick?" she repeated.

He swallowed the knot in his throat, took a deep breath, and let the words tumble out. "He offered to clear off the loan on Angelo's."

Michonne drew in a sharp breath, regarding him sadly. "And you took it, didn't you?"

Nodding his confession he cupped her small hand within his. "Yeah, I did."

The quiet darkness they sat in engulfed her. Michonne's heart sank, and her spirit broke. She blinked at him, now at a complete loss for words.

"I didn't plan to tell you this way," he breathed, witnessing a look of disappointment cloud over her expression. "I didn't think I would've taken this long. But I kept losing my nerve to come out with it because I just couldn't find the right time."

"No," she finally spoke, her voice weak, weighed down with emotion, "You kept losing your nerve because you know you made the wrong choice."

He shook his head. "Didn't want to take any chances. At first of course I didn't want to do it – take the money – but the more I thought about it...It gave me the upper hand with Phillip. There was nothing to throw back at me." Leaning forward he squeezed her hand. "I didn't have a choice. It was just business."

"Then why did you think it was best not to tell me?"

"Daryl wanted it to stay between us. But like I said, I was working up to it."

No. Wrong answer.

A sickening pain riveted through her chest. Yanking her hand away from his grasp, she flew up and switched on the light, making haste to gather her things.

Following her, Rick jumped out of the bed and got dressed. "Couldn't let Phillip use you to try to humiliate me. I didn't have a choice," he tried to reason, barely convincing himself.

"No, you didn't," she mocked. "And neither did I." Halting her frenzied movements she glared at him. "Who do you think you are to leave me in the dark like this? How could you think that it was okay not to even consult me?" Jesus they were just making plans to share a future, so how could he
reason like that? What did he expect? That she'd nod and smile and say 'Okay my darling, okay.'?

"Like I said, Daryl made that part of the agreement. He wanted to keep it private."

'That son of a bitch.'

"This is my life!" she screamed. "It's my restaurant! Daryl, is –"

"What?" His eyes narrowed down daringly at her.

She shook her head and glanced away. "He's nothing to you. It didn't matter what he wanted, you should've sent him to me. You had no right Rick. This sure as hell wasn't your decision to make!" He was an arrogant lunatic. How could he do that to her? Overwhelmed by his betrayal, she found it damn near impossible to even look back at him.

"I have a business to run Michonne! I thought you understood that. You know what was at stake. I did what I had to do!" He watched as she wordlessly kept her head down, pulled on her pants, grabbed up her bag, then made her way to leave. Out of instinct, and out of fear, his arm flung out and held on to her. "Wait," he pleaded, desperation and regret glistening in his widened eyes.

"Go to hell!" she cursed him. "We're done."

His heart stopped. "What?!" He clutched her arm, tugging her back as she moved to walk away.

"Just like that? Don't you think you're being melodramatic?"

She spun around and slapped him in his face, "How's that for being melodramatic?" and then she yanked her arm away.

Storming into the guest room, she roused a confused Charlotte out of bed. It took them precisely two minutes to pack up and leave.

Due to the commotion, Carl came out and stood in the hallway. Stunned, he wanted to know what it was his dad did.

"It's okay Carl," Rick answered, in a tone of voice that matched his despondency.

"No, how could you say that?" He observed his father's fully flushed face. "You're crying." His eyes moved towards the staircase landing. "And Michonne's leaving. So how could you say that it's okay?"

"Just go back to bed Carl," he simply ordered, and retreated into his room. But he himself was unable to do the same.

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One week later.

Michonne looked out of her windscreen and stared in disbelief at the endless line of traffic ahead of her. No one was moving, they'd come to a complete standstill, making it impossible for her to get through downtown to make it to work on time. Checking her watch it was already minutes after nine.

She got out of her car and ambled her way a few feet ahead, hoping to discover the cause for the unlikely build-up. She tapped on the glass of a few windows – a Volvo with a family, a Benz with some slick looking nineteen year old – and asked if they had any idea about what was going on.
They all said 'No.'

She decided to call Paul, but he didn't answer. "Hey, it's me. When you get this message, please call me back? It's bad out here, I'm stuck in a jam." Glancing behind her at the lengthening stream of cars, "It's just getting worse," she commented before hanging up. As she continued sifting her way forward in between the cars, a blaring siren rang out, and her eyes narrowed to peer ahead. It was a fire truck. She sighed defeated. Well that was it. She was stuck for the day. Palming her forehead in frustration she then turned and started back towards her car.

Having returned to her vehicle she leaned sideways against the door. Michonne shaded her eyes from the glare of the sun and surveyed the fellow drivers who were lined up behind her. Some, in their irritableness, were even posted on top of the hoods of their cars. Completely boxed in she wondered how the hell she was going to get out of this.

In the next instant, her phone rang out. Michonne groaned out loud. It was Rick, again. She'd ignored his calls three times already for the morning. It had been a week and still there wasn't anything else to say to him. She needed more time. Never should she have let her guard down, never should she have allowed him to step into her life and take center stage only to set her up for disappointment. But this was her fault, wasn't it? The signs were definitely all there. She got what she deserved.

This time, she picked up, but only to give him a piece of her mind.

"I'm only going to say this once. Stop calling me."

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Did you just hear what I said?"

"I did. Now answer me. I wanna know where you are."

She scoffed. "That's none of your business… But I'm on my way to work."

"So you're not there yet? You're not at the restaurant?"

She blew out a heavy breath. "No, Rick, I'm stuck in traffic on Peachtree, frightfully late for my appointment with Paul… he's not even answering my calls. So…" she sighed, "…Now is not a good time for me."

"He won't, he can't."

"Excuse me?"

"Something is happening."

"Wait, what? What does that mean?"

"Michonne don't move from where you are. I'm coming to get you. Tell me where you are right now."

"Rick? Wait, how do you know something's happening? Happening where? Is it on the news?" She climbed back into her car and turned on her radio. "And, and what do you mean Paul can't?"

"Michonne just listen alright. Don't—"

"Wait hold on, we're moving." Suddenly people were jumping back into their vehicles and the traffic
started shifting along. "I'm gonna get through. Let me call you back when I get to work." She didn't know why she just said that because frankly it wasn't true. She had no intention of returning his call.

"Michonne no! You can't!"

Startled, Michonne's heart skipped a beat. "Rick! For crying out loud, what is wrong with you?" But then her mind started to lock the pieces into place. "Wait, how do you know something is happening?"

He went quiet. "Just stay where you are, please?"

"What's happening? Rick just tell me." Her voice wavered with uncertainty.

"I, I got a call, its Angelo's… There's been an explosion Michonne, and Paul... he got caught in it."

A jolt of adrenaline shot through her heart, and her throat closed up. She shook her head wildly in absolute disbelief, "No!" she gasped. Clutching her phone Michonne arm dropped to her side. In the next second she shoved open her car door, jumped out and bolted down the crowded street. Moving as fast as she could in her heels, the synapses in her brain went popping off like fire crackers as panic and fear gripped her heaving chest.

'This can't be happening. It isn't true.'

She strained the muscles in her legs demanding them to go faster. Rick was wrong, it has to be someplace else.

'I'm sorry God, but please let it be someplace else?'

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, about a corner away from her destination she came barreling towards a hoard of people blocking her way. She shoved and grappled her way through them only to be met by a barricade. Beyond that her eyes widened in horror at the hideous sight of thick, black smoke pouring out of ravenous flames that were devouring every inch of her precious Angelo's.

For a moment she froze, fixated on the disaster, her hands coming up to cover her gaping mouth, her mind scrambling to make sense of what her eyes were seeing.

It was was hardly anything recognizable left.

In the next instant, she began moving towards it.

"I'm sorry Ma'am but you can't pass through here."

Accosted by one of the officers in blue as she attempted to climb over the wooden contraption, as though she alone possessed the ability to undo the horrific disaster. "I have to go! That's my place, that's my restaurant!"

The officer looked at her with pity in his eyes. "You're the owner?"

She nodded, "I am." And her tears came flooding out.

"I'm so sorry, but… it doesn't look like they're gonna be able to save it. I'm sorry."

Michonne felt herself tremble and the officer held onto her. "Was, was… was there anyone who got out?" she asked.
"We got everyone out, but…"

"And they're all okay?" she sobbed.

Forgetting all protocol the officer moved the barricade to let her through. "Ma'am, I think you should come this way. You really shouldn't be here. Do you have anyone you could call?"

As he gently led her away towards a police car, she went into a state of shock. Suddenly, she was under water, and her vision went grey. Her heart pounding louder than the sirens, louder than the blasted roaring flames.

"Ma'am?"

Her knees went weak. "I can't, I can't breathe."

The officer opened the back door and placed her in the seat. "Just hold on, okay? You're gonna be fine. Let me get a medic for you."

Her hand flew up to his neck and she clutched him. "Please officer…"

"Officer Mamet, and don't worry. I'll be back. Just give me a minute. Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered through her lightheadedness. For the next minute or so, she tried to regain control of her faculties, but then an unexpected prickly sensation raised the hairs on the back of her neck. Michonne became aware that she was being watched. Lifting her gaze up and back over to the crowd, her eyes darted back and forth to verify her suspicion.

And sure enough… there they were, with that god-damned smug glint in his eye.

'Phillip?'

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