Summary

Two years after moving to Pelican Town, William Bauer has established his farm and put JojaMart out of business. Adrift in a sea of grey, he is a ticking bomb waiting to self-destruct.

Recently unemployed, Shane Daniels is a wreck and drowning his life in a bottle. When William invades his personal space in the saloon, spoiling for a fight, fuck-ups collide—and two broken souls discover their pieces match.

Sometimes the only way out of hell is together.
Pelican Town was so saccharinely wholesome it made William’s teeth hurt.

He looked around the town’s homey pub and took a swallow of the deep brew Gus was famous for. Coffee and chocolate, blended with hops—a dark brew to fit his dark mood. The bitterness was a welcome contrast to the well-lit bar, and the peppy music streaming from the ancient jukebox in the corner. William took another drink, already on his fourth of the night. This cheerful and cozy place was home now.

Home sweet home.

Two years of work, two years of busting his ass, and he’d successfully driven out all of Joja Corporations methods of choking the town into a dried shell, the way it had done to Poplarville and Kasmina forty miles up the road. In Pelican Town, the bus worked. The clogged, polluted river was now sparkling and clean. The small quarry had reopened on the north side, and Pierre’s General Store was once again a bustling hub of commerce. He’d even repaired the old community center. Miss Penny finally had a real classroom in it, and wasn’t forced to tutor from a pair of pushed together tables in the library.

Two years into this grand experiment of rebuilding the rusty shack of his life and he’d done it. He’d reached his goals. He’d gone the distance and made this town what Pops always dreamed it could have been.

He should be happy.

Yet less than two weeks after meeting all those goals—less than fourteen fucking days—and he was sitting in the bar, drinking and trying to ignore the stretch of grey that had crept into his vision. Emptiness, its hungry maw a constant pain, ate at him. He hated it, the gnawing that consumed what satisfaction he managed to hoard, with little care for how the teethmarks felt against his spirit.

He closed his eyes and pulled at his hair. Something was missing. Something was always fucking missing.

It was Friday night, and anyone who was anyone was at the Stardrop Saloon, the small town’s watering hole. The chatter in the place was incessant. William opened his eyes again, soaking in his surroundings and the people those voices belonged to. Clint, the blacksmith, on his left. Robin and Demetrius on his right, dancing to a jukebox song, still in love after two kids and a business. He gave a nod of acknowledgment to Kent, who was standing to leave with his wife Jodi. His gaze rolled over people, naming them like he’d repeat the names of seeds he was planting. Leah. Emily.
Sam and Abby, playing pool in the corner. Lewis and Willie. Elliott. Pam.

Finally his eyes settled straight ahead, to a man hunched on his barstool. Shane Daniels. William took another long swallow of beer, studying the town pariah.

As men went, he was plain. His hair was a bit greasy, his face ruddy with a permanent five o’clock shadow. He wore a ripped and frayed hoodie with the JojaMart logo on the back. As far as William could tell he had no spatial awareness; he just sat staring at the polished countertop, his fist tight against the glass tankard. William had ignored the guy ever since his first day in town, when a genial ‘hello’ had been met with a grunt and silence. He’d steered clear since then. No point in forcing conversation with a grumpy fucker when there were plenty of friendlier people around.

William looked down at his glass.

He knew them all now. He’d come through and sold produce to Pierre’s General store and to Gus, the barkeep. Swapped recipes with Caroline and Jodi. Gone to a few of the town shindigs, smiling and laughing with the populace like a good boy. After the community center had been completed, he’d even been given a damn trophy.

Town Hero.

His leg started to jiggle up and down, captive with pent up energy.

Hero.

What the fuck did any of these simple country bumpkins know about what made a hero?

He drank until his glass was empty and looked up at the beams that crossed the pub. His eyes followed the grain of the wood, wondering what he was even trying for.

_How about just try to get another drink?_

He stared ahead again. Shane was still hunched over the bar, oblivious to William’s internal frustration. Other than maybe Clint, he was the stockiest fucker in the joint. Broad shoulders and probably a little fat, though it wasn’t the obesity of the self-indulgent—just the extra weight that came with a lack of motivation. His fists were curled around his pint like it was a lifeline.

_Just get your drink, fuckhead. Don’t shit where you eat._

It would be…wrong, he knew, to antagonize a stranger. Even worse to do it to a neighbor. The Daniels’ ranch was due south of his place by less than a mile. Seeing as Marnie had the best feed in town, and with calving season not too far off, it would be the worst idea in the world to poison that well.

Maybe it was the pent up frustration. Maybe it was because he’d not shared more than ten words with the guy in the two years he’d been here. Maybe he’d had too much to drink.

Or maybe he was just that type of fucked-up asshole.

He pushed out of his seat and crossed to where Shane sat. Leaning against the bar, he shoved his empty glass into the other man’s personal space, just past the point of politeness. When Shane ignored the gesture, William took another step over and deliberately bumped into his shoulder.

The contact of aggressive energy sent red sparks through his body, like a tap of steam on his pressure valve. He crowded closer, not looking, just letting his bulk take up space that wasn’t his.
The void was calling. The colors had bled out of the day. Those sparks of ego were the only thing keeping him anchored, and maybe a fight was exactly what he needed to cut the sweetness of this place.

__The hell?__

Shane frowned, sliding his stool down the bar.

Any other day and he’d have grabbed a fifth of whiskey after punching out of his shift at the grocery store, taking it to the dock to drink in private. Away from the jukebox. Away from the fake laughter, and assholes who didn’t respect his damn space.

Any other day.

The saloon felt distant. Mechanical, almost, like the inside of a clock. Shane sat in the middle of it, still and silent while bodies ticked around him on their preset trajectories, moving like parts rather than people. No one knew that for Shane, this wasn’t just any other day.

He stared into the inch of beer at the bottom of his mug, vision swimming. He couldn’t be alone. Not on the 18th of August. If he was alone he would do something stupid, and if he did something stupid it was Jas who would suffer. If anything he should be spending time with her, but he couldn’t do that either; not when her bright freckled face was like staring into a damned time machine.

He would’ve been thirty-one today, just like Shane.

Gus came around the front of the bar, bustling as always on a Friday night. Shane motioned for a refill, punching those thoughts into the back of his head to join all the other bruised and beaten thoughts of the night. He had no idea what number drink he was on anymore, but the goal was simple: get fucked up and forget. While he still could, at least.

He tried to knock that thought back too. JojaMart was closing, and there was nothing he could do about it. Three more weeks and he’d be out of a job, out of the pitiful paychecks that helped him drown the shittiness of his life in a pint. That was reality, but that was for later—another problem for his future self to deal with.

Dumb schmuck.

Cheerful sounds continued around him, distant and hollow. Shane gazed at the counter and waited on his beer, but he’d barely begun to zone out when the hairs on his neck began to creep. Following the ominous feeling, he turned. His face grew hot.

It was the same fucker who’d shoulder-checked him, once more standing too damn close. The local farmer, Shane realized. Not that he knew the guy, but Marnie sometimes did business with him. Big guy too, with one of those ridiculous hipster beards, and colorful tattoos all over his neck and arms. He didn’t look like a farmer to Shane. He looked like he belonged on a calendar page in some jerk-off’s shed.

*Probably manufacturing steroids out in one of his barns.*
And what the fuck was his deal, anyway? Leaning all casually against the bar, as if he hadn’t just forced himself into Shane’s bubble for the third time that night. Shane opened his mouth, ready to tell him to back the hell off, but at that same moment Gus reappeared with a foaming pint.

“There you are, son,” he said, plopping the ale down and rushing off to fill another order.

Shane glared at the farmer’s profile before turning back to the bar.

Of course it’d be tonight. After countless nights in the saloon with people giving him the berth of a fucking leper, of course it was tonight that someone would fuck with him. Sighing, he reached for his drink.

His hand was knocked out of the way by a set of tattooed knuckles.

Turning his head in slow disbelief, Shane watched as the guy grabbed his beer. He lifted it to his mouth, taking a confident swallow, then licked the foam off his lips. Setting it down—fist still wrapped around—he stared at Shane with piercing blue eyes.

Shane’s heart began to pound its own tattoo in his chest. His hand clenched in his lap, itching to connect. Though it’d been years since he last threw a punch, he was struck by an uncontrollable urge to jam a fist into that stupid bearded chin. Hitting this guy would probably be a deathwish, but since when was he a stranger to deathwishes?

Don’t do anything stupid. You came out tonight for a reason.

Stupid? Shane swatted back the thought. Because stupid was getting up in another motherfucker’s business and stealing his drink out of his hand. Stupid was messing with someone when you had no idea how little he cared for his own stupid life. And stupid was what he did next—because before Shane realized what he was doing, he’d reached over and flicked the guy in the forehead.

Hard.

A hand shot up through the space between them, lightning-fast reflexes snatching his wrist.

“Now that ain’t nice,” the farmer drawled, beer on his breath as he leaned in. “You wanna touch my face, you gotta take me to dinner first, sweetheart.”

Shane, stunned, sat perfectly still while the other man looked him up and down as if taking inventory. His heart pounded harder, adrenaline slamming into his body with each beat, and he braced himself, because the second this fucker let go he was going to yank that ridiculous beard and bash his head into the counter.

Then his wrist was released. Before Shane could go through with his plan, the man drew back, looking at him. An amused expression slid over his face. He winked.

Shane shoved back with such force the stool gave a sharp squeak and went onto two legs, his face burning.

The universe hated him. That was the only explanation. It hated his pathetic existence, and that wink was the sick fucking cherry on top of its sick fucking joke of the night. The small gesture felt like a finger digging into an infected wound, and Shane’s chest seared with fresh hatred as he righted the stool. He yanked back his beer, mumbling, “Faggot.”
It was, he discovered, the wrong thing to say.

The temperature in the room dropped twenty degrees. Those blue eyes—already cold—iced over even more. The man they belonged to stood. He placed one hand on the bar, towering over Shane, his voice dangerously quiet. “What did you just say, asshole?”

“I said get the fuck away from me.”

“What’s wrong?” he crooned, growing closer. “You drink so much tonight you lost your memory, or you just too chickenshit to own up?”

“Fuck. Off.”

“Those who slur loudest are usually covering something. So which are you, pal? A homo or an asshole?”

“Just somebody minding their own business, fucking try it some time,” Shane snapped. He turned back to face the bar, and under his breath muttered, “Prick.”

The beer was slapped out of his hand. It crashed to the floor, the shattering of glass on hardwood ringing through the air. A hush fell over the pub as the amber liquid began to pool around the shards.

Pin-drop silence, but for the jukebox softly in the background.

The farmer crowded closer to Shane, all shoulders and clenched jaw. “You got something to say,” he hissed, “you say it like a man.”

Shane’s whole body seized up as he stared at the broken drink on the floor. He lifted his head, slowly, and bored into the man’s stare with his own.

“Prick,” he spat.

A wild, maniacal grin burst over the farmer’s face.

“Wrong again. My name is William. Now, you had something else to say. Say it again. Go ahead, call me that word one more time.”

Shane was too drunk, too stupid, and too pissed to back down now. He pushed his face right up into William’s.

“I called you,” he said through clenched teeth, shoving a finger into the broad chest, “a goddamn” —another shove— “motherfucking” —another shove— “PRICK.”

The word had barely left his lips when William reached out and hauled him up by the collar in one powerful movement, slamming him into the wood-paneled wall behind them. A light fixture rattled above Shane’s head, and several people in the bar collectively jumped to their feet. They were background noise though, barely registering as William’s hand twisted Shane’s collar so tight he couldn’t breathe. He struggled, his shoes barely even touching the floor, and a chord of real fear struck.

This guy was going to fucking kill him. He could see it in those eyes, ones that had gone from amused to hardened over like a goddamned psychopath in a matter of seconds. Without a doubt, he was going to get his face pummeled tonight, and, flinching, he braced for it.
What he got was a sheet of ice water.

The second it hit William’s grip released as if by spring. Shane dropped to his feet, choking in air and blinking against the drops that blurred his vision.

Gus stood behind the bar with an empty bucket, looking furious. Shane had never seen the jovial man with such an expression, nor had he heard such impatience as the voice that thundered, “THAT’S ENOUGH, GENTS!”

Shane steadied himself on the wall, gulping against the cold. William stood in front of him, soaked to the bone and gasping just as hard. His shoulders rose and fell, his blond hair wet and dripping in his eyes—eyes that still looked like they wanted to rip a hole in Shane. He glared him down eerily for a few more seconds.

“Yup,” he said at last, still panting. “Too much of a fucking coward.”

He spit at Shane’s feet, dug into his pocket to pull out some cash, and dropped it on the counter before stomping out of the bar.

The people inside, previously so silent, began to hum with low, anxious voices.

Shane couldn’t be fucked to listen to them. Couldn’t be fucked to look if they were staring. The word coward stampeded through his brain, trampling every other thought to dust. He stormed past the twittering patrons, knocking over the barstool in his way, and shoved through the saloon door so hard the bell—which normally gave a soft chime—reverberated violently through the air.

If he was going to die, it was a damn good night to do it.

William burst out of the saloon, furious and dripping. He squeezed his hair and growled. His shirt stuck to him, soaking into his jeans. He hated wet clothes—hated the too-soft fabric clinging to his skin.

It hadn’t been enough. It had been like fucking foreplay before getting off, all heavy breathing and posturing, but no actual release of the noxious energy that filled him.

It’d been a while since someone had been stupid enough to use his sexuality as an insult. Homophobia had been rampant in the armed forces, but a few punches and bruises usually fixed that right the hell up. The last derisive sniff had come from that Morris chucklefuck, and William had set him back a few pegs in the name of equal rights.

But he hadn’t even gotten the chance this time.

You’re losing it, the sane part of his mind warned him.

William blamed that stretch of consciousness on the six months he’d spent in addiction counseling. If he could’ve shot off that part of himself to make it shut the hell up, he would’ve swallowed the gun barrel in a heartbeat. He didn’t want to hear that logical blend of his mother’s loving voice tempered with his father’s patience. He was keyed up, knew it was wrong, and didn’t care.

Even if it was pointless. Egging that guy on? Pointless. Shaky and cowardly fuck had been too
scared to really be a goddamned challenge. And where was he? Soaking wet with a long walk home for fucking nothing.

He’d been so close to something real, to something so good and visceral he could’ve sunk his teeth into it. But he’d seen Shane’s fear. It was like smelling cookies and then realizing it was only someone’s dainty-ass candle. He’d been kidding himself the entire time to think, maybe, there was someone with enough balls in the soft and sleepy town to give him a true break of this goddamned grey night.

He squeezed his shirt, leaving a trail of drips as he stalked towards home.

Tomorrow he’d go to Zuzu, he decided. He could put the animals on auto-feeders and go get fucked up at the Mirage for a night. Go find a real fight, and maybe a real fuck. He’d gotten out of his ban last month, so why the fuck not get re-banned? He clenched his fists, the plan in no way satisfying the needs of tonight.

“HEY!”

William froze. His heart slammed into his chest, the voice ramping him back up with an excited need as he turned his head.

“Asshole!” it shouted again.

Footsteps came up behind him too fast, gravel scraping underneath worn shoes. William’s mind could place his assailant with no trouble, and even though he knew the hit was coming he didn’t try to stop it.

If he’d known how hard it would land, he would’ve.

A fist driven with uncoordinated rage brought a burst of stars behind his eyes. William stumbled, stunned, one foot moving out to catch his balance. His lip had split against his teeth and he touched it, holding the blood up to his eyes. Heart pounding, he turned his head, slowly, unsure exactly what he was facing.

Shane stood there, eyes wild with fury, a twin spirit of frustration that had boiled over to violence. Whoever the scared fucker had been in the bar, something dark and ugly had taken his place. William rolled his head on his shoulders, a beacon of focus clearing through the chaos. With a driving force he aimed a fist back at Shane, letting it bounce off his face, giving him a taste of his own medicine, letting go of the leash on good manners, good behavior, and good fucking peaceful country living.

Shane took the hit with the acceptance of a man who was no stranger to beatings and expected to take more. It was breathtaking, and William didn’t intend to waste the gift. He closed with him, driving his shoulder into Shane’s stomach, and Shane retaliated by bringing his fists down like a mallet on William’s back. His aim was drunkenly bad, glancing off the ribs with a bloom of pain. William slammed him into the grass near the riverbank before he could re-aim his pile-driving punch onto an already fragile spine. He straddled Shane, pinning him with his thighs, and began to mechanically and methodically punch his face.

He jabbed him once in the eye, once in the jaw, and just as he was going for another eye shot in the name of matching bruises, since he was a considerate motherfucker like that, Shane head-butted him in the nose. It was another fire-blossom of agony and William reeled back, breathing out through his mouth.
As soon as he was free of the pin, Shane dove forward. The dive caught William in the solar plexus and knocked the wind out of him in a brutal rush. He managed a single kidney jab—hard enough to get Shane’s attention but not so hard that he’d be pissing blood in the morning.

Shane flinched back, shouting in either pain or fury.

William, wheezing, stumbled and held his fists at the ready. His nose was bleeding freely and his jaw was on fire. Despite it all he grinned, panting breaths flicking blood into a mist over his mouth. He was sweating, his muscles roiling, a heady cocktail of adrenaline-laced chemicals fueling the reactions.

“Didn’t think a faggot could hit you so hard, huh, Sadsack?” he taunted.

Shane swayed on his feet, one eye squinting at him, before he roared another challenge and drove forward like a gridball linebacker.

William anticipated the moment, bracing his knees and taking the hit, pivoting his hips to slam Shane up against the nearest tree. They were eye to eye now, breaths mingling as William planted his legs, pressing in at three points. Shane had one arm pinned behind his back, William’s forearm over his collarbone, and William’s other hand pinning an arm over his head. He stood close, very close, and could see his face.

The moon was above them, the forest around them silent, the only ambient noise the flow of the river as it made its way toward the sea.

For one, stupidly clear moment, William thought Shane looked intoxicating this way. Blood dripped over his brow, and his eye was swelling. This close, William could see the pulse pounding against his throat. It reminded him of the way he’d leave a lover, all worn and exhausted, delicious in the aftermath of their fucking. He sure as fuck was sore. He was going to have a black eye of his own, and be chewing out of one side of his mouth for days.

The silence stretched, Shane puffing hard to get his breath back. The guy hadn’t spoken at all in the fight; hadn’t bothered to give William any reason for his sudden decision to get his ass kicked.

“You just don’t give up easy, do you Daniels?” William asked, starting to ease up the hold, experimenting to see if maybe, their fight was over. “God…” He was impressed despite himself.

Shane shifted, and William pressed himself tighter. For a moment their hips were closer, their bodies nearly flush with one another. Shane wasn’t even that much shorter than him. His frame was masculine and tough, and god, what a bruiser. Why hadn’t he looked at this guy before now?

As William had the thought, he stiffened, eyes wide as he realized he wasn’t the only one getting hot from this.

Like he could sense it, Shane struck, exploiting the mercy, ripping his hand on the bark behind him to slam it into William’s abdomen. William groaned between grit teeth, the fist as hard as a damn hammer. Jerking, he twisted the arm he still had possession of, turning Shane around and kicking the inside of his knee. Shane was forced to the ground. Despite the violence of the move, William was careful—joints were delicate, and he wanted the big bastard down, not out.

“Impressive. Giving as good as you get, huh?”

Shane lurched once, trying to find purchase to wiggle out of the hold, but William twisted his thumb and slammed him back into the grass.
“Now,” he hissed, “let’s have a little chat.”

Shane did not oblige the request, only panting against the ground. William didn’t let up the pressure until his shoulders sagged.

“The fuck do you want from me?” Shane finally rasped.

William shivered at the sound, the feeling of power over another scratching an itch within him, one that had been ignored for over two years of his self-imposed exile. When was the last time he’d gotten into such a satisfying fight?

“Say,” he said, leaning down, his chest now flush with Shane’s back, “I’m sorry I called you a faggot, William.”

He could feel Shane’s pulse from the thumb on his wrist. It was going rabbit-fast. Just like his own heart.

When Shane tried another half-hearted struggle William realized he’d relaxed his hold, probably out of appreciation for the body that was straining beneath him. He waited but Shane didn’t speak, just wheezed out hard, jagged breaths that created little ripples in the grass under his face. William held his pressure, though. He didn’t want to give the guy the idea this was over.

“How ‘bout this?” he said. “I’ll count. I’ll even go slow so you can follow me. I’m a nice guy like that.”

Face still in the grass, Shane bit out, “I didn’t do jack to you, man.”

“Words,” William drawled, “have meaning. Lemme lay out what you gotta answer for, Daniels.” He squeezed Shane’s shoulder, but only once, not yet willing to cut off all blood supply. “You took my beer—”

“—MY beer!”

William let him struggle, trying not to pull too hard on the arm. He wanted him pinned, not broken. The last thing he needed was to pay some other guy’s medical bills. Still, Shane would be sore on that shoulder for days, and William darkly wondered if he’d remember how he’d been pinned down like his little bitch when he felt it throb and pang.

“Rude,” he chastised. “As I was saying before you fucking interrupted me—you stole my beer, and then you called me a faggot. Guess you were out the day you townies learned manners.”

Shane surged up and William shoved him back down.

“Now be a sweetheart and apologize,” he said, breathing hard, anticipation ringing down his spine. “One… Two…”

“Three,” Shane spat, dropping his head. “I don’t fucking care.”

William could feel the shoulders shaking underneath the pressure of his pin. With his free hand he sank his fingers into Shane’s hair, rubbing them slowly but with pressure. He gave the scalp a gentle squeeze, the lesson clear—he didn’t have to be gentle.

“That’s not what your racing heart says,” he said, stroking Shane’s head one more time before gripping it hard. “And I can feel it. I can feel that beat like a bass drum.” He inhaled Shane’s sweaty hair, a smell that would haunt him. “You get off on this too,” he whispered, leaning close.
“You. Like. It.”

He held him for a moment more, waiting. But Shane was beaten. William let go of the arm and it flopped down next to Shane’s face, his dark eyes staring at the ground in surrender. The look was so deeply satisfying that he almost didn’t want to leave him there…but he would.

He pushed off, standing, and brushed the dirt from his knees.

“Until next time, Daniels.”

And with that he walked home, leaving Shane alone in the dark.

Shane was thirteen when he took his first real punch, and he deserved it. At least, that’s what his dad said. It’s what his mom said after with her silence, passing by his bedroom without a word of the eye socket that resembled a bloated prune plum.

He’d made his dad think he stole the last thirty dollars from the tin above the stove. He hadn’t, of course. But he’d made his dad think so, which was just as bad an offense. Shane had come home with a brand new backpack that day. He’d won it at a fair set up in the school gymnasium. It was his own dumb fault, tossing the dingy one he’d used since second grade in order to sport the new one home. When Corey Daniels returned from work to discover the flashy new toy—and the missing money that meant no possibility of bourbon that night—it was only natural he’d taken it out on his son.

It was just one hit.

“You fuck up, you pay the price,” he said after, when Shane, without crying, had crumpled to the floor. “I’m not an unreasonable man, but you’re old enough to know how shit works.”

Lying on the cold ground, smelling damp earth, his clothes soaked and his body beat, Shane thought he probably deserved this too. Probably deserved it more. He knew what he said—knew he’d been trying to incense the guy. But he hadn’t meant it. Shane might’ve been an asshole, but if people would just leave him alone then he really did not care what the fuck they did in their lives.

The leaves above him rustled. A few crickets chirped, echoing in the dark. Other than those soft sounds, the night around him was peaceful and almost silent.

Peace.

What a strange word. Before tonight, he would’ve said peace was a near-empty saloon, a crackling fire, and a brain that was drunk enough to forget. But right now the world was enveloped in a different sort of peace. Sure, it felt like his body had been snapped in twelve places and littered about the forest floor—but those snaps must’ve released something inside him, because now there was nothing left.

Nothing.

Just pain, and nothingness.

He wondered if anything was broken or ruptured.
His head was pretty quiet. That didn’t happen much.

Well, it wasn’t totally quiet. There was a splitting pain in his skull, and a tympani-like thumping between his ears. Better than the usual incessant chatter of his brain, though. Was he even drunk anymore? It didn’t feel like it, but neither did it feel like any kind of sobriety Shane had ever known.

He pulled himself up, gasping at a sharp jab below his ribcage, and paused a moment to sit and adjust to the pain. Another dart shot through his shoulder as he lifted his hand, examining the bloodied back where it’d ripped across the tree bark. He wiped the blood on the front of his hoodie, staring into the darkness and taking slow, excruciating breaths.

If only he could stay here all night, in this exact position. Walking home felt like an impossibility; the ranch might as well have been on the moon.

He tried to picture William’s face. All the pieces were there, but he had trouble putting them together. The blue eyes. The full beard. The long wet hair on top of his head, hanging down over shaved sides. Even his mouth, bloody from Shane’s fist. But he couldn’t keep the image as a whole from shifting, from swimming around like some kind of surrealist painting in his mind’s eye.

*Until next time, Daniels.*

Maybe he’d do it again. Maybe he’d show up once more to pummel him, and that would be the way Shane went out—in a painful, peaceful haze on the edge of a dark forest, after all his energy was spent.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed it, we’d love to hear from you in the comments. Any behind-the-scenes or extras can be found on [our tumblr](#).

Star Burst updates every other Saturday between 2-4pm PST.
In the two-and-a-half years since Shane moved in with Marnie on her ranch, he’d lost track of the nights he’d drunkenly stumbled home after dark. Weekends, weeknights; didn’t matter. Shane drank on every day that ended in Y.

It was, however, his first time drunkenly *limping* home.

Gravel dragged beneath the soles of his shoes, every few steps producing a wheeze from his lungs. The cold wet grass was a siren’s call. Hell, even the crunchy gravel looked inviting. Shane wanted nothing more than to stop, drop, and pass out on the road. When the twinkling porch light of the ranch finally came into view, he almost collapsed in relief.

Home.

Bed.

Sleep, which was as close to death as he was allowed.

The windows to the kitchen were dark. Shane was sure everyone was asleep by now, so after finagling painfully with his keys and pushing open the front door he was startled to see the light on in the living room.

“Shane?”

 Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

It was Friday night, his lagging brain realized. And according to the glowing red numbers on the microwave, it was almost 11:00 pm—long past the time of 9:30 he was expected to be home. A reasonable request, once a week, for Shane to stay in with his goddaughter while his aunt grabbed a drink at the saloon with her boyfriend.

“I’d say about damn time,” came Marnie’s irritated voice, floating nearer and flipping on the kitchen light. “But you’re already too late for me to…”

Shane had been attempting to kick off his shoes without bending over, and as she entered the room he stumbled into the wall with the coat rack.
“Good heavens,” she whispered.

He squinted at her through his good eye—the eye that wasn’t swollen over from that first brutal punch. Frizzy auburn hair framed her face, braided to one side for sleep. Her lavender bathrobe was drawn shut, the knuckles of her soft wrinkled hands growing white as she gripped the tails around her plump waist.

She was going to freak out on him. Any second now.

“Shane!” The white-knuckle grip released her robe and she hurried over, knocking into a chair on her way. “What in god’s name? Are you okay? How—how did this happen? Are you going to faint? Here—don’t bother with your shoes, you need to sit down, let me help—”

…and there it was.

Shane flinched as she reached under his arm to help ease him to the table. “Watch it!” he rasped, her good intentions spiking fresh pain through his shoulder.

Tears pooled in her eyes, her voice now a whisper. “What happened?”

He pushed her hand off. Holding the wall, he walked himself to the kitchen table and sank slowly into one of the chairs.

“Shane Daniels, you tell me what happened!” she insisted, growing frantic.

“Walked into a door,” Shane said dully.

“I had a phone call from Lewis when I didn’t show, and he said you’d left the saloon after some kind of awful argument with Farmer Bill. An argument, Shane? An argument?”

“A door,” Shane repeated, closing his unswollen eye.

Bill, that was right. That was the fucker’s name, or at least the name he went by in town. Shane hadn’t been able to remember it earlier. He tended to just think of the guy as ‘the farmer.’

“A door?” Marnie cried. “You got into a fight!”

“Huh.”

Every word. Every word was so damn difficult right now.

“Don’t you do that! Don’t you act like this is nothing! You look like the living dead and you can barely walk. What in the world happened?”

Fuck talking about this tonight.

With great effort, Shane tried to push back up from the table. It wasn’t Marnie’s fault he’d been an idiot, but every syllable was pain, every breath making him wish he’d dropped cold in the gravel a half mile back. Except, he realized too late, this motion exposed the bloody gash from the tree on the back of his hand.

“Gracious,” she whispered, covering her mouth. She shook her head, eyes wide in disbelief. “Bill did this? Bill who runs The Bowery? Please, please tell me I’m wrong…”

Hearing that name again sent a dart of irritation through Shane. He pushed off the table and slowly began his way down the hall. His legs hadn’t been hurt, but that fucking kidney jab had practically
collapsed one side of his waist, and he tried to disguise the limp as he walked away.

Why the *fuck* did they call him Bill? He’d introduced himself as William; William suited the asshole better.

“Shane.” Marnie followed him, as he knew she would. “Shane, I jus—”

“I started it,” he hissed.

She stepped in front of him, cutting him off. “Why would you start something like this? That doesn’t make any sense. It’s so unlike you, what could have possibly provoked—”

“Marnie!” he wheezed, the name coming out like air from a leaky balloon. “We were drunk. Okay? Drunk.”

“That’s no excuse! I know you, Shane, I know you can handle your liquor just fine without resorting to violence. What kind of fool do you take me for? Was it Bill? Oh, I hate that it was Bill. We do business together all the time, and he’s always so professional and charming. But then—well, he *did* have that altercation with Morris a few years back…”

Shane’s swollen eye burned. He leaned his head against the nearest doorframe, and through grit teeth said, “It was my fault, okay? Just drop it.”

“I won’t!” Marnie cried. “We need to clean up that hand, and that eye. We need to get ice on you, and then you need to tell me the *truth.*”

“We. Were. Drunk!” Shane shouted, lifting his head. The words were tight, his jaw unwilling to open very far. “It was a shitty fucking day, and yeah, I picked a fight. You happy now? For fuck’s sake, just let me go to be—”

“Aunt Marnie?”

They both stopped talking. Marnie whipped around, while Shane slowly turned his head as far as his neck would allow.

Jas stood at the end of the hallway, holding a ragged stuffed panda by one ear. She was in purple cupcake pajamas, her long dark hair in a side-braid like Marnie’s. Haunted eyes were glued to Shane’s face.

Her bottom lip began to tremble. “Uncle Shane?”

That look. Oh god, that look. That frightened tone in her voice, ripping through Shane’s chest like a strip of barbed wire, more painful than anything William had done with his fists.

*Happy birthday, Garrett.*

“Jas…” he whispered, dropping his head against the wall once more.

“Uncle Shane will be fine,” Marnie said quickly, dabbing her eyes with the sleeve of her bathrobe. “Sweetie, you should be in bed.”

“You’re hurt,” she whispered back.

Then she raced for him, flinging tiny arms around his waist. Shane wheezed like he’d been sucker-punched, catching her and trying not to cuss. Nine years old, less than seventy pounds, and like an anvil socking him in the stomach.
“Sweetie,” Marnie repeated, kneeling down, gently prying her off. “He’s in a lot of pain right now. Hugging him hurts.”

Jas dropped her arms like she’d been burnt.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she said, her lip trembling again. She backed up, clutching her panda in both hands.

Shane breathed heavily. “You didn’t hurt me, kid. It’s oka—”

“Jas, you ought to get some sleep. You can see Uncle Shane in the morning.”

He glared at Marnie through his unswollen eye, but she was oblivious to his frustration. She smoothed Jas’s hair and bent to kiss her forehead—something, Shane realized, he was incapable of right now—and nodded her back down the hall.

Jas paused, looking at Shane a final time.

“I love you,” she whispered.

When Shane tried to say it back the words came out silently, just air through his open mouth.

Jas gripped her panda to her chest, turned around, and shuffled stocking feet down the hardwood floor to her room.

“We’re cleaning those wounds,” Marnie hissed when she was gone, and Shane was all out of energy to argue.

It was a haze, standing with his aunt in the brightly lit bathroom. He squinted against the blinding iridescent bulb above the mirror, watching his battered reflection. His bad eye was a deep berry color, the lid more than triple its normal size. The puffiness matched that of his ballooned lip and swollen jaw, and there was a split above his eyebrow covered in dried blood.

Marnie broke his gaze when she opened the mirror, pulling out the first-aid kit from behind it. She began cleaning the back of his hand, washing it in the sink and then wiping the cuts with something that stung. After laying on a triple-antibiotic ointment, she wound cotton gauze around it. The room was silent but for the buzz of the light bulb and his aunt’s soft breathing.

Shane shut his good eye, letting the wash of darkness bring relief. For the first time in over an hour, he realized he was still drunk.

It was good Marnie could only see the marks on his face, and not the bruises that surely covered him under his clothes. Not the shoulder that felt like William had twisted the bones in a circle and left them there. She kept working, focused on his cuts, at last slipping a small bandage over the one on his forehead.

“Now,” she said, pressing it down and looking straight into Shane’s face. “I’ll bring water to your room, and you rest for tonight.” She handed him the bottle of ibuprofen from the first-aid kit. “But Shane? This conversation isn’t over. And so help me, if you can’t lift those arms above your head come Monday you’re going to see Dr. Harvey.”

She stood on her toes and kissed his forehead, just like she had to Jas, and slipped from the bathroom.

Couldn’t just leave him be, could she? Couldn’t just let his wounds rot and fester and take him in
his sleep, which was what he fucking deserved. No, she had to take care of him. Clean his cuts and kiss his forehead like a mother; a manner he’d gone so long without he still didn’t know how to accept it. And she’d had to comfort Jas. Had to pull the mother card on her too, because he certainly wasn’t fit to pull the father one.

After she brought his water Shane took the pills, drinking as best he could without being able to tip his head back properly. Then with the precision of laying eggs in a grocery bag, he got into bed, wincing to adjust his pillow.

The images took him before sleep could.

His bed morphed back and forth into damp ground, so real he could smell the dirt. He could see William’s face again, those blue eyes pinning him more powerfully than the physical hold. And when his body gave the final jerk of falling into sleep, he felt the shove of an arm on his collarbone—pushing him into that tree.

“William, my word. What on earth happened to your face?”

It was, William thought, a very fair question, if a bit rude. But if anyone had a right to ask rude and nosy questions it was Ma.

“Had a difference of opinion with a bulldozer,” he said mildly, sipping the pomegranate sangria.

Ma stared at him as if he’d grown another head.

He regarded her back. Angela Bauer, who was always Angie to anyone who knew her, was no stranger to her son coming home bruised and bloody as a kid. Admittedly, he probably should have grown out of it by now.

So I’m a slow learner.

“William, did you go to a doctor about this?” she asked, her eyes critical.

“Wasn’t that bad.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?” She held her hand to the side, out of the peripheral vision of his swollen eye. He started to turn his head and she dropped her arm, exasperated.

“I hate to tell you, Will,” Gretchen said from the prep station in the kitchen, “but I think the bulldozer won.”

He would have rolled his eyes, except that shit hurt too much.

“Nah,” he said, putting the empty sangria glass down on the marble countertop. “I totally left the bulldozer in the dirt.”

She raised her eyebrows, as if to say mmhmm, and continued piping filling into a deviled egg.

Gretchen was his mother’s college roommate, and ran the catering company that supplied labor and food to all Ma’s social events. He didn’t understand why the head cook to over fourteen teams of catering always personally oversaw Sunday mornings, but she’d been as much of an
establishment in his life as any family member.

“William Joseph Bauer,” Ma declared, walking over to the freezer and coming out with a bag of peas. "You are the world's biggest idiot."

“Ma, these bruises are two days old. I already iced them. Just gotta let them fade.”

She sighed and threw the peas back in the freezer drawer, then kicked it shut before whirling on him, hands on her hips. “I can’t believe you showed up here today looking like the wrong end of an eggplant!”

Here was his parent’s house on the outskirts of Zuzu City, in their large and fancy mock-estate. Today was Sunday Brunch.

“I dunno,” he said, reaching for one of the piped deviled eggs. “I thought it would bring some colorful diversity to your shindig, Ma.”

Gretchen bit her lip, holding back a smile at the unamused glare that earned from his mother. William winked at her with his good eye.

“I swear,” Ma said, crossing her arms and stomping one heeled foot. “Your father dropped you on your head after birth and just let us all deal with the consequences.”

“What’s the point of that?” his dad called from the foyer. “He’s dropped himself plenty of times.”

William chose another deviled egg and took a bite. They were soft enough not to make the entire side of his face bloom into a flare of pain. Shane had smashed it so hard with that first hit, he was still feeling the aches three days later. When he looked up, his dad walked into the kitchen.

Unlike Ma in her pearls and sundress, with perfectly coiffed hair and expertly done make-up, his father, David Bauer, was more casual in a pair of navy shorts and a polo with the logo of Bauer Financial on the breast. He stopped when he saw William and let out a low whistle.

“Son,” he said, voice full of censure. “I thought that military boss of yours knocked stupid fights out of your head.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, that implies he was discharged with a mind,” said Ma. “William, go play golf with your father today.”

“What?” both William and his dad said at the same time.

“I can’t have you here looking like that!” Ma cried. “You’re going to scare the children!”

“Angie.” His dad placed a hand on her shoulder. “William hates golf.”

“Geez, I can see when I’m not wanted.” William reached for his jacket. “I’ll just go home, guys.”

“No,” they both said at once.

He sighed and scowled.

“Check-in Sundays are sacred,” his dad said, frowning. “You know that.”

He did know that.

They’d been a tradition ever since he’d moved onto Pops’s old farm and rebranded it ‘The
An organic powerhouse of produce, dairy, and canned goods that fed the demand for premium quality groceries in a practical food desert. His mother had demanded the check-ins after she came to see him three months into building the farm, and realized he’d been living off of MREs and pizza from Gus’s Saloon. He’d quit going to NA meetings years ago, so they used the weekly check-ins as a replacement.

Four years clean wasn’t enough of a security to them.

“You still have some clothes downstairs,” Ma said. “Go change so your father isn’t late for his first tee.”

William gave his dad an incredulous look. “Is she for real?”

His parents exchanged a silent look, the telepathic communication they’d used since he could remember. “Yup. Best go change, son.”

“I swear,” William grumbled, turning towards the stairs. “You two act like I’m thirteen instead of thirty.”

His mother didn’t bother dignifying that with a response, instead giving a sniff that said in no uncertain terms that if he was dumb enough to come home the way he had, he should’ve expected it.

Fifteen minutes later William, wearing khaki shorts and one of the spare company polos, was sitting with his leg twitching in the passenger seat of his father’s red sports car. The purchase had been a sign that he was ‘losing his middle-aged mind’ if you asked Ma. William just thought he was tired of puttering out in the slow eco-cars he’d always driven when William had been growing up.

“So,” his dad said, starting them up the drive towards the country club. “Who’d you fight?”

“No one,” William said, the lie a familiar taste in his mouth. It reminded him of his school days.

“So no one beat your face, and probably your ribs?”

William tried not to replay the fight for the five-hundredth time in his head. Tried not to remember the excitement and rush of Shane’s dark and furious eyes. Tried not to remember how fucking hot it had been to be so close to another person in a similar state of violence. He hadn’t let himself get into that sort of struggle in over four years. Any bar fight or shoving match he’d had between now and then…well, fuck if he could remember what those had been like.

“William,” his dad said, pulling him out of reminiscing and back into the tiny car. “I mean it. This sort of reckless behavior is troubling.”

“It was a blip,” William said, crossing his arms and then regretting it. He’d not gotten a really deep breath since Friday, because his back still ached where Shane had slammed his fucking bowling ball of a hit between the shoulder blades.

“Hmm,” said his dad.

William turned to look at him with his good eye. He was slimmer than he’d been when William was a kid, age thinning him out. His hair was silver, and unlike his son, his face was shaven. William wondered what the boys at the club were going to think when his clean-cut and proper father showed up with his tattooed and bruised-to-fuck son.
“Look,” he said, trying to soothe the distrust in his dad’s grunt. “I was drunk. I picked a fight. I got what was coming to me.”

“Any broken bones?” his dad asked, suspicious. “Because it’s been five years since your last assault charge and Tony retired. I dunno if the new girl they’ve got on retainer could wiggle you out of trouble—”

“Dad,” William said, irritated. “I’m not being charged with assault. God. I look like I went one-on-one with a damn meat grinder, and you think that—”

“The other guy has to look worse.” His dad stared grimly at the road. “They always look worse.”

William looked out the window, feeling a pang of guilt.

*Can’t argue with facts…*

“You’d think at the age of thirty, you’d have started to grow the hell up, son,” his dad said.

William didn’t comment. There was no point.

“Who we playing with?” he asked, electing to change the subject.

“The Marshalls.” His dad turned through the metal gates of the club. “Probably the other reason your mother wanted you to come with me today.”

*That’s ominous.*

It didn’t take William long to realize what his dad meant though. The Marshalls, it turned out, were a gay couple who were meeting David to discuss their new bakery empire.

“Ooooh, David!” Nico Marshall greeted. “I didn’t know you had a body guard.”

William took the two of them in and sighed internally.

They were, he decided, definitely a bit on the camp spectrum of the rainbow.

William didn’t mind flamboyant guys, he really didn’t. Sometimes that’s just who a fucker was, and if being loud and cheerful while declaring things ‘fierce’ and ‘fabulous’ was what floated your boat, go on with your bad self. But the flirty, over-the-top ridiculousness was uncomfortable for anyone who wasn’t on the same wavelength.

“William, this is Nico and Tyrell Marshall. They are behind Marshmallow Baked Goods.”

William shook hands, noticing Tyrell’s flash of jealousy when Nico looked him over.

Great. One of those insecure couples.

“Nice to meet you both,” he said, not bothering with a smile. If he did that, it would split his lip back open for the hundredth time that weekend.

“William is my son,” his dad explained, as their caddies started to load the four sets of golf clubs into the cart.

There was a pause, then Tyrell blurted, “Cameron’s Will?”
Fuck.

Cameron.

Of-fucking-course these bitches knew Cameron.

Cameron, his ex-fiance, who his parents had kept in the damn divorce.

"Yup," William said, grim.

"Oh!" said Nico in excitement. "Oh, we love Cam! We met him at the pride meeting last March! Oh my…" He looked William over again, much to the irritation of his partner. "Wow, we didn’t realize you’d be so—"

"William? You want to drive the golf cart?" his dad interrupted, holding out the keys.

"Sure thing." William snatched the subject change like the life preserver it was, and privately vowed bloody revenge on his mother for putting him through this.

Despite Nico’s enamored flirtations and Tyrell’s curt responses, William managed, somehow, to help his dad steer them off the subject of him and Cameron’s disastrous engagement, and onto the accounting software and support that David’s company provided. It helped that they were both much better golfers than William, and after beating the Bauers, they seemed very sure of the work Bauer Financial could give them.

William endured it.

That’s what he did for these check-ins.

He endured.

It helped that he had something to distract his thoughts with. There was no need to do more than grunt and nod to the concerns of the company, while privately thinking about furious green eyes, and the way his blood had tasted when face-to-face against that tree. He spaced out during long discussions of market shares, replaying the way Shane’s hair had felt between his fingers, how hot his scalp had been…the sounds of his excited breathing matching William’s own pants.

"Well," his dad was saying, pulling him back to the present. "Why don’t you boys come back over to the office this week, and we’ll finish up that paperwork?"

"It would be a pleasure," Tyrell said, shaking his hand. Nico followed suit and finally, mercifully, they parted ways.

William didn’t bother speaking, just watched his dad’s cheerful step.

"Good work, Dad," he said as they got to the sports car a few minutes later.

His dad turned and grinned, a wide smile that deepened the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth—lines of long laughter and cheer.

"You know, you don’t always have to go to your Mom’s brunches for Sunday check-in," he pointed out.

"Ain’t no good at playing whack-and-chase, Dad," William said, sinking down into the car. He waited until his father had ignited the engine and turned them back to the house. "And, you two could just…I don’t know, schedule a dinner or something at my place. I could grill some steaks.
You could see the farm.”

His dad lost some of the jovial expression, his face pained. “Son, you know how busy we are. Your mother comes down when she can.”

“Yeah, I’m just saying, it wouldn’t kill you two to cancel brunch and golf one Sunday. I got cows that need feeding and care. It’s not good to leave them alone for so long.”

“So hire someone,” his dad said promptly.

William rolled his eyes. The ghost of needing help on the farm was a constant shadow since he’d expanded operations last season.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back out the window. “Because farmhands just grow on trees.”

Three weeks until the JojaMart doors closed, and it didn’t matter that the health inspector would never again darken their doorstep; Morris had a sudden, urgent need for the store to pass all non-existent inspections. Shane splashed bleach down the produce cooler drain. It was fucking busy work, but whatever. His boss seemed to believe his grisly appearance wasn’t fit for customer service, and if he thought the backroom of Joja was a punishment, Shane wasn’t about to correct him.

The bleach stung his eyes, and he wondered how badly it would burn going down his throat. What it would do to his insides once there, and how long it would take. Wondered what would hurt more—swallowing bleach or being crushed in the cardboard baler. He could hide at the bottom, waiting for someone to come around, close the metal door, and press the compact button. His body would be squished like a papaya before anyone noticed.

Just some of the many fantasies Shane had during his time in this godforsaken store.

Some people called them intrusive thoughts, but intrusive implied they were unwelcome. To Shane, this morbid little game helped the long retail hours pass. Walking by the roll of industrial-strength plastic wrap, he imagined looping it around his neck and hanging himself from the attic above the meat cooler. Or standing in the blind spot of a delivery truck on the loading dock, bones crunching beneath tires before the driver even realized they’d hit a bump.

He unrolled the hose from the rack by the sink, turning the nozzle on high to spray down the floors. Bleach and soap foamed together in waves across the blue tile.

When he’d shown up Monday for work, Morris had sent his ass home for three whole days. Said Shane looked like death and would be a liability, working in his—admittedly still painful—condition. But Shane knew the store was slowing, there was little left to do, and that Morris would’ve latched onto any excuse to cut hours. Three days pay, gone like that.

Not that the loss had stopped him from spending his measly savings on bottles of whiskey. If ever there was a time to self-medicate, it was after your body had been beaten to hell.

But still.

It was Friday now, exactly one week from the fight. He and William were both banned from the
Stardrop Saloon, but that part wasn’t so bad; it just meant drinking by himself at the dock, which he often did anyway. And what he probably should’ve done last Friday night. He’d been so worried about doing something stupid if left alone, but what about in public? What about when his drunken brain decided it was a good idea to flick a tattooed and muscled stranger in the forehead? Garrett hadn’t liked violence. Sure, he threw a game controller at the wall now and then, when the system froze up in the middle of a save. And yeah, he’d enjoyed splitting a pizza in front of the theatrics of a good WWE match, or cheering on a hockey brawl.

But real brutality?

 Booze and fistfights. Great fucking way to celebrate his life, you drunk asshole.

Shane himself wasn’t unacquainted with violence. He’d thrown and received punches. He’d dealt with black eyes, and his nose had healed bumpy from a break when he was fifteen. But he’d never in his life been pummeled into a pile of dirt, left to limp home in the dark. Fuck, he’d never tasted true violence before. That other stuff was horseplay. Friday night had been one wrong thump to the temple, one wrong jab in the organs away from ending up on Harvey’s exam table.

It’d been so fucking stupid.

And dangerous.

And painful.

Shane couldn’t stop thinking about it.

He didn’t want to. It felt like fucking betrayal. To his best friend, to everything he stood for. But when the fuck had he ever felt so alive? Overcome by such adrenaline in the moment that William’s punches felt like angry slaps, merely turning his head while his energy barreled on; while his brain drifted up somewhere in the sky, to watch from afar as he robotically kicked into survival.

Until the stupid fucker had to go and end it, all that pain and consciousness crashing back into Shane’s body like a big gay meteorite.

He tried not to imagine how William’s fingers felt in his hair when he’d been pinned to the ground. Tried not to hear the timbre of his voice when he’d leaned over, and in that bone-chilling whisper told Shane he liked it.

Of course he hadn’t liked it.

…had he?

Shane rolled his shoulders, still out of whack, stiff and sore this morning when he’d had to unload all the heavy boxes from the truck.

Yeah, fine, okay. So he had liked it—big fucking deal. Not like Garrett’s ghost could look into his brain and see what a sick fuck he was. And considering he still cringed to recall the painful walk home, it wasn’t like it’d been some pleasant stroll through the trees. No, this was about someone finally giving Shane his rightful punishment. No undeserved sympathy. No feigned ignorance, looking the other way or excusing his behavior. Just some asshole wailing on him, serving up penance for all the things he’d ever done wrong.

 Like getting drunk on the birthday of the one person who cared to see you sober.
Shane grabbed the floor squeegee, attempting to pull his thoughts from the fight.

It was fucking hard—fucking hard when the brute contact of his fist with William’s jaw had been the first thing in years to jolt the straight, dead line of his heart into something resembling the spikes of the living.

Should thank the guy, really.

He squeezed water across the tile, stopping to stare as it spun in a cyclone down the grates of the drain.

When his shift ended Shane exited the double-doors of JojaMart, yanking off his hat and stuffing the unflattering thing in his pocket. He scrubbed his hands through his hair to loosen it, walking with his head down as usual. It was a gorgeous summer day. While Stardew Valley had been going through a heatwave lately, the current temperature was pleasant with a warm breeze, seagulls cawing as they circled overhead in the late afternoon sun. There was a low rumble on one side of the store where a delivery truck waited in neutral, then the slam of metal as its door closed. The sound was oddly comforting; a signal Shane’s workday was over.

“Ey, Sadsack.”

Speaking of comforting sounds.

Shane froze, heart beating fast.

Hadn’t he just been in the produce room thinking about how much he’d enjoyed the fight? How he should thank the guy, even? So why the fuck were his lungs seizing up just to hear William’s voice?

Ignore him. Just ignore him.

Shane could feel him approaching from behind, though not looking back to confirm it. He just heard the slow footsteps, steady on the sidewalk, and when he finally remembered how to move his feet it was clear William continued to follow him.

Just as slow.

Just as fucking steady.

Shane’s heart raced even harder. Why couldn’t this sucker just say what he had to say? Why did he have to slink behind like some kind of apex predator, in no fucking hurry yet clearly with his sights on Shane as the particular target?

Right as his mounting anxiety couldn’t take it anymore, William fell into step at his side.

Shane focused hard on the passing lines in the sidewalk, wondering if William could hear his pounding heart through the sleepy afternoon air. “Whatever it is, don’t care” he said, eyes on the ground.

William’s voice was confident and smooth. “Thought you might be open to a peace talk.”

They walked in silence for a spell, until Shane finally braved looking over.

William’s right eye was yellow and green, a mirror image of Shane’s bruise, but the rest of him looked well put-together. Today, the long hair that had fallen over his face during the fight was
pulled back in a sleek topknot. He wore a tight black t-shirt, and Shane did a double-take at the colorfully inked arms stretching taut the sleeves. Had he really taken a punch to the face from those things?

William was also, he realized, carrying a cooler in one hand. He opened the lid and tilted it toward Shane, revealing twelve dark bottles nestled on a bed of ice.

Shane almost snorted in relief. So *this* was the asshole’s catch. Taunt him into getting drunk again, then wait around to see what other idiotic behavior he’d pull out of the forehead-flick box. He faced forward, ignoring the beer.

“If you’re gonna pound my face again, wait till I’m out of uniform. Only get two more paychecks as it is.”

William didn’t look bothered. He closed the cooler and dropped it to his side again. "So with Joja closing, you’re losing your gig, huh? Sucks man, but can’t say I’m sad to see the backside of that eyesore.”

This time Shane snorted for real. As if some farmer cared about him losing his job.

“Listen,” William said. “About last week, I was outta line.” He looked at Shane sideways. “Bad headspace. Shouldn’t have been like, an asshole about it.”

Shane picked up the pace. “Don’t care.”

“Oh please.” Now it was William’s turn to snort. “Running like a fuckin’ rabbit. You kicked my ass too, man. You ain’t a little proud of this shiner? Besides, it’s free beer. Why you running from free beer?”


William stopped too.

“Not interested,” he repeated, raising a brow. “Well that’s a shame. Because, hate to break it to you—I am.” He shoved the beer into Shane’s chest. “Bring back the cooler.”

Then he turned and started to walk away.

Paranoid, Shane looked around from where he stood in the middle of the sidewalk. The road was empty, no one to witness whatever had just gone down. He clutched the plastic container to his chest.

*Bring back the cooler?*

He was caught, and he hadn’t even known it was a trap.

His heart pounded harder.

“Fine!” he called, after William had gone only a few steps. “Gimme your peace talk or whatever, then take this shit home yourself.”

William turned, smirking. “Glad you came around to diplomacy.” He lost the smile and rolled his head on his neck, rubbing the shoulder where Shane had driven into him. “How’s your arm and stuff?”

Shane hugged the cooler. “It’s fine.”
Still rubbing the shoulder, William looked him up and down. He shrugged. “Let’s go to the docks. I’ve got to check some traps out there anyway.”

Without waiting for Shane’s agreement, he took off walking again.

Shane glanced once more down the road. It was still deserted; still silent but for sleepy summer sounds. Hefting the cooler into a better grip in his arms he followed William, a doubtful feeling creeping into his heart.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re enjoying the story, please let us know with a comment or kudos! Or come talk to us on our tumblr. We love to interact with readers!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday between 2-4pm PST.
Step one of William’s plan was complete: lure the scared motherfucker out so he could smooth over his own bullshit.

It had been a week of long, hard thinking about the best way to apologize and make amends for the fight. And it wasn’t just the fight he had to make good on—it was the banning from the Stardrop, the rumors, and of course, being an asshole. There was no real reason to forgive him, so he was relieved Shane had agreed to follow him out. A bucketful of beer could only get his stupid ass so far.

The traps made a fine excuse to hang around the dock near Marnie’s place anyway. He’d kept a few of them around since realizing how good the crawfish were in the lake. His mom would have paid top dollar for what he could haul out for free.

He glanced sideways at Shane, taking in his appearance. It wasn’t that dissimilar to the way he’d looked last week in his ragged JojaMart hoodie, though this time there was a hat shoved in his back pocket. Clutched to his chest was the molded cooler that William had stocked with his home brews.

Guy needs some jeans that fucking fit, he thought critically. Those look like they were stocked in the clearance rack of the Joja shelves.

Not wanting Shane to think he was judging him or some shit, William pulled his gaze away. It wasn’t like clothes mattered in the grand scheme of things. Shane’s jeans didn’t keep his fist from slamming into William’s jaw. The ratty hoodie hadn’t made him slower when driving into William like a damn linebacker.

He pulled a mesh bag out of one of his cargo pockets to distract from focusing too much on his walking companion. The bag jingled the tools he kept in the large pockets, and reminded him of his other reason for smoothing things over with Shane.

He needed to see if the guy would be willing to get a job from the same shithead who’d kicked his ass last week.

Hello, HR? I’d like to file a complaint?

There was no getting around it. He couldn’t keep doing it alone.
This morning he’d had to bury a cow. Poor girl had been sick for days, and though he’d called the vet out and had been dosing her with medicine, she’d unfortunately given up the ghost. Burying her alone was a pain in the ass. Milking the herd took hours, and that was just his herd. He still had summer harvest coming up, and shuddered to think what he was going to do during calving season.

Each step reminded him of his multiple fuck-ups with learning farm life. Not having wire cutters when one of his yearlings had gotten her udder stuck in the fence. Not having a utilitool when his tractor died two hours before a rainstorm. Not having a decent pair of pliers or roll of duct tape when fixing the sprinklers. The first year on the farm had given him a crash course in being prepared.

He kept his attention forward, though listening to Shane's reluctant footsteps behind him.

*Maybe he won’t even go for it.*

He flashed back to a conversation he'd had with Marnie earlier in the day. The normally gentle livestock broker had been furious—scolding him for their altercation, citing Shane’s injuries as more severe than he’d expected. He’d never intended to destroy the guy, but then, he’d never been accused of rationality when his blood got too hot.

They arrived at the dock and William knelt down by his first crab pot. He surreptitiously observed Shane, who moved stiffly, though no obvious pain crossed his face.

"Whatever happened? It can't happen again. Shane doesn't exist in a vacuum, much as he'd like to think he does. He has a goddaughter, and if you'd seen the look on that little girl’s face when she saw her uncle Friday night..."

William looked back down, dumping the crawfish into his mesh bag.

*It can’t happen again.*

Shane lifted the lid of the cooler as William emptied traps, and he realized, like a dolt, he'd forgotten to include a bottle opener.

*Smooth move Ex-lax,* he groused, pulling himself out of Marnie’s afternoon lecture and back to the business at hand. He retrieved a coin-sized opener from his back pocket.

“Hey, heads up,” he called, tossing it towards Shane.

For a guy who was apparently beat to hell, his reflexes were quick and he snatched it out of the air.

William looked away, frowning down at the crab pots. Reflexes like that would be damn useful for manual labor. And hand-eye coordination was good. He popped open the next pot and tipped the crawfish into his net bag, trying to decide how to approach this.

*Bet he’d rather walk through glass than take this job.*

Shane put the opener to the side after catching it. At first William wondered if it was a rejection of the beer, but then Shane popped his thumb under the crown top and snapped it free from the bottle.

Tough bastard like that and Marnie was worried about his arms? How well did she even know her nephew?

William went back to work, letting him settle and make his way through that first beer. Might as well let the guy chill and get in a good mood before he laid down his offer. The minutes passed
and he finished emptying all the traps, then wiped his brow with his forearm. Finally, after tying the last of the catch into the net bag, he let himself look over.

Shane sat, drinking, his eyes on the water. The lake was calm this afternoon, the warm breeze barely enough to ripple its surface.

“You mind sharing one of those?” William asked, hanging his bag on a hook along the side of the dock to keep his crustaceans submerged.

There was the sound of the cooler opening, then another cap being snapped off. He wondered if Shane had ignored the bottle opener again, and for some reason the little quirk made him smile. He shook the excess water off his hands, then pulled out a handkerchief to finish drying them. After he was done he stuffed it back in his pocket, and sank down slowly and a bit stiffly next to Shane. His back gave a warning twinge.

*C’mon Spine. Don’t fail me today.*

Shane must’ve been thirsty, a finished bottle already between them on the wooden dock. Watching William with those same wary, deep-set eyes, he handed over the open beer and grabbed a second for himself.

William nodded in thanks. He took a long drink, then made the plunge. “So. Marnie says you’re good with animals and shit.”

Shane popped the bottle cap off with that thumb trick and pocketed it, as if it was a habit. “You talked to Marnie?”

William risked a look over and could see practically every muscle in Shane's neck bulging in tension. He leaned back on an elbow, casually giving the guy a touch more space, and for a moment examined the glass bottle in his hand. The brew had come out well, a blend of sweet wheat and hops. He weighed his words. Should he tell Shane that he'd been looking for him? Should he tell him Marnie had reamed him out for that beautiful black eye he wore? Should he tell him he felt like shit, that he’d caused Shane to scare his goddaughter?

Nah. The dude was too squirrelly and on edge.

“Yeah, I talked to her,” William said, keeping his voice lazy as he rolled the bottle between his thumb and forefinger. “Needed to get a feed order in.” He took a swig and sat up, letting his elbows rest on bent knees, looking out at the lake.

*Totally had nothing to do with imagining the way you sounded against that tree. Nothing to do with wondering if you were okay. Not a damn thing to do with your green eyes haunting my thoughts.*

Shane didn't speak, his foot jiggling slightly, as if agitated. Nervous tell. Or maybe an angry one. William kept his breathing even, the way he did when trying to line up a shot during target practice. Did Shane think that he’d been trying to mess with his family? Or worse, maybe he thought William was trying to justify his own damn behavior.

“I didn’t say anything about, uh, last week,” he said, risking another explanation.

Shane still didn't respond.

*Stoic motherfucker.*
William drank another long swallow of his brew. “I figured that shit was private. Between us.”

Finally Shane shifted, his bottle tilting then going back to vertical. William wondered if his arms hurt still—wondered if those bruises brought the memories back to him whenever he strained or pulled himself. He knew that when he’d been loading hay, his back had screamed. Shane might’ve missed his spine, but the muscles around it were soft enough to have spasms for two days after the conflict. Playing whack-and-chase across half the green of the country club hadn’t done a damn thing to help either. Yet he didn’t regret a twinge, each pain flash a burst of color against the greyness of his days.

He drank, using the beer to hide his smile. They wouldn't be having this conversation if Shane had a single, solitary clue about the twisted pleasure William had taken in that beat-down.

“She had a fucking cow over my face,” Shane finally muttered.

His voice was so soft. William stilled, memories of being banished from brunch like a bad dog helpfully reminding him of how fucked up they'd both probably looked.

“She had a fucking cow over my face,” Shane finally muttered.

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“Saw my parents this weekend,” he confessed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Told them I had a disagreement with a bulldozer.”

He glanced at Shane for his reaction, but Shane just continued to stare at his beer. Probably he figured William was going to slug him again. Yet that energy was long gone, and all he wanted to do was figure out what exactly had happened...why they'd connected in such an explosive way.

He tried one more time.

“They didn’t seem to take that as a good answer. Cue the lecture. Think I’d rather get that right hook of yours than listen to that bullshit again.”

Shane’s bottle was raised, and he paused before it touched his lips. “Told Marnie I walked into a door.”

So. He hadn’t wanted to give details either. Discretion was an attractive quality to have in a potential employee. His fingers tapped on the bottle in thought. If Shane wasn’t going to go around spreading the nature of their fight, maybe he could be trusted not to spread information about William’s business too.

“Look,” Shane added darkly. “You picked a damn good night to annoy me is all.”

William watched, fascinated by the sudden play of emotions that rolled across the other man's face.

Shane’s cheeks reddened. “I’m not...I mean, just—I don’t give a shit what people do on their own, okay?”

The words were hard won, and William turned them over in his head.

Interesting. So Shane had been thinking about it. But because he felt bad about calling William a faggot—not because he’d felt that lightning hot connection.

Not everyone is as twisted as you are, you psycho.

“Yeah,” William said, “don't worry about it. I was picking a fight.” He took a long, final swallow of beer. “I fucking knew it man. I started it.”
Shane only stared into his drink, foot tapping a more erratic pattern.

Keeping that restlessness in his peripheral vision, William flexed his grip on the glass neck of the bottle and added, “I'm an asshole like that.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Yeah, you kinda are an asshole,” Shane agreed. Another beat. “But so am I.”

The laugh escaped before William could keep it in. God, what a pair they made. Two assholes sitting by a lake. He reached out and clapped Shane on his back—and immediately felt a flash of guilt when Shane flinched from him.

*Just fucking move into his personal space and build a damn house, asshole.*

He pulled his hand back, letting the gesture move naturally.

The cooler was still full and William snagged a fresh beer, reclining again, icy bottle in one hand and giving Shane space. The opener lay on the dock between them and he fished it over to pop the cap. Shane might have thumbnails of iron, but William had enough busted spots on himself without having to impress anyone by opening a crown top.

“So. Now that's settled.” He looked at Shane. “You want a job?”

Shane had just begun to chug the last of his beer, and after finishing he dropped it and stared at William in disbelief.

“Charity?” Loathing dripped from his voice. “Yeah, fuck you.”

He shoved to his feet, empty still in one hand.

William had been prepared to be turned down for being an aggressive fuckhead. He’d been prepared for Shane to tell him to take the job and shove it, after their last encounter. Not once did it occur to him that he’d think William felt *sorry* for his pile-driving ass. Annoyance burst through whatever guilt he’d been feeling. Charity? Just because he had a beard didn't mean he was fucking Santa Claus.

“Man, fuck you!” William scowled. “Sit your ass down. It ain't charity. I've got over a hundred chickens to feed since last spring. They eat and shit a metric fuckton. Not to mention that it's summer, which means it's time to winter-prep the barns. Do you know how much work over fifty head of cattle are during the summer?”

Shane paused, but didn’t sit back down. William drank his beer and glared into the lake, unable to stop listing the problems he'd been quietly agonizing over for weeks.

“Gotta fix the drainage in the west field, or come winter it's going to be a mud pit. Two of my cows came down with mastitis last month and I had to bury one of them this morning.” He took another swig of beer, feeling stupid for even asking. “If you've ever had to drain a damn abscess, you'd understand it ain't no fucking charity to want an extra pair of hands out there. And if you’d ever had to *bury* one of the heavy beasts by yourself? You’d save me the trouble and go slap yourself, okay. Jesusfuck. Only reason I asked is because Marnie said you might be interested.”

William glared into the lake, mind roiling. Charity? Maybe charity for his own fucking peace of mind.
If Shane said no, maybe he could find someone in town to help him pour a new concrete apron.
The flies were out of control this time of year anyway, but if he could improve the drainage system,
next year they’d surely be better.

He drank, irritated. If not Shane, then fucking who? Kent’s boy, Sam? Well. Not that much
greater younger than him, but the skater punk seemed more interested in music than putting in the hard
labor a farm required. Alex, the sports-god wannabe? Maybe. He had the muscle for it. But
William had an instinct about young men, and that one would swap salt for sugar and then become
a defensive fuck about misreading the damn label. He’d trained too many fucking kids to not have
a hunch about who would do well in a self-reliant job like farming, and who he’d need to
continuously supervise. The point of a farmhand was to get some independent help who knew enough
about what he was fucking doing that William wouldn’t have to babysit his ass.

The cows were starting to be more work than he could afford. And though he’d been thinking about
expanding into sheep and goats next year, would it be more cost effective to just sell the whole
herd?

He glanced back at Shane.

He was a hefty fucker. Getting soft from drinking at the saloon all the damn time, but William
didn’t have a problem with having a few beers at the end of a long day. And besides, there was no
way that Joja gave a body the type of full workout farming did.

With a sigh, Shane sat back down.

He pulled a fresh beer from the cooler and popped the cap again, this time not careful with his
thumbnail. William froze for a second, eye on that single bead of blood that welled up on the dry
skin.

“I need a job,” Shane said, pocketing the cap. “But like...that’s the only reason. It isn’t to help you.”

Well. Talk about your backhanded compliments.

“Morris sent me home this week,” he continued slowly. “Said I’d scare the customers.”

He dropped words like he was measuring out gold coins, and William couldn’t help but watch him
speak. He wondered if that would be the end of the conversation, and decided to count to three in
his head. When he got to two, Shane said, “Three. Days. Pay.”

Damn, William thought, not daring to meet his eyes. Instead he drank, remembering an incident
that had occurred two years before. He’d just moved to Pelican Town and begun cleaning up The
Bowery. He’d gone into town and met with his first customer, Pierre, only to see Morris come into
his place of business to drop off coupons for JojaMart like he was some sort of savings genie. It
was the most bullshit, bullying act William had ever witnessed in his life.

Sometimes, William had moments where his brain wasn’t exactly in control. His instincts had
taken over, and he’d threatened the guy. The threats had lead to Morris puffing up like a damn fish.
So William had unpuffed him with his fist. It was damn neighborly, if you were to ask him.

Moments like this? Hearing how Morris had messed with Shane’s money? He felt like the only
thing he had to regret from that incident was that he didn’t smash in Morris’s stupid froggy face
harder.

He finished his beer and let his forearm rest on his knee, the bottle pinched between thumb and
forefinger.
Tread lightly, you shit-kicking stupidass.

“That was shitty of him,” William said. “Not really Morris’s biggest fan. I, uh—” he rubbed the back of his neck “—got in trouble with Lewis a couple of years ago for punching him.”

Later, much later, he’d regretted the assault. Not that it mattered. Lewis, who’d known Pops, had slapped him with the barest of recriminations. His reputation on the other hand...well, Pelican Town’s rumor mill ground that into flour.

William took a long swallow. Wasn’t like reputations and him were good friends anyway.

“Man,” Shane said. “You got anger issues.”

And you’ve got eyes.

“I should add that to my ink.” William took another long pull of the home brew, then turned and met Shane’s gaze. “When can you start?”

Shane looked down at his lap. “Monday,” he said quietly. “If it means I can screw Morris over without a two weeks notice.”

Petty revenge. A guy after his own heart.

“I’ll drink to that,” William said, amused. “Pay? What you looking for payment wise?” He frowned. “I never hired no one before.” He hadn’t thought this part out. What was the standard rate for farm work?

Shane flushed.

Ah. He was embarrassed setting a pay scale. William waited, fingers sliding the bottle back and forth.

“Just…match the wage at Joja, at least,” Shane mumbled.

William shrugged. He’d look that up when he got home. Minimum wage with basic benefits for stocking shelves didn’t seem quite fair for the type of manual labor he’d need, but he’d figure it out later.

Then he realized there would be more to it.

“Listen, I know it’s a pain in the ass,” he said, staring out at the lake. “But during calving season, you’ll need to be like, on call. I have an extra room at my place. Last season I nearly lost one of my big milkers and her calf to a breach birth. It was pretty touch and go.”

“You can just call the ranch,” Shane said.

“Sure. As long as you don’t mind getting the call at 3 am. Calves like to be really considerate about when they’re born.”

Shane frowned. “Might wake my goddaughter up.”

“Look,” William said. “I’m not trying to jerk you off here.” As pleasant an activity that might be... “It’s serious work. More serious than I realized when I took it on from Pops.”

He glanced over, but realized the conversation was reaching a wall.
“Never mind,” he said. Calving season was months off, anyway. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

He finished his beer and put the dead soldier to the side, then reached across Shane to get another from the cooler. Shane pulled back, and for a second William wondered if he was afraid of him. That thought didn’t sit comfortably.

“Something wrong, Daniels?”

“Nothing,” Shane said, voice stiff. “Just, let me talk to my aunt. I’ve got responsibilities there too.”

Yeah…his kid.

William leaned back, popping the cap, and took a swig of his beer. “Fair,” he grunted. “Just let me know if there are issues. I’m flexible.”

Shane didn’t respond to that, which probably meant the flirt had gone over his head.

You’re going to be one of those deliberately obtuse motherfuckers, aren’t you?

William cast around for a change of subject and felt his back twinge from the hit Shane had laid on him the week before. In as conversational a tone as he could muster, he asked, “So who taught you how to hit like a jackhammer, Daniels? You box or something?”

Shane grew stiffer, only staring into the neck of the beer, eyes dark.

He swings and he misses…

“Alright,” William said, shifting to his feet. “None of my business. You wanna start Monday? Be there at 6 am.”

Shane nodded.

William regarded him for a minute, then looked at the beer in his hand.

He’d done it. He’d convinced Shane to take the job. And even if he looked as excited as a brick, William didn’t need him excited—just serious enough to show the fuck up on Monday.

He tilted his beer and chugged the rest, letting the thick brew slide down his throat. After finishing he sighed, contemplating the bottle. “That,” he said, wiping his bearded chin, “was a decent batch. I should charge Pierre more.”

Shane continued to peer into his own bottle. “It’s good shit,” he agreed quietly.

“The Good Shit. Maybe that’ll be the new name,” William said, unable to help feeling flattered at the compliment. He pointed his bottle out over the lake, as if he was directing a crowd. “That batch is Okay Shit. That one over there?” He pointed to the murkier side of the lake. “We give that to the relatives we want to fuck off. That’s the Bad Shit.”

He glanced to see if he was getting a reaction, but Shane was now staring the water—more than likely embarrassed by William’s theatrical gestures.

William looked back at his bottle, and in a less ridiculous tone said, “But this one? This is the Good Shit.”

He realized he wanted to linger, but he had a rule about striking out. Retreat and try again later. He
leaned down and picked up his three dead soldiers, then the catch he’d gathered from the water. Slinging dinner over his shoulder, he nodded at Shane.

“You get the Good Shit, Daniels. Enjoy it. See you Monday.”

Then he started back towards his place. Just as he’d gotten to the gate that signaled the edge of his property, he turned his head and captured that image of the lone man sitting on the dock, his outline making William’s heart pound. He swallowed and turned away again, letting the gate swing closed behind him.

It was just professional business, after all. Just a job. And if he was smart, he’d keep it there.

Because, William thought ruefully, I’ve had so much fucking luck with being smart.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! If you’re enjoying the story, come visit us on tumblr or drop a comment, we have a blast talking with you guys!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday between 2-4pm PST.
It was like William knew his weakness already.

Shane took a drink, reluctant to admit the guy had both good taste and a talent for brewing. The heady, hoppy ale was as good as the craft beers Gus got in seasonally at the saloon, and blew away the cheap crap he used to buy at Joja. Strong too. He’d only emptied three bottles, but to his buzzing brain it felt like five.

Proper fucking apology, at least—if William had come to Shane with orangey pisswater, it would’ve been a hell of a lot easier to turn down the job.

Well. No. That was a lie.

Shane reached into his pocket and pulled out his balisong. The triple-spoked knife was like an extension of his arm these days. Any time he sat at the dock with booze in one hand, out came the knife in the other. He flipped a few simple pinwheels, staring at the water, the act as soothing and familiar as the beer washing down his throat.

Jojas was closing in two weeks. Much as the job had sucked, it’d been his livelihood. It was the money that provided for Jas, and helped Marnie cover rent and utilities. It was the paycheck that made his nightly booze possible, and seeing as two bottles of whiskey was lucky to last him three days, that shit wasn’t cheap.

He flipped another knife trick.

He really needed this job.

Almost fourteen fucking years he’d worked at Joja. Ever since eleventh grade. And sure, he’d had to transfer to Pelican Town from one of the Zuzu stores, but it’d been a smooth lateral slide after filing a request with the manager. No interviews. No pressure. Minimal room for fucking up and falling flat on his face, like he’d certainly have done with a new job. Then there was Marnie, the goddamn safety net. Even if Shane was unemployed she’d never have the heart to kick him out, especially with Jas in their lives. And being the anxious, selfish moron he was, he’d taken advantage of her kindness to hide from the bitter truth: that he’d have to put himself out there for the first time in his adult life.

In his own pitiful way, he’d tried. Gone on Marnie’s computer, browsing the job listings within
twenty miles. Wandered the town, an eye out for establishments that might be hiring. Accepting the tip-offs Marnie gathered from her gossip circles, about how so-in-so was hiring in Poplarville, and why didn’t he give them a call?

Why? Because Shane was a fucking idiot, that was why, and you couldn’t teach a dumb old dog new tricks.

The idea of interviewing at a new place made him want to hurl. The thought of phone calls or resumes was enough to make his anxiety implode. Some days he didn’t understand how his seventeen-year-old self had even had the balls to turn in that one-page application to get hired at Joja in the first place.

It’s ‘cause you didn’t do it, dipshit. Garrett did. He walked up to the desk and asked for the damn application when you couldn’t. He stuck the pen in your hand and told you how to fill it out.

These days it was so much easier to turtle in his bedroom, drink, and pretend the looming joblessness didn’t exist. Or better, that it’d take care of itself. And it kind of had; a shiny new job, handed over to him on a silver fucking platter. A job whose interviews he’d shown up for unknowingly. One that only seemed to care about where he’d learned his right hook, and whether he’d be on-call for cow duty. Even he wasn’t a big enough idiot to turn that down.

Well, no. That was a lie too. He was a big enough idiot to turn it down. Almost had, until William had brought up Marnie.

The ranch was struggling. She rarely talked about it, but Shane knew it was in trouble. If his paychecks disappeared for good, their household would snap under the weight of the two extra dependents.

He closed his eyes, drained the beer to the bottom, and when it was gone immediately reached for another. Cracking it open, he stared at the wisps of smoke curling from the neck, wondering if he was crazy. William had kicked the shit out of him a week ago. Now Shane was going to work for him? What kind of dumb fuck took a drunken beatdown from a guy one day, then put that same guy in a position of financial power over him the next?

A dumb fuck like you, obviously. Suckered in by good beer and smooth talking.

William could totally be pulling Shane’s leg. What about his ominous parting words that night? Until next time, Daniels. Maybe round one was to bruise the body, and round two would be for the pride. Maybe Shane would skip Joja on Monday, and when he arrived at the farm that fucking tattooed boulder of a guy would be waiting for him, laughing at what a gullible moron he was.

Except that didn’t feel right, and he knew it. He flicked his knife closed and took another drink.

William’s words had been too honest today. Shane hadn’t missed the frustration in his voice. Fuck, he’d lived on the ranch long enough to know how stressful and time consuming this line of work could be. The ranch’s chicken coop was his responsibility every morning before leaving for Joja. On the weekends he cleaned the barn and stable, mowed the lawn, and helped Hunter, Marnie’s part-time kid, bundle the feed orders. No such thing as a day off when you had crops to tend and animals to feed.

Shane sat and drank, gazing over the water, and when his current bottle was finished he opened another and drank some more. The sun was setting, a dusky, navy curtain pulling down on the world. Cicadas and crickets became musical in the grass. A breeze rippled the lake, and the traps that William had laid along the shore gave soft clanks as they bumped together. It was growing
quite late when Shane finally reached in the cooler for another, only to come up empty.

Like chain-smoking in bottle form; he’d just polished off nine of William’s home brews in a matter of hours. Nine brews that felt more like thirteen.

Shane dumped the melting ice in the lake. He tossed his empties in the cooler with a series of clangs, then stood, grabbing it by the handle and swaying on his feet.

It was good shit, he’d give William that. He was, to put it mildly, as drunk as a goddamn skunk.

After a slow, stumbling walk home, Shane paused at the ranch door and looked at the cooler in his hands. He knew he’d have to tell his family about the job at some point this weekend…but maybe not tonight. He ducked into the chicken coop, tucking it behind the feed. It’d be safe until morning coop duty, and then he could find a better spot to stow it until Monday.

Monday.

He’d been brooding so hard about the legitimacy of William’s offer, he hadn’t stopped to think about what it meant. Not truly. Until that very moment it hadn’t sunk in, and now it did, like aloe on his burnt fucking soul.

Come Monday, no more JojaMart.

No more customers.

No more listening to some old lady prattle on about why she could eat only green bananas. No more being verbally abused when the bakery department ran out of a certain type of bread. No more being given the look, the one that said Shane was put on this planet to inconvenience people, his pallet of cereal boxes blocking their all-important sojourn to the Oaties.

No more unflattering, uncomfortable uniform. No more cleaning wads of toilet paper off the restroom floors. No more rounding up shopping carts in the sludge of winter.

Fourteen years later, no more JojaMart.

Of course, there would’ve been no more JojaMart soon regardless. But having another job lined up, being able to kick that shithole to the curb guilt-free? Shane closed the coop, grinning, and returned to the front of the house. He opened the door, his heart so light he was walking on air, drunk off one of the most delicious beers he’d had in ages, and nothing—fucking nothing—could piss on his night now.

“Evening, Shane!”

Whomp, whomp.

“Lewis,” said Shane, crashing back to earth.

Three people were gathered around the table. Aunt Marnie, Jas, and Lewis, who was the mayor of Pelican Town and Marnie’s steady boyfriend. By the looks of it, they’d been finishing up a late supper of chicken parmesan and green beans when Shane’s drunken ass wandered in.

He and Lewis had not gotten off to a great start when Shane first moved to the valley.

Lewis, for one reason or another, had chosen to keep his relationship with Marnie under wraps at the time. A sixty-year-old man, playing dirty little secret like a fucking kid in high school. And
while Shane didn’t wish to devote any time to thinking about his aunt’s booty calls, it’d fired up something fierce and protective in him to know Marnie was visiting Lewis’s house midday, yet the asshole wouldn’t even hold her hand in public.

For months Lewis had filled his aunt’s head with promises about how, when the time was right, their relationship would go public. And Marnie believed him. Repeated those promises to Shane as evidence that things were headed in a good direction, while Shane believed she was being as naive as the ‘other woman,’ waiting on the promise of a man to leave his wife.

And then Lewis, the fucker, pulled through, forcing Shane to eat all his words.

Nothing said he had to like the guy.

“Was a last minute thing, Lewis joining us for dinner,” Marnie said. “He wanted to wait for you, but we didn’t know how late you’d be out.”

“Old Joja making you stay overtime until they shutter the place down?” asked Lewis.

“Something like that.” Shane opened the fridge, searching for the leftover pasta salad.

Marnie tsked. “Shane, you sit down and eat something at the table. We’re not done yet, and the food’s still warm.”

“I’m good with pasta salad.”

“Shane.”

He closed the fridge, sighing, and grabbed a roll as he plopped down at the table.

Marnie beamed. Christ, it drove him fucking batty, the way she beamed over silly shit.

“How’s the job hunt going, Shane?” said Lewis conversationally, patting his moustache with a napkin.

Shane struggled to flatten a hard pat of butter against the roll. “Just ducky.”

Jas giggled.

“How’s the job hunt going, Shane?” said Lewis conversationally, patting his moustache with a napkin.

Shane looked up. He’d expected scolding for his smartass answer, but instead she was looking at him inquisitively.

“Er—yeah.”

“So does that mean Farmer Bill found you today?”

Shane’s knife slipped and stabbed a hole in his bread. He’d already forgotten that William had talked to Marnie.

“Er…” He focused on the bread. “I guess.”

Marnie blinked. “You guess, Shane? Either he did or he didn’t.”

Shane sighed, giving up on the butter. “He did.”
“Ah!” said Lewis. “I’d heard Pierre say Bill was considering taking on help. He’s grown that farm into quite the operation these last two years.”

“Oh, it’s a monster of a business for one man alone,” Marnie agreed. “I’ve no idea how he’s done it so far, but wish he’d share his secret with me.” She looked at Shane. “You accepted?”

*Only reason I asked is because Marnie said you might be interested.*

How, exactly, had that conversation gone down? Because it didn’t matter if *William* said he’d kept hush-hush about the fight. Shane knew there was no way in Stardew’s green fucking Valley that Marnie had offered him up for employment without getting to the bottom of the violence. Not after the hard time she’d given him all week. Not after the hand that had covered her mouth that night, the ‘It can’t have been Bill!’ falling in disbelief from her lips.

“Um. Yeah. I accepted.”

“You’re gonna work on the farm?” Jas’s interest was finally piqued. “Aunt Marnie says he’s got way more cows than we do!”

Marnie peered at him critically. “You *really* accepted?”

“Yes,” he said, annoyed at having to repeat himself.

Her expression was hard to read. Shane couldn’t tell if she was pleased or not.

Lewis cleared his throat. “Well! Congratulations on the new job, Shane.”

“Yeah.”

“Though…” Lewis hesitated. “That scuffle in the saloon last week.” He chuckled, sounding nervous. “No bad blood? I mean, if you’re accepting a job from the man…?”

“Now, Lewis,” said Marnie, touching his arm. “Bill and I had a long talk. Cleared up a lot of misunderstanding there.”

Another wave of irritation darted through Shane. *Why* couldn’t they just call the fucker William? It was like they weren’t even talking about the same damn person.

“A long talk,” he repeated, glaring at Marnie.

“Yes. He paid me a visit this morning. Brought those melons you see on the counter, actually. Beautiful things. I have one cut up in the fridge for dessert.”

Shane stared. “He visited to bring melons.”

“To put in an order for feed, Shane. The melons were just to butter an old lady up, I think. He was…concerned, after your incident.”

Great. They were going to talk about the fight in front of Jas, when she’d been terrified by it. In front of Lewis, when it was none of his goddamn busybody business.

“So you talked about me,” he said flatly.

Marnie waved her hand. “I sell to the man. My relationship with him long precedes yours. I think he wanted to make sure there was no bad blood between *us*, as business partners.”
Shane glanced at Jas to see if she was following the conversation, but she was busy lining green beans into the shape of a stick man on her plate.

“And?” he said, irritated. “You get that sorted, yeah?”

Marnie’s eyes narrowed. “Why, yes. We did.” A pause. “I was wary when I first met him too, you know. He had that reputation, after the altercation with Morris. But then he started doing all those things to help the community, just really turning things around for folks here. And of course, learning he was ex-military. Not to excuse the violence, but goodness—doesn’t that just do a number on a man? The things one sees out there…” She shuddered. “Look at poor Kent. Hasn’t been the same since he returned home.”

In a place the size of Pelican Town, gossip flowed in a steady and constant stream. Voices at Joja while Shane was stocking the aisles, which apparently made people think he was deaf. Voices in the background of the saloon, while he nursed a beer or whiskey neat and attempted to drown them out. Until the night of the fight, he’d only known William by sight and reputation. Big old farmer. Had a temper, but proved himself a ‘hero,’ saving the community center and helping drive JojaMart to the ground. Stand-up fucker at heart.

And now, Shane remembered, ex-military.

It made so much fucking sense.

The things William had hissed while pinning him to the ground. The preternatural control during his peace-talk, and the sudden flare of ‘Sit your ass down!’ when Shane doubted his intentions. That temper, coupled with that sense of command…he wondered for a moment what William’s ranking had been. Guy like that? Surely he hadn’t remained some scrub at the bottom of the chain.

“—for years now, so friendly and professional in business,” Marnie continued, when Shane finally tuned back in. “Never had a problem with Bill before now, and it’d be a shame to start because of ‘a couple guys letting off steam after a long week.’” Marnie shook her head. “Lord knows if he wasn’t so stressed by the workload, that steam might’ve come off in a healthier way.”

Shane paused with his fork halfway to his mouth.

William had said that? A couple guys letting off steam? And Marnie fucking believed him?

He crammed the chicken in his mouth, suddenly wanting to extract himself from the table as soon as possible. How many conversations had he had with his aunt this week, trying to convince her the fight meant nothing? And she’d pressed and released, pressed and released, never satisfied with his answer. Then in waltzes hipster farm boy, probably puffing up his chest and delivering that that line with some stupid charismatic smile, and she accepts it.

Of-fucking-course.

“Yes, boys will be boys,” chuckled Lewis. “Got into a few scrapes myself as a young man. None quite so impressive as yours, Shane, but a few scrapes all the same.”

Marnie swatted his arm. “Just because we’re choosing to look past this doesn’t mean we condone violence, you cad. And don’t be sexist.”

Lewis stopped chuckling, but when his aunt turned her head, he looked at Shane and winked.

Shane—suddenly envisioning William’s wink at the bar—stared down at his chicken, reddening.
“Anyway,” Marnie continued. “He mentioned how badly he needed to hire someone, and what was I to do? Ignore the one person whose got both experience and need of a job? So yes, we talked, Shane. After everything that happened I was hesitant, but Bill put my mind at ease. Seemed more concerned that you might not be interested.”

Shane’s eyes flickered up.

She shook her head. “I truly hope this hasn’t happened to him here in Pelican Town, but he says some men have a problem working for a gay man. I told him you’d be just fine, of course. That you’re a hard worker and a good boy, and you leave people’s business to themselves.”

A good boy? She’d told William he was a good boy?

Well, great. Now Shane wanted to hurl.

Jas, it seemed, had grown tired of making pictures with her vegetables. She’d also apparently grown tired with the conversation, looking up and saying, “Vincent is jealous that I have two last names. He told me so today.”

Marnie turned, a look of amusement crossing her face. “Did he, now?”

“He should be jealous,” Lewis said, as if they were in on this together. “Jas Prevost-Lorie. Gosh, what a beautiful name for a little girl.”

Shane stabbed his chicken, an even greater darkness stealing his mood.

“I’m not little,” Jas protested. “And I told Vincent you get two last names if your parents die.”

“Jas!” Marnie chided. “That’s not the reason.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know tha—”

“I’m finished,” Shane declared, shoving his chair back from the table with a squeak.

He walked his dishes to the sink. Jas and Lewis continued their conversation, but Marnie got up, following him. She frowned.

Shane knew that frown. It was the frown that replaced the smile when, after he’d been drunk in a social setting, she’d finally gotten him alone long enough to show her disapproval. He waited for it, the shake of her head, the passive aggressive comments. But this time they didn’t come. She only touched his shoulder.

“Come sit back down for dessert. Bill’s melon…”

Shane’s jaw tightened.

“I don’t want,” he said, “his goddamn melon.”

He rinsed his plate, shoved it in the drying rack with soap spots still on the back, and left for his room without saying goodnight.
When William opened his eyes every morning, he came to consciousness in a kaleidoscope of pain. There were colors of cramping and throbbing that swirled his vision, and locked him on his back while he processed the daily trial.

He took stock of the aches and their sources. Scar tissue in his back muscles caused stiffness. Spasms made his shoulders tight. He could picture his spine, one long string of stacked cuffs along a curve. The doctors had warned that he was at risk for degenerative disk disease, tapping fancy screens with the white bones against a black background.

William clenched his teeth, then forced his jaw to relax. He inhaled and exhaled, each breath a raft over the wave of aching. Slowly, so slowly, he pushed up, rolling to get vertical. There was a familiar churn in his stomach. He reached over and dumped a few antacids from the bedside table into his hand, chewing the chalky disks. A flat burst of fake berry coated his tongue, but the tablets eased his stomach of the morning queases. He didn’t rush, letting his body settle, and looked at the clock. A few minutes after five.

With a groan he got to his feet and padded into the bathroom to shower, letting the hot water loosen the last of the morning pains.

*Shane starts today.*

Saturday he’d spent the entire day laying out how he’d utilize the extra help, making a list of things that someone else could do, and separating out the tasks that would take more training. On Sunday he’d made another appearance at his mom’s. His bruises had finally faded enough that she deemed him acceptable company.

William shoved those memories away, firmly not in the mood to replay that particular discomfort. Today had enough discomforts without borrowing yesterday’s.

He stared at the mirror. The black eye was almost completely faded, just a light yellow tint over his temple. Any bruising left on the jawline was hidden by the beard. He turned his face left and right, then pulled out his grooming kit and unrolled it on the counter. After putting his hair up in a topknot, he combed and trimmed his beard, and rubbed in a conditioner that kept it neat. Then came two touches of sandalwood cologne. A watch dug out of a box. A fresh handkerchief, tucked in his pocket.

Minutes later the shower was wiped down, the bed was made, and his space was straightened. He headed into the living room and snapped on the weather station.

“—and it’s another hot and sunny day in the Stardew Valley,” the weatherman chirped against a map of the Ferngill region.

William relaxed a touch. Sun was good. A farmer should love rain, but he had reasons to dislike those days.

After making coffee and feeding Ingrid he stepped onto the porch. It was still dim outside, the sun creeping up the horizon. He sat and pulled on the work boots he’d cleaned the night before, then started towards the barns, going over the list of tasks he’d made for Shane.

In the last two years he’d expanded his farm, from the small dirt garden his grandfather had left behind into a sizable working machine. Half of the acreage were fields, his summer harvests close to being ready. His blueberry bushes were fat and heavy with fruit. It had taken him all his time and energy to keep ahead of the crop.
Still, the summer profits were worth the effort, and his animals took care of him financially during the winter. The surrounding area was starving for artisan cheeses and mayo. Slap the ‘organic’ label on his produce and boom—it was like printing gold. His recent brewery forays had also helped make last year extra profitable.

William paused at the barn door and looked over the dim countryside.

Solar-powered lights lined gravel paths that he’d laid down himself, and fences delineated the fields. He’d gotten a tractor last summer that cut down his tilling and sowing by a ton. It was parked in one of his barns, and he had a whole system of those. One barn for his tools and supplies. One for milking, one for calving. One for his cow’s winter quarters and overnight area. They all opened into the huge pastures where his herd spent their time. There was also his massive chicken house, up to almost a hundred birds.

Maybe…it was impressive. But William could only see all the work that needed doing.

Well, Head On, he thought, when he realized he was waffling on whether to wait for Shane or start his normal routine. After all, it was work. Not a social club.

William cut on the lights, stepping into a huge space of musty cow smells and moos. No matter how clean he kept it, that distinctive, earthy smell of livestock infused the very wood. He pulled open the doors and then the pens, funneling the herd towards the milking barn. The cows, heavy with their morning milk, started down the shoot. There was a battery-powered radio on a hook in the corner and he snapped it on, country music filtering into the big room as he hauled the milking lines used to collect the day’s dairy.

He glanced once at the door but then turned away, determined to focus and not be caught staring at it.

He’ll get here when he gets here.

With that thought firmly in mind, he got back to work.

The kitchen was dark and quiet. Shane, freshly showered, stood in the shadows of the humming refrigerator while the coffeemaker gave its final sputters. He pulled out the carafe, and by the light of the glowing blue button on the machine’s front, poured himself a mug, listening to the sizzle-hiss of the final drips on the hotplate.

Marnie bustled into the kitchen and flipped on the light. It was like she’d pulled back curtains over his dark bed to let in the sun. Shane groaned, squinting.

“First day!” she said cheerfully.

He grunted, shoving the carafe back on its plate.

She crossed to the cupboard and grabbed a mug for herself, along with a loaf of bread. “I was thinking you ought to drive the truck up to the farm.”

Shane warily watched her. “Just gonna walk.”
She held the loaf out, silently asking if he wanted some too. He shook his head.

“Well,” she said, shoving two pieces into the slots of the toaster. “It’s just that I plum forgot—Bill placed a feed order on Friday. Hunter’s working this morning, and he should have it ready by ten. Might be more convenient just to drive back and pick it up for him at that time.”

“I’ll walk.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shane. It’s a twenty minute walk, or a two minute drive. You’ll be on the clock remember. And I don’t need the truck today.”

Shane closed his eyes. He had his own reasons for never driving to work, but there was no good argument for this. Screw her stupid logic.

“Fine, whatever.”

Marnie rolled her eyes. “Careful not to dish out too much of that morning charm on your new boss.”

A cold spread through his body.

He’d spent all damn weekend thinking about this job. Thought about it while scrubbing the troughs of the coop and sweeping the stalls of the horse barn. While sitting through dinner conversations he couldn’t seem to follow, and after, when holed up in his bedroom to drink. All weekend twisting his stomach in knots over this damn job, over realizing he’d have to spend the day working alongside William…

…and he’d never thought about the fact that William hadn’t just given him a job. He was indeed Shane’s new boss.

The new Morris.

Shane scrubbed a hand through his hair. Coffee in hand, he turned down the hall before the conversation went on any longer. Marnie was a morning person, bouncing out of bed as if she’d spent the night prepping how many words she could fit in during the first ten minutes of the day. Even without the hangover it was maddening.

Once in his room, Shane set the mug of coffee on his dresser. He stared down at it.

What are you gonna do now, you idiot?

When living in the city, he’d taken the bus to JojaMart. After moving to Pelican Town, he walked. He didn’t even mind walking, as it gave him an extra half hour before and after his shift to be alone before dealing with people. But what both methods had in common: Shane was not behind the wheel of a vehicle, and so his morning routine could go undisturbed.

The routine being spiking his coffee with at least three shots of whiskey.

It ironed out the cramps in his head. It eased the nausea in his gut. And on a day like today, it would’ve done a hell of a lot for his nerves.

Shane looked into the black surface of the coffee, seeing his own wavering reflection.

The shakes were coming on.

He twisted his hands in his hoodie sleeves; a forest green one today. It was that and jeans, an
unusual outfit for a Monday in Shane’s world. For the first time his week was not going to be spent in the ratty blue Joja jacket and dockers, which were currently wadded up at the bottom of his hamper. If this new job was the real deal, Shane was going to chuck them into the wood stove when he got home.

If this new job was the real deal, that meant he was officially farmhand at The Bowery.

With William.

His new boss.

If, you know, he managed not to puke and chicken out in the next ten minutes.

With one hand Shane grabbed the knob of his dresser drawer. Slowly he tugged, and it glided open to reveal a jumble of underwear and socks. Tucked into them were a few glass bottles, shimmering under the harsh iridescent light of the room. There was one brand new fifth of whiskey, another with only a few inches left, and an empty pint.

He pulled out all three and unscrewed their caps. With shaking hands, he filled the little pint container full. He hid the big bottles back in the drawer, while the small one was slipped into the baggy side pocket of his jeans, where it was slim enough to be invisible. In case of emergencies. Because Shane knew himself well enough to know anxiety and panic were, categorically, emergencies. Ones he was better off not experiencing too deeply his first day.

Turning to leave the room, he caught a glimpse of his reflection above the dresser. His heart sunk. 

Too bad you can’t spare William. Sorry fuck’s gonna see a lot of your ugly mug if you keep this job.

Shane resisted the urge to tear it down, with a silent promise that he’d burn the stupid mirror with his Joja uniform later.

“Have fun!” Marnie called, when he walked through the kitchen.

He scooped the keys off the counter, making a noncommittal noise in return.

The countryside was quiet and peaceful before sunrise. Marnie’s pickup was parked out front and Shane turned on the engine, a mechanical roar piercing the silence, headlights illuminating dark bushes. He sat staring into that light for several minutes with the exhaust sputtering. Finally, talking himself down from driving straight through those bushes and into the trees beyond, he shifted the truck into gear.

The dirt road was bumpy, the old pickup creaking as he drove.

He thought of the fiery burst of William’s fist in his eye.

Bounce, rattle, rattle.

William stalking Shane from behind, and the bribe of long brown necks in a cooler.

Bounce, rattle, rattle.

The scent of warm cologne, lifting from William’s skin when he leaned across Shane at the dock to grab a beer. The tight black t-shirt around his arms. The sleek blond hair, pulled back in a knot.

Bounce, rattle, rattle.
Shane’s own sorry reflection, dark bags beneath tired eyes.

_Bounce, rattle, rattle._

The drive was less than a mile, over before it began, and Shane was soon parked in the gravel on the north side of the property. He cut the engine, looking over fields lit by the faint rays of dawn. It was the first time he’d ever seen it up close, despite the farm being one of the ranch’s closest neighbors. Marnie said the property had belonged to William’s grandfather, but once William took over he’d turned it from overgrown flower gardens into a booming business.

Still, nothing prepared Shane for the sheer fucking size of it.

_I was right. This guy is fucking crazy. No one in their right goddamn mind would take on this much on their own._

The farmhouse was dark, but there were lights on in one of the bigger barns, and its door was wide open. Shane glanced at the watch on his trembling wrist.

Still a few minutes early.

Getting _drunk_ on his first day would be stupid. But it’s not like his three morning shots ever got him that far. Beyond their warmth smoothing his nerves, he never even felt them. Besides, William was nowhere to be seen yet, and he was parked now, with over four hours before he had to drive again.

He slipped the whiskey from his pocket, uncapped it, and took three steady shots. Just to ease his twisting stomach—make himself fucking presentable and shit.

Shaking his head after it went down, he tucked the bottle into the center console, then rubbed his palms on his jeans to wipe away the sweat settling into their creases. He had to get out of the truck and walk over to that barn. All there was to it. Showing up late wasn’t going to make day one any easier.

Shane took a deep breath and got out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, we hope you’re enjoying the story so far!. Come visit us on [tumblr](http://tumblr) or drop a comment, we really love to hear from you guys.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday between 2-4pm PST.
Shane stepped onto the farm to a chorus of soothing country sounds. Chickens clucked. Cows lowed, and the metal from their containment rattled. There was one barn lit up, and assuming that’s where William was, he headed that direction. As he grew closer a radio playing country music began to drift through the air, layered atop the steady swish of milking machines. The noises grew louder and louder until Shane was standing anxiously in the doorway of the barn, looking into the bright interior—and right at his new boss.

William stood beside a line of cows, attaching a milker to one of them. When he was done he stepped back into full view, and Shane saw he was dressed similarly to how he’d been at the dock. Clean jeans, navy tee. Well-groomed beard and topknot.

Asshole.

Shane reached up and flattened his hair, knowing it’d probably dried funny after his shower. William hadn’t noticed his arrival yet, and even with a few shots in him his stomach was doing cartwheels. He hated being this nervous. Christ. In a moment he was going to have to speak, and when had he ever been good at doing that?

Just as he finally gathered enough courage to cough—because that was easier than forming actual English syllables—the cow William was leading into support gave a hard jerk. He dodged back, narrowly avoiding the several-hundred-pound headbutt she’d thrown his way. Scowling, he cussed and swatted her on the backside before shoving her in again.

She retaliated with a vicious tail whip that smacked him in the face.

Shane leaned against the doorframe of the barn, heart pounding. “That, uh…” He cleared his throat. “That where you learned to fight?”

William turned and midway his scowl broke into a smile. He chuckled, patting the cow on her hindquarters, then pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe his hands.

“You mock, but one of these ladies knocked me on my ass a few weeks ago. They hit like a brick.” He jerked his head toward the stalls. “You can help me muck out. When that’s done, we’ll get in the next batch.” Snagging a pitchfork, he crossed over to hand it to Shane, then pointed at the wheelbarrows. “Manure goes in the back pile, and then we’ll have to move it for composting.”
And that was it.

That was the introduction to this whole thing? Shane waited for him to say more, but William only grabbed another pitchfork and got to work himself.

“Okay,” Shane said quietly, joining him.

For the first few minutes he kept a close eye on his boss as they filled the wheelbarrow, sure he was going to start a conversation or give more instructions. But no; except for the radio, it was silent as the grave. It was too easy. After the anxiety he’d bathed in all weekend, there had to be some catch to all this. Instead, the pitchforking softened his nerves. There was even a stretch where, side-by-side in a steady peaceful rhythm, Shane forgot how much he’d wanted to throw up that morning.

The stalls took twenty minutes. Shane was moving the last load when William nodded him over.

“Marnie use electric milkers?” he asked.

Shane eyed the machines, which were similar to the ranch’s. “Yeah. Might be selling her cows, though.”

“Huh.” William cocked his head. “I’d have thought she’d rather break off her fingers than do that. She’s so proud of them.”

Heat traveled up Shane’s face.

Why had he said that? Marnie’s personal finances at the ranch were not his business to discuss.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, trying to recover. “Just, she mentioned downsizing the herd…”

William raised a brow, but didn’t press.

“You’ll be doing this by yourself tomorrow,” he said, pointing to the other side of the line. “But I’ll show you how I like it done today. Start on the end and unclip. And keep an eye out on the teat, I don’t need mastitis.”

Shane nodded. William demonstrated—pointlessly, as it was another task he’d done hundreds of times, but he supposed every job had at least one set of pointless instructions—and then they took to opposite ends of the row.

As they worked a new song came on the radio, and William began to sing along.

He kept below the volume of the actual singer, but he had a good voice, Shane realized. Deep and able to match pitch. Between the singing and the memorized movements of the task, Shane couldn’t help but find it soothing, as if William’s lack of self-consciousness made it easier to put aside his own. Just like with the rhythm of the mucking, his nerves unkinked a little bit more.

They moved from girl to girl, unclipping, and once the current group was done ushered them out and brought in the next.

“Looks good,” William grunted, checking over Shane’s shoulder as he attached a milker. “You’ve got this. I’m going to start on the coops. When you’re done, come meet me.”

See, dumbass? All that fucking worry for nothing. He’s giving you chores you can do in your sleep, and you barely even have to talk.
Shane finished up, and then as instructed headed to the coops. A few of the more curious chickens strutted over to peck near his boots and he bent down to scratch them, knowing Marnie’s birds liked that. One in particular seemed to love it, pushing her way through the clucking crowd, and Shane scooped her up.

William stood in the back of the coop, packing eggs into cartons.

“Figures you’d like that one,” he said, rolling his eyes. “She’s mean as sin.”

The little feathered head sank into Shane’s scratch, as if it had a tranquilizing effect. He shrugged. “Seems alright to me.”

“Yeah, tell that to the fingers she’s tried to eat.”

Shane held his finger in front of the chicken’s beak. She opened her red-rimmed eyes and blinked blearily at him.

Yep. Downright satanic.

William closed a box and pulled a clipboard down, jotting numbers for the eggs. “You clean the coop. Let the chickens out. Feed ’em. After I get these eggs dealt with I’m going to be in the north field, as one of my fences seems to have grown a hole.” He made a final note, then rehung the clipboard and nodded toward the wall. “Tools are over there. Hose is behind the coop.”

“Okay.” Shane set the mean-as-sin chicken free and stood, biting his lip. “Your, um. Your feed order. Should be ready by ten. Brought Marnie’s truck, so I can go pick it up or whatever.”

William nodded. “Silo’s on the south side of the farm, closest to the ranch. Makes unloading easy. Holler at me and I’ll help you with it.” He patted Shane on the back as he passed. “Good job so far, Daniels.”

The pat sent up another faint whiff of that warm scent Shane had first smelled at the docks.

Cologne to do farm work?

He shoved the thought out of his head.

The morning passed, busy but uneventful, and at a few minutes to ten Shane wrapped up and headed to the truck.

If Marnie could’ve afforded to pay someone full-time on the ranch, she’d have hired Shane long ago. As it stood, Shane helped out where he could, taking care of the coops each morning, on the weekends letting the horses run and cleaning their stable. But out of sheer necessity she had to keep at least part-time help around, and two days out of the week her fresh-out-of-high-school hire, Hunter, came by. He’d just finished loading the hay bales onto a trailer when Shane arrived.

He hooked it to the pick-up, trying not to think about how when he returned, William was going to be working side-by-side with him again.

Stop being a fucking pussy. You survived the morning. It went well.

He drove back with one hand on the wheel, the other tapping the center console where the whiskey was hidden. He pulled in next to the silo and peered around for any sign of William.

Jesus.
Across the field, his new boss was standing with his head under the water pump. Shirtless, because why the fuck not. Even with the distance Shane could see that the tattoos he’d thought were sleeves actually covered William’s whole torso, an entire shirt of colorful ink. He was running blue-stained hands through his hair, and there were fifteen bushels of blueberries lining the fence next to him.

Shane was supposed to call him over like that?

Ducking his head below the dash, he pulled out his whiskey and downed three more shots. He stowed the bottle and sat back up, staring at the steering wheel for several seconds.

Taking a deep breath, he laid a hand on the horn.

William looked up at the honk. He shook his wet head like a dog, wiped his hands on his jeans, and started walking over.

Shane had removed his hoodie at the ranch, the mid-morning sun too hot, but as he slipped out of the truck he regretted it. His old gridball tee was damp and spotted with sweat, and he felt terribly self-conscious climbing onto the trailer.

William got within throwing distance and held up his arms. “Toss ‘em.”

Straightforward, same as before. Just because he’d wandered over like a wet shirtless dog didn’t mean this had to be any different than the previous work together, Shane told himself, grabbing a bale and throwing it down.

William caught it, dropped it on the conveyor belt that rose up the silo, and kicked the machine into gear. Once again there was no pressure of small talk, and the job became like clockwork: Shane tossing, William catching, the belt carrying a steady supply of feed to the top. He’d ordered several hundred bales and it was sweaty, itchy, tiring work, constant bending and lifting.

Shane leaned down to grab one of the bales at his feet, hefting it up with a grunt—and when he twisted around William was watching.

Of course he’s watching, dumbass. He’s waiting on the hay.

Shane threw it into the waiting arms, his pulse hammering in his throat.

“So this,” he said, determined to change the invisible subject. “It’s all you?” He jerked his head toward the fields. “Seriously got no other help?”

William nodded. “Not a lot of people around here are good at this kind of thing. And this season sort of snuck up on me.”

As he turned to drop the bale on the belt, Shane caught sight of the fading bruises on his back, between the ink of the tattoos.

It felt strange to know they’d been put there by his fists. The fight had been less than a week and a half ago, but if it weren’t for his own bruises—and the twinges of leftover pain in his shoulder—Shane would’ve sworn it’d been another lifetime.

“Not judging,” he said, bending to pick up another. “Just saying, you’re cracked.”

“Cracked?” William chuckled. “Like in the head?”

“Yup,”
“Not the first time I’ve been accused of that. Still. Glass houses, Sadsack.”

Shane slowed as he stood.

That stupid nickname.


He chucked the next bale with a lot more force.

William caught it with a step back, smirking. “Looks like you’re recovering from our last discussion.”

“Slipped out of my hands,” said Shane.

“I’m sure.” He cocked his head, looking toward the fields. “You know, with your help I’ll be done before dark today. Been a few months since that happened.”

Shane paused to look at the fields too. They were damn impressive, honestly. He reached slowly for the next bale. “So this is like, all you do.”

“What? Throw hay?”

“Just wake up, work till dark, sleep?”

William shrugged. “Yup. It’s a boring-ass life, but it’s mine.”

Shane closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn’t meant it like that. Not as an insult. He’d meant to point out the dude’s obvious dedication to his land, but of course—of course he’d fuck up a basic compliment.

“Not judging, man,” he mumbled, throwing the hay. “Better than what I do.”

“Well,” said William, catching it. “Sometimes I like to go into town and pick fights with the locals.”

Shane grunted. “Swear it fucking blew Marnie’s mind, learning it was you.”

“What, her poor nephew, beaten up by the big, bad, gay?”

Shane hoped he was already flushed enough from the sun and exercise that William wouldn’t notice the new heat in his face.

“Nah,” he said, throwing the next bale too hard again. “Just, she kinda worships you. Acted like I was telling her some sick joke, learning it was you.”

“For someone who worships me, she sure did give me an earful Friday about it.”

Shane felt his face darken, drowning out the previous flush.

“I’ll fucking bet,” he muttered.

Just like Marnie, spinning the truth of a story to fit her own goddamn narrative. All that talk of William wanting to make sure there was no bad blood…Shane would’ve bet his whole first paycheck Marnie had given him the earful first.
“It’s fine,” said William. “I’m used to it. Ever since that shit went down with Morris a couple years back…ain’t like I’m not stupid enough to bring it on myself.”

At hearing Morris’s name, Shane’s mood grew even darker. “Yeah. Thanks for the reminder that me and my old fuckwad of a boss got our ass kicked by the same guy.” He grunted, bending for another bale. “Feel good shit right there.”

William chuckled. “That piss you off?”
Shane said nothing, chucking it at him and turning to pick up the next one.

“Damn,” said William slowly. “It really does. Well, lemme tell you this. It won’t happen again, okay?” He dropped the bale on the belt. “And what about you? Without the town bruiser to let off steam, how you gonna blow off that mess of fuckshit you’ve got going on?”

“Same as always.” Shane snorted. “Except Gus banned us, so now I gotta buy Joja’s pisswater.”

“Aw, now you’re hurting my feelings sweetheart. I thought you liked my home brew.”
Shane ignored the endearment. “If you ever sell your stuff to Pierre, I’d fucking buy it. Right now he only gets that fruity shit in.”

William laughed, wiping his brow. “He just ordered four cases of my blueberry shit once it’s fermented.”

Shane’s eyes flickered to the fence lined with berry bushels, then back to William’s stained hands. “Figures,” he muttered, realizing he’d probably just insulted him.

“I make it. Doesn’t mean I drink it. It’s fucking girl beer.”

“It’s fucking Marnie beer.”

“Well maybe I should send you home with some then. She might forgive me for your black eye.”
Shane shook his head. “She has a drink at the saloon sometimes, but she doesn’t bring shit home.”

William became oddly quiet. Three bales later he said, “It’s, uh…‘cause of that kid, right? Jas? Don’t want her around that shit.”

Yeah. Nothing to do with the fact that her entire fucking family is raging alcoholics.

“Something like that,” said Shane, even quieter.

He stopped to stretch, his shoulder practically screaming now. William took the opportunity to stretch too, placing a hand on his lower back and leaning into it. They watched the bales creep up the conveyor belt, one by one.

When they’d been working and talking Shane hadn’t noticed his buzz much, but at a standstill, the softness of the liquor sank in. The summer day deepened around them, the sun’s heat beating down on his exhausted body and making him sleepy. Eventually his gaze was drawn back to William, who faced the belt.

Shane pulled his shoulder across his chest in a gentle stretch, eyes settling onto the colorful skin. For the first time he realized how much of the ink was military-themed. Across his back, bombs and fire went off above a verdant green field, and on his chest was an eagle with its wings spread, just two parts of the tapestry covering his whole torso. Some designs even crept into the waist of
his jeans. The artwork was vibrant and detailed, with clear thought behind the placement of each piece. Rather than feeling like patchwork, the images flowed.

There was a trail of bullet casings raining down one bicep, and as Shane stared at them he heard Marnie’s words from dinner.

*Poor Kent. Hasn’t been the same since he returned home.*

He wondered how old William had been when he joined the military. They had to be close to the same age, though Shane was pretty sure William was a few years older than him. He wondered what he’d been like going in; whether he’d changed a lot. Whether he’d been on the home front, or sent out to Gotoro.

Then Shane saw them again, on a section of uninked skin between the sky and field of William’s back piece: the purple bruises he’d put there.

His stomach twisted in a knot.

“Damn animals eat too much,” William muttered, hand still rubbing his lower back in slow circles.

Shane determinedly refocused his gaze, reaching for the next hay bale. “Your, um. Your back okay?”

William turned, that easy, predatory smile sliding over his face. “Recovering nicely.”

He pulled down the bale Shane had moved forward and hauled it onto the belt.

The work resumed in the same sweaty, steady rhythm as before. There was no more small talk. No more stretching or staring. Just heavy breathing on top of silence. Shane forced himself back to the present, back to the task at hand—away from the danger of everything that played in the background.

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The day had, William decided, gone better than he’d had any right to expect. His silo was full. His animals were cared for and handled by seven that morning, and Shane had cleaned out the auto-milker with the same quiet efficiency he had in everything William asked of him. Now here they were, before dark, looking at the beginnings of the fence repair that had been necessary since he’d first inherited the trash pile of a farm.

*This…is going to work.*

He looked at his watch. Five-thirty. Shane was pounding a mallet on a post, its bright wood looking like gold against the grey weathered ones. When he finished he stepped back, wiping a brow.

William pushed to his feet. The effort brought a stab of pain through his lumbar, his spine protesting the prolonged bending required to attach the connecting rails between the posts.

"I'm bushwhacked, Daniels," he said, slipping the hammer into his tool belt.

Shane looked at his watch too. "Early day for you, isn't it?"
"Well, looks like my new farmhand was a damn fine investment."

William glanced sideways as he stacked the posts in the wheelbarrow. Shane’s shirt was soaked with sweat, patches down his neck and sides, and his hair was plastered against red cheeks. William appreciated the look. He liked men. He’d never made a secret of that to anyone who knew him past the age of coming out. The military had taught him that not only did he like men, he liked men who knew how to work. Seeing Shane all sweaty was a brand new flavor he wanted to try, even if he knew he didn’t dare.

As he gathered the tools, he cast around for something to say that might, just might, tempt Shane to stay longer than the average work day.

“Since it’s my fault Gus threw you out of the Stardrop, why don’t you stay for a beer before you go home?”

Shane, who was putting away tools in the same way they’d been taken out, paused for a moment. William found that he liked that. He’d noticed it all day, Shane’s eye for detail. He copied William’s moves and instructions, like he had a diagram in his head that let him replace things exactly the way that he’d found them.

Shane carefully closed the toolbox. "You, uh…you sure we should be drinking together?"

Oh no you don’t, you nervous fucker.

William stacked a bag of nails and screws on top of the closed lid. Cocking his head to the side, his words came out in an almost purr of taunting. "Afraid you're gonna catch cooties, sweetheart?"

"Fuck off.” Shane wouldn’t look at him, shifting the posts so that none would fall when they pushed the wheelbarrow inside. “Just don't need a fresh black eye to explain."

William snorted in disbelief. "Oh, so now you're scared? Here I am, offering you the finest of alcoholic ambrosias and you're turning me down?"

Shane hesitated.

William waited.

Finally, each word looking as though it cost him something, Shane muttered, "Only cause the saloon is dead to me right now."

"Yeah. Sure. Uh huh. Go put those in the shed for me, and latch the door. I’ll meet you at the porch."

William didn’t wait for him to change his mind. He turned back towards the house, reaching up to unfasten his hair tie and rub fingers through the sweaty strands, then scratched the buzzed parts all the way to the longer top section. Once up the stairs he made quick work of kicking off his boots and fetching a towel. Giving himself a quick wipe-down, he cast a look around the room. He wanted to change his shirt. The fabric was just this side of uncomfortable, clinging and sticking to his chest, and worse, his back.

For a moment he debated leaving the front door open, but that seemed too intimate.

You can hold off on a dry shirt for a half hour, he told himself.
He grabbed a second towel, then a bucket, a bag of ice, and a twelve pack. He stuck the bottles in the ice, little metallic caps sprouting from the snowy white stuff like boozy daisies. Once outside he set the bucket on the porch, popping the tops and dropping them in a smaller one kept for recycling.

It didn’t take Shane long to walk up. William tossed him the towel, watching as he rubbed his face and arms. When he was done he draped it on the rail and William handed him a beer.

"Good work today, Daniels. It's more than I can usually get done."

Shane shrugged, taking a long, hard swallow. William felt a twinge of satisfaction; it was deeply satisfying to watch someone enjoy something he’d made.

After coming up from his drink Shane said, " Didn't do that much."

Humble? Or just oblivious to how much help he was?

"Yeah, okay. Whatever." William leaned on the porch rail, sipping his own bottle. He rolled his neck and stared out at the fields, shifting his weight between knees and hips. The new fence looked like a golden line of progress on the horizon.

Not that much my ass.

He looked at Shane, who was absently pulling on the collar of his shirt, fanning the fabric.

William felt a pang of sympathy. He couldn’t stand to be stuck under wet clothes. He probably had about fifty more t-shirts than any man needed in his lifetime, but he couldn’t help it—sometimes they got changed out three or four times a day.

"You know, if you want," he offered, "I've got some spare sweats. We could go to the bathhouse down the road and get cleaned up. Least I could do after working you so hard is send you home smelling fresh."

And damn, would a soak be good on my back.

Shane took another hard swallow. He shook his head, rubbing his neck. "Nah, man. I'm good."

"Suit yourself. Offer stands."

Watching Shane rub his neck made William suddenly conscious of the way his own shirt was plastered to him. It was like the reminder made it all the worse, and he put his beer down to pull off the damp thing.

His heart rate slowed, relief as the sweat began to cool his skin instead of cling to it.

"I swear I go through more shirts in a day than most people go through Kleenex," he said, draping the shirt next to Shane’s towel. "I just fucking hate that sticky-ass feeling. Fabric all wet and shit? Ugh."

Being near dead in the middle of a jungle will do that to you.

"Picked a good job then," Shane said.

"I got fucking luckier than I deserve is what happened."

William turned back to the field, just as Ingrid, his orange cat, came onto the porch and stalked
over to Shane. The little traitor body-bumped into his ankles, and Shane leaned down to scratch under her chin, right where she liked best. He was good with the monster; Ingrid’s languid purr was long and soft as she settled next to him.

_Took near a month to let me touch you without trying to take off a hand_, he thought, amused.

He took that moment, where Shane seemed to relax a bit, to sink next to him on the porch step.

"So," he said, leaning back on an elbow and stretching out the lower lumbar. “You always live in Pelican Town?”

Shane stiffened at the closeness. He focused on Ingrid, petting in slow, careful strokes. "During our fight you called me a Townie, but I only moved here a few months before you. I'm from Zuzu."

William sat straighter. "No shit? What brought you out here then?"

Shane shrugged. “My goddaughter. Long story."

“Yeah?” William leaned over, sliding the bucket of beers between them. "Well. What if I told you I liked stories, Daniels?"

After a long, final scratch, Shane let Ingrid be. He sat up, pulling out a second bottle and popping it open with his thumb trick. "Not good at telling them."

_Wouldn’t mind listening to you try._

"You know, you're not what I thought you'd be," William said.

Shane sighed, then leaned an elbow on his knee and rubbed his forehead. "Look. What I said, in the bar? I was drunk and pissed off, but like...that was low of me. Don't actually care, what people do on their own. Doesn’t fucking affect me.” He looked into his beer. “So yeah, a week late, but there's that apology."

William paused, his beer halfway to his mouth. He frowned.

“It's whatever, man. I was being an asshole on purpose. I wasn't having a good night last week either.” Not that it was an excuse, but it was true. He turned the bottle up, finishing it with a long pull, then tossed it in the bucket where it made a satisfying crack. He reached for a third without hesitation. "Nights like that I shouldn't be around people. You got caught up in it."

"I know those kinda nights," Shane said, eyes on the horizon.

_Why do people always say that? No. No you fucking don’t._

"Yeah, no. I don't think you do," William muttered, his grip tightening on the bottle.

Shane shrugged. “You know yourself,” he said quietly. “I know me.”

The response was mellow, not rising to the bait of his defensiveness.

_Don’t pick a fight, Bauer. You promised to behave._

William took a swig of the fresh beer, icy and sharp against his tongue. “What does anyone really know, man?”

Shane looked at him. "So you’re one of those philosophical fucks when you drink."
The guy was level, despite William’s undercurrent of agitation. It was calming, and he let out a
breath.

What was he like when he drank? Usually a fucking idiot. It’s why when he decided to let himself
get shitfaced, he stayed the fuck home or went into the city.

"I’d rather be one of those busy fucks when I drink,” he said, “but this pissant town is a bit short on
my preferred methods of entertainment.”

No clubs. No real LGBT community to speak of. Just a sea of heteronormativity that weighed like
a heavy blanket over everything he said or did.

Shane nodded. "This pissant town's short on everything.”

"Some days,” William said wistfully, “I really miss Zuzu.”

He missed the people he knew. Missed being able to walk down the corner and get different
flavors of food, instead of relying on the Stardrop for his pre-cooked dinners. If it wasn’t for his
mother packing his truck full of leftovers every Sunday, William might actually have to learn how
to cook something that didn’t come in a box. And wouldn’t that just add one more thing to his to-
do list?

“Me too,” said Shane. He kicked his feet out on the porch, and nodded vaguely at the farm. "Some
of it’s okay though.”

He was definitely mellowing. Instead of the shifting eyes and tense posture he’d held all day, he
was looking out at William’s land, contemplative. William wondered what he saw when he gazed
over the long stretch of blueberry fields and melon patches. Yet, the way he said it…he appreciated
the view.

"Like, fucking peace and quiet sometimes,” Shane added slowly. “If I could live in Zuzu for the
most part, but step in my backyard to this…”

So that was the trick to this guy, William decided. Give him space to talk, and if you were patient
enough he’d give you his words.

It felt surreal, how less than ten days ago they’d been at each other’s throats, aggression and
bullshit all roiled up into a spilled-over boiling pot. Yet, in that one moment against the tree, face to
face, eyes meeting…the silence of that look felt like this. Like somehow they understood each
other.

William shook the thought and pulled himself up to lean on the rail, creating space between them
again.

"I guess I haven't fucked it up too bad,” he said, looking back at the fields.

They drank in silence, lost in their own thoughts. Shane’s relaxation, in a way, made it easier for
William to relax too, reaching that good spot where his mind slowed enough to appreciate the
aches in his shoulders and back. Not just as flairs of his chronic pain, but as signs he’d gotten a lot
of work done that day.

Shane tossed his third beer and reached for a fourth. It was an improvement on the stilted way he’d
drank with him at the dock over the weekend, and William risked probing some more. He wanted
to know his new farmhand. If today was any indication on how well they worked together, they’d
be spending a lot of time around one another. Maybe they had more in common than he’d initially
"So what are you doing with yourself outside of the daily money grind?" he asked.

Shane shrugged. "Don’t do shit worth noting."

"C’mon, Daniels. What kind of shit ain’t worth noting? What are you doing at home, just fucking watching paint dry all day?"

Shane rubbed a hand on his eyebrow. "I hang out with my goddaughter. I piss off on my console. I get wasted. It’s a full fucking life and you should be jealous."

William crossed an arm over his chest, resting the fingers inside the elbow of his beer hand. "Sounds like a rollercoaster. You know what? I think I am jealous. No one I know would let me raise their kid. That's a pretty deep fucking gift, man."

He knew immediately it was the wrong thing to say.

Shane’s back stiffened and he held himself as though he’d been punched. His fingers tightened over the glass bottle, whites showing against the stark half-moon of dirt under his nails. He lifted the beer and drained it, then chucked it with William's empties.

The clatter of glass cracked across the silence that had fallen between them.

"Look," he said, punctuating the word by snapping off the top of his next drink. "I shouldn't be raising a kid either. Those fucking lunatics that handed her over to me should be shot."

William watched Shane’s lips lock on the bottle, like it held the magic potion to deal with this problem of life. He retrieved another beer to match him, and sat back down on the steps, leaving only three or four inches of space between them.

"Life is fucking wild, man. Never thought I’d be here either.” He nudged Shane. “Look at me.” He waved a hand over himself in the most sarcastic manner possible. "Boss man William Bauer. Farmer of Farms. Drinker of beers."

Shane stared at him for an indiscernible moment.

"The fuck is with the Farmer Bill shit?" he asked. “Nobody's going around saying Bartender Gus. Grocer Pierre. Suicidal fucking Stockboy Shane.”

The laugh burst out of William and he leaned back. "It's that goddamned Willie, man! That fisherman who lives on the docks?" He shook his head. "Gus said, ‘Oh we can't call you Will. We already got a Willie.’" William waved a hand, then shrugged. "So here I am. Fucking Bill."

Shane shook his head at the stupidity of the nickname, and William reached for a fifth beer. After popping the top with his bottle opener, he caught Shane’s eye.

"And don't you go off and kill yourself before like, winter, at least. I've got to get some work done around here."

Shane looked away from the gaze, into the distant fields.

“Winter’s probably better,” he grunted at last. “Shit won’t stink as bad when they find you."

At least the motherfucker has a plan.
"Joking," Shane added flatly.

It was a tone that told William not only was he not joking, but he’d probably had the thought multiple times.

William nodded seriously. "Yeah. Sure you are," he said, then paused. “I tried to before. I don't recommend it. People get all wigged out ‘n shit."

He held his hand out, turning it towards Shane so he could view the underside of the arm. It was wrapped with a barbed wire tattoo, the spokes creating an almost three-dimensional illusion that he was bleeding out around the little digs. Each metallic twist had been carefully placed to cover the scars from his copious and reckless use of heroin four years ago.

"Hard to see, but you can feel ‘em,” William said. “Go ahead."

Shane looked at the arm, hesitant. Slowly he lifted his hand and ran one callused thumb over the first barb, along the most prominent bulge of scar tissue.

His fingers were cool from holding the beer, and when he stroked over the braille map of marks William’s heart began to race. He held his breath while Shane touched the skin, and watched his face. It was gentle in a way one wouldn’t expect when first looking at him. There was empathy there, and solidarity in his caress. He lingered longer on some scars than others, following his own fingers, as lost in the touch as William.

Then, realizing what he’d been doing, he drew his hand back sharp.

Silence dropped.

“I almost did too,” Shane said at last, quietly. “Never that far though. Too chickenshit.”

William’s hair fell over the side of his face and he left it there, a curtain to half-shield himself.

It was a raw confession. He was sure Shane rarely spoke so casually with anyone about the time he’d considered checking out. William let his eyes drop to his arm, to the places he’d soaked with ink.

"I took almost 100 mg of heroin one night, after being out for two weeks. My tolerance had dropped. I knew the risks, but I’d gotten a big score. I remember mixing it and thinking, ‘No one gives a fuck.’” He let his arm drop, and took a drink of beer. "I was a fuckwit."

Shane paused. "How long you into that shit?"

The question hit William hard. It wasn’t a response he was used to getting when he told people about his stupid near-death attempt. Shane didn’t say ‘Well of course they cared’ or ‘You know it’s never that bad, man’ or even ‘It gets better!’ Not that those things weren’t true, but no—Shane cut right to the heart of the issue.

How long were you on the H.

"Too fucking long,” William said. “And not long enough."

Shane nodded as if he understood.

William had never hidden his past. The motto was Head On. But as he closed his fist, he felt weirdly…vulnerable. He crossed the barbed arm against his chest and leaned forward, eyes on the
What was he doing? He and the guy were supposed to work together, and here he was, unloading his closet of dirty fucking laundry like Shane was the new dry cleaner.

*Fix your face Bauer,* he told himself. *Reel it back in.*

"Been clean over four years," William said. He shook his beer slightly. "Substitution helps."

Shane turned his bottle, watching it spin for a long time before speaking.

“Got sober once too,” he said, then shrugged. “But beer ain’t heroin."

*Sober? Huh.*

So his poison was booze. Fair enough. A weakness for a weakness.

William tapped his beer against Shane's. "To Sobriety."

They drank. The sun was setting, shadows falling across the porch. The colors of summer evening were rich and welcoming. Shane stretched his legs out, his knees falling languidly open.

William was struck with a lightning hot bolt of desire.

It was so fast he bit the inside of his cheek to hold it in. He drank in the sight of the man beside him. When he’d first looked at Shane in the bar, he hadn’t thought he was particularly good looking, what with his red-flushed face, sunken eyes, and hunched shoulders. And he’d been so closed off, uninterested in speaking. Normally that would’ve killed any spark of interest before William could think twice about it. Yet now he let his control slip for a moment and stared, fixated.

Shane’s shoulders were broad and the old grid ball t-shirt pulled as he rested. William could picture his hands over those shoulders, Shane’s back flexing and moving if the shirt were stripped away. He’d thought about it briefly today, when they were filling the silo. Thought about what Shane would feel like bent over the tailgate of his aunt’s truck. Thought about the grunts of exertion he’d made when tossing hay bales, and how they would translate to having that ass on the spit of his cock.

*He works for you. You sick. Perverted. Fuck.*

The thought snapped a leash on his fantasies.

William let his arm brush against Shane’s, and in a soft voice, one full of dark promises said, "Probably you want to head home. Before I do something stupid."

Shane blinked hard. William watched as he came to focus—and as understanding slammed into him like a fucking train.

Immediately he scattered in his limbs.

"Yeah,” he said, scooting down the porch, looking around as if making sure he had everything. “I —I gotta go. I gotta go."

William smiled and closed his eyes at the not-at-all subtle escape, feeling bitter.

*Congrats, you dickhead. You scared him.*
He pulled himself up, unsteady, the fifth beer in less than an hour starting to hit. "I'll see you in the morning, Daniels," he drawled, and dropped his empty in the bucket.

Shane slowly stood. He dug in his pocket and clumsily drew out a set of keys. Then he paused, looking back and forth between them and Marnie’s pick-up. His fist closed and he shoved them back in his jeans.

“Leaving the truck here,” he mumbled. “I’ll get it tomorrow.”

He turned and began walking home with his head hung, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

William couldn’t help himself. He licked his lips, watching him go.

With slow, relaxed movements he closed the cooler and gathered the draped towel and shirt. It occurred to him, as he cleared this evidence of their happy hour off the porch, that he might’ve gone too far.

In fact, he might have borked things completely.

William stared down at his arm. His fingers curled into a fist, and when they did he could see the tattoos flex.

He’d button it down, he decided.

He’d be better so the next time, Shane might not run away.

Chapter End Notes

For this chapter, Draco commissioned an awesome piece of art [click here!] of the porch scene, from nananikki-hey. It was such a powerful moment for our boys, and we think they did a beautiful job capturing that energy!

Also check out our tumblr to see the amazing fanart done by Rosalie for previous chapters (she posts them here in the comments too!)

Thanks for reading, and know we’re always thrilled to hear from any of you. <3

Star Burst updates every other Saturday between 2-4pm PST.
The lake was preternaturally still. Treetops spiked a black silhouette against the darkness, and stars spilled like glitter across the sky.

The quiet here reached his bones.

It had started when Shane was sixteen years old, when one night his best friend suggested they take a drive to the city harbor.

“Why?” Shane had asked.

“Because. It’s the sort of place your mopey ass would like.”

They’d walked long docks of polished wood, and taken a seat on one of the abandoned benches under a glowing lamp post. Quiet, watching. Sleepy boats, rocking in the black water. A couple near the very end of the dock, their laughter echoing through the silence. The commercial port on the far side of the harbor, brighter and busier, the anchored ships lit from below in blue and gold.

Garrett had nudged him. “Not so bad, huh?”

They’d been close enough to touch shoulders. Shane had stuffed his hands in his hoodie pocket and stared at the distant city on the horizon, at the soft dome of peach light trapped between the water and sky.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” he’d replied, almost burning inside with how lovely it was.

The docks in Stardew Valley didn’t have the polish of the city ones. They were rustic, the wood old and the type to give splinters if one was careless. But being out here gave Shane the same sense of longing—the same deep ache in his heart he’d once felt on those other docks beside his best friend. Loneliness. And not like the loneliness of being in a crowd of people, when Shane disappeared. Out here, sitting on the splintered path that jutted into Cindersap Lake, he swam in the achy feeling rather than drown in it.

He tilted his head back and let a long stream of whiskey drain down his throat.

It was Tuesday night, his second day as farmhand complete. The work hours had slipped by, half in silence, half in zen-small talk that somehow didn’t grate on Shane’s nerves like most conversation.
And when he’d approached the house at the end of the day, William was again on the porch—again offering an uncapped brown bottle.

Though Shane accepted, this time he was careful to only stick around long enough for two. He was used to sinking into his own head while drinking. Not **talking** to someone. Not growing easy, unguarded, and loose-lipped.

He wondered if William had any idea that those drinks were only the beginning. That whether it was five like yesterday or two like today, he went home and kept drinking hard through the night. Woke the next morning hungover, and tipped whiskey in his coffee to ease things until he could booze up properly again. He’d as good as **told** William he was an alcoholic, after all.

Yet what had he done?

Tapped Shane’s beer.

*Toasted their fucking sobriety.*

It had hit Shane at odd moments that day when mucking stalls, when filling troughs. He kept hearing that clink of the bottle necks. Kept feeling that nudge on his arm, with soft words telling him to go home. He’d pause with a pitchfork of manure, or with the feedbag half-tilted in his arms, and think of that unnerving moment when he’d touched William’s arm. How in that scarred, bumpy skin he hadn’t felt the unbearable loneliness of being around people, but the quiet ache of being alone at the docks in the dark.

The memories didn’t last long. They flashed like tiny bolts of lightning before disappearing again, leaving only the imprint of their brightness on Shane’s mind. He’d go back to tipping manure in the wheelbarrow, or letting the seed plink into the trough, blinking at the wall of the barn and reminding himself it was the middle of the day.

He downed another inch of whiskey.

*Fuck that shit.*

Never going to make that mistake again, getting drunk around his new boss. Wasn’t going to risk doing something else as stupid as what he’d done that first night.

He set down the bottle, staring at the black water and absently rubbing the back of his hand. His fingers passed over the knuckles. The skin was rough and red, healing over from the scrape against the tree.

There were other marks under the scabs. Ones he couldn’t feel anymore. Faint white lines, from when he’d first started learning balisong tricks and caught the wrong end of the knife too many times. He could still remember how the bite of the blade had felt. How sometimes, it even felt **good**. Just like his hand scraping against the tree, and the pain in his jaw the whole last week, and the soreness in his shoulder after William had twisted it.

Shane reached for the whiskey again. He took a long drink, then stared down at the silhouette of the glass, fingers flexing around its neck.

“You’re cracked too,” he whispered.

It was another fucking lifetime ago, those old scars. A lifetime he’d been sober in, because Shane’s last friend hadn’t drank with him. Garrett had been the one to help him quit drinking, and were he here now, his handsome face would be heartbroken to see that half-empty bottle in his freshly-
scarred hands.

Yet still, Shane drank. He drank for a long time. Drank until that half-empty bottle was empty, his thoughts taking increasingly dark and winding turns the closer he got to the bottom.

Jas, he realized, the whiskey dry and his head swimming. He needed to see Jas. He needed to spend time with her. Tonight, that was the only thing that mattered.

Moments later he was stumbling down the path home.

_I’m sorry_, he thought. _I’m so, so fucking sorry._

His shoe caught on a rock in the road and tripped him, though he managed not to fall.

_I’m so fucking sorry. It’s never going to happen. Ever. I promise._

He fumbled in his pocket for the house key, and jabbed it several times at the knob before hooking it in the slot.

_He’s not you._

_He’s not you._

_He’s not you._

The lights in the kitchen were too bright after Shane had sat in the darkness so long. He squinted against the blinding yellow bulb as if it were the direct sun, leaning a hand against the door and kicking his shoes off.

They hit the wall. One clunk. Two clunks.

“Where’s Jas?” he asked, his words thick and loud.

There was a soft sigh from the couch in the next room.

“She’s asleep, Shane,” Marnie said, clicking off the television. “It’s after nine-thirty.”

Shane scrubbed a hand through his hair, blinking bleary eyes at her. “Asleep?” he repeated, then glanced at the static glow that lingered on the TV screen. “Oh…yeah…”

Marnie was already in pajamas, her hair braided for sleep. She stood. “Well, she missed you too,” she said, looking exhausted. “And if you’d stayed home after dinner, you could have spent time with her.”

She clicked off the lamp on the side table and the room went dim.

“Good night, Shane,” she said, and disappeared down the hallway.

He stood staring at the empty couch for a long time after she left.

After work on Wednesday—after another seamless day, and another two beers with William on the porch when it was over—Shane made the executive decision to stay home the rest of the night.

He’d spent all last week shuffling Jas to the back of the queue. But last night at the dock, he’d had clarity. Clarity that included getting his head straight on about her.
Again.

It was always a goddamn cycle. Like she was a library book he could pick up when he wanted to make progress, and set face down when he had no time. And he had to make time. Like tonight, sitting on the porch steps of the ranch after they’d just eaten supper.

“I’m never going to get it!” she cried, frustration crinkling a crease into her freckled nose.

“You will too,” said Shane.

Jas stared down at the practice butterfly knife in her hand. “Easy for you, you’re good at it.”

“Yeah?” Shane looked at her small glaring face. “Well how about I’ve been practicing longer than you’ve been alive, kid.”

“Longer than nine years?”

“Got it when I was eighteen. That’s thirteen whole years ago.”

“You’re so old.” She frowned, but then sat up straighter, determined. “Show me the ice pick again.”

Shane eased his legs out in front of him. Flicking open his own butterfly knife—balisong, was the technical term, but Jas liked using its “pretty” name—he smoothly pinwheeled the three-spoked weapon, first one way, then the other. At the last moment he released it with a spin then caught it by the handles, blade facing out.

Shane’s knife was expensive and solid silver. It was the first one he ever owned and what he’d learned on, slicing his hands up nicely in the process. Jas’s knife however was blade-less, with a rubber-gripped handle for easier catching. She watched him perform the trick with deep concentration, and when he’d finished she frowned again.

Biting her lower lip, she turned to her own knife and attempted the alternating pinwheel. The first half went well, but the second half got out of her control, stopping the trick in its tracks.

She flopped back against the porch, blowing a raspberry of frustration and glaring at the sky.

Shane held out his hand. She slapped her knife against his palm, crossing her tiny arms after.

“Like this,” he said, demonstrating again in slower motion. It would be dangerous to do with his bladed knife, but with hers he could at least attempt the slower speed for her to see better. “You’ve gotta roll your wrist after the first.” He did it twice more, then handed it back. “Try it.”

With a deep, determined breath Jas brought herself back to sitting, and Shane gave her an encouraging nod.

She tried again—and it worked.

Another crinkle scrunched the freckled nose, this time from the smile that blossomed across her face.

“I did it!” she cried, so excited she sprung to her feet and dropped the practice blade.

That smile. It fucking killed him sometimes.

Dusk was falling over the valley, the periwinkle of the horizon fading into navy above them. The
air was cool, or at least the summer definition of it. They sat under the pool of yellow porch light, facing the back fields of the ranch and practicing their knife tricks. It was one of Jas’s favorite things to do together, ever since Shane caved and bought her the practice blade for her ninth birthday a few months ago. In the past she’d been content to sit and watch him flip tricks on his own, but sometime between the ages of eight and nine, she’d turned adamant about getting one too—offended, even, when Shane insisted hers be bladeless.

Bending over, she picked up the dropped knife and stuck it in her pocket. She sat close to Shane, their legs touching on the porch steps, and reached for his solid silver one. He let her take it.

The steel was heavy and sleek. Over a decade old, it was Shane’s most prized possession and still looked almost brand new, shiny from frequent polishing and with only a few light scratches. Jas opened it carefully, touching the blade in the soft, safe manner Shane had taught her. Then she folded it closed and examined the little rectangular package.

“My dad gave you this,” she said conversationally.

Shane leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring at the silhouette of a distant apple tree, at the long fences that kept the cattle in where they roamed.

Jas opened the knife again, letting the blade dangle upside down, swinging it back and forth. Shane knew she was experimenting; pushing her limits on playing with it. He kept watch from the corner of his eye but said nothing.

“Wish I could see him right now,” she said, watching the blade sway.

_Just look in a damn mirror, kid._

She had her mother’s dark hair, true. But the freckles. The way her expression grew mischievous in an _I know something you don’t know_ sort of way. The smile that came easy and free, and the way her eyes rolled into the back of her head when Shane said something ridiculous—that was all her daddy.

Shane stared at his hands, picking one of the scabs. “What would you say to him?” he asked quietly.

“I’d say…” She stopped to think, then cleared her throat and put on a deep, scolding voice. “What do you think you’re doing here mister? You’re a ghost!”

Then she broke into giggles.

Shane forced a smile as, still giggling, she closed the knife and comfortably settled onto his lap. He hugged her around the waist and rested his head on her shoulder, looking up to where a few pale stars pinpricked the blue sky.

The thing that made it hardest was knowing his ghost would’ve giggled with her.

William raised an eyebrow at the cards he was dealt and reclined in the high-backed chair. It was the last Wednesday of the month, which meant it was poker night—and that he was sitting around Kent and Jodi Clark’s kitchen table with a hand full of bullshit.
He and Kent had started hanging out once a month after Kent had returned home. The captain had been a POW in Gotoro, during the same war that gave William such severe injuries he’d been drummed out of the service like a broken marionette. Kent’s own disability was invisible to anyone who looked at him, but William had listened to Jodi give tearful confessions of her husband’s evening roaming and nightmares.

And William knew a thing or two about nightmares.

So without any warning, three weeks into Kent’s return home, William had shown up at his place with Marlon, Gus, Lewis, and Clint on the last Wednesday of the month, with a poker chip set, a few decks of cards, and a lot of snacks from Gus’s bar. The players in their little poker brotherhood had shifted over the months, but William knew it didn’t matter who came. It just mattered that Kent knew someone gave a shit to spend some time with him.

It was hard, he thought, when the people around you didn’t have a fucking clue about what was living in your head.

Not that the poker team was anything like deep therapy, but sitting around for three or four hours drinking beer and shooting the shit with other men was almost like being in the mess hall with some buddies. Almost like sitting in the barracks after a long patrol, and kicking back before your leave request was approved. And it sure as shit was better than nothing.

William tossed down his hand and sighed dramatically.

“You’re fucking counting cards, Captain,” he groused at Kent, who was smirking at his fold.

Tonight it was Marlon, Gunther, and Clint at their card game. Clint’s poker face was too good and William was starting to regret inviting the big quiet smith. Still, he seemed so damn touched that they’d wanted him around, he’d let the invite stand.

“You always bitch when you’re losing, Bauer,” Kent replied, sliding a handful of one dollar chips into his pile and stacking them neatly.

“And you brag when you win,” Gunther added, accepting the deck and shuffling the cards back together.

Clint stacked his chips too. “Haven’t seen you by the saloon lately.”

William shrugged. He hadn’t felt the need for extra company these days.

“I bent Gus’s nose out of shape a little bit,” he said. “But I figure he’ll relax once my Octoberfest blend comes in.”

“So.” Marlon raised one bushy brow. “You really were in a bar room brawl last week?”

“Hardly a damn brawl,” Kent snorted. “Some posturing and grunting before Gus dumped a big dose of Shut The Hell Up on both of them.”

That’s because I know how to handle my business outside, William thought, reordering his cards and watching the men around the table stare at him.

Gunther chuckled. “I’d have thought you’d leave the bruising back on the front lines. Fighting doesn’t seem like a good feature in a farmer, Bill.”

That fucking nickname.
William had ignored it for so long, but Shane’s observation had highlighted how much the damn thing grated on his nerves. Normally at poker night he and Kent slipped into calling each other by their last names—the formality comforting, and a damn sight more accurate than the shitty moniker Gus had dubbed him with his first week in town.

“Farmers are mysterious motherfuckers,” he said loftily. “We live alone and coax life from dirt. I got my secrets, Gunther.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got at least half my money too,” Kent said, tossing a dollar chip at him. “So shut up and play.”

William caught the chip and threw it back without any heat. *Shut up and play* sounded like the best thing he’d heard all day. They fell into silence as they viewed their hands and tossed money into the pot, and then trashed talked for a few minutes before William’s straight beat out everyone else at the table.

Clint chuckled as William pulled the chips his way.

“What’s so funny?” Marlon asked.

“Just the gay guy using a straight to kick our butts,” Clint said, shaking his head.

“Careful now.” Kent stood to toss his empty and get another beer. “Last guy who made fun of who Bauer liked to bone got half his teeth knocked out. Jodi said Shane Daniel’s face looked like hamburger meat when she was shopping the clearance rack at Joja last week.”

William stilled, the casual observation slicing into his good fucking time. Especially since he hadn’t been remembering the fight as ‘that time he ruined Shane’s face,’ but as ‘best night ever’.

“Don’t let him fool you,” William said, stacking chips. “Daniels hits like a damn steam engine.”

Kent came back with fresh beers but William waved him off. He usually kept to one drink when hanging out with these guys.

“I dunno,” said Marlon, accepting his. “Marnie’s nephew is a quiet one.”

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Kent and William said at the same time.

“Had a guy in my unit,” Kent continued, sitting down. “Silent as the fucking grave. Right when we’re running the crucible? Dude hauled up one of our guys who’d broken his leg on the trail. Dragged him right to the end.” He sipped his beer. “The rest of us were running with our normal kit and weight, and this stupid-ass finished the trail with his kit, our unit-mate’s kit, and the unit-mate. Probably broke his back to do it, but man. After that we all just stared at him like he was a fucking mule.”

“Leave off of Daniels,” William added, taking the deck. “I started that shit anyway.”

No one seemed to question the assertion, though Kent looked at him sideways.

“Bauer, start shit?” he asked sarcastically. “Surely you must be thinking about another farmer with a reputation of hitting people he doesn’t like.”

“Oh,” Gunther said, snapping a finger, “that’s right! Morris and you tied up last year.”

William rolled his eyes and started to shuffle. “He deserved it.”
He tried not to remember the look of irritation on Shane’s face when that had been brought up the other day; how he’d thrown his hay bale harder at the mention. This town just couldn’t let a single thing go, could it?

“Deserved to get cold-clocked for handing out coupons?” Clint asked.

William began tossing cards at them one at a time. “He went onto private property and was soliciting rival business. Joja would have had Pierre arrested if he’d done that. Besides, what does it matter? Morris and his entire eyesore are gone now.”

This earned grunts of agreement around the table. Kent mentioned that they might have to tear down the old Joja building soon, unless perhaps they could convert it into something. Marlon added an observation that William didn’t quite catch. He focused on doling the deck out, and when he was done flipped through his hand without really seeing the cards.

Violence.

That was what he was known for. Kicking asses and causing trouble. It had been the same at home, old skirmishes that turned into gossipy fuel for his peers, and his mother’s social circles. And here it was, happening again, like a wheel of repeated mistakes he couldn’t stop spinning.

The subject at the table changed to the different types of trails that were in the valley, and how they compared to boot camp. William’s chest eased, his neck relaxing.

He didn’t come to poker night to think about things that bothered him. He came to lose himself in interactions with people who barely knew him.

At the end of the game he lost half the money he’d won, and everyone was near the same level of poverty they’d started at. It was a good feeling, that no one was better off than anyone else. Then Gunther, Clint, and Marlon all gathered their things around 10 pm, and trooped out while William lingered behind to help clean after the party.

He was sticking a clothespin on a bag of chips when Kent spoke up.

“You started it, Bauer?”

It took a moment for William to pull his mind out of the random shit-talk they’d been spewing for the last hour, back to the topic of the bar fight.

“Yup.”

“Not like you to start fights at the saloon,” Kent observed, stacking containers of dip to the side.

“Yeah well, felt like blowing off some steam and the asshole got in the way,” William said lightly. “Look. I apologized. We buried the damn hatchet and he’s been working over at the farm to help me get through summer.”

He could feel Kent’s eyes on him, and knew that if he made contact he’d have to address it.

*Not today, Captain Clark.*

Instead of giving space for unwelcome words, William stacked chip bags, the racket of foil packets creating a chaotic static that made words difficult. He opened up the cabinet to put them away and paused. A smile broke over his face, the need to distract Kent forgotten.
“You’re letting Jodi make popcorn again?”

About three months into Kent’s return William had witnessed a panic attack triggered by the sound of the popping corn, and Jodi had refused to bring it into their house for almost a year after.

Kent’s face flushed at the subject change. “Well,” he said, fidgeting with the cards, stacking them neatly into the poker bin. “It’s dumb to never eat popcorn again.”

William shut the door to the cabinet firmly and clapped him on the back, a feeling of relief in his chest.

When Kent had first come home, he’d worried the fucker might hang himself from the tree behind the house. William had passed him sometimes, smoking and staring up at the branches. The first time he’d seen that look had been on the face of a platoon-mate who’d stared too hard at his own weapon, and two days before deployment, the guy had slipped out of the bunks and tried to eat a bullet. The intense gaze had haunted William for the rest of his day. It was a feeling that was too damn familiar, a look of focus that he’d seen in his own eyes after his accident. But unlike William, who had no one to miss him, Kent had a wife and two kids who thought the world of him—so William had intervened in his way, unwilling to see another soldier fall to the fucking demons in his head.

As if summoned, the front door opened and said wife and kids trooped in.

Vincent, Kent’s youngest son, was asleep in Sam’s arms. William nodded at the older boy. He’d briefly considered offering him the job on his farm, but Sam was obsessed with building up his band, and Kent often complained he was gone every weekend trying to get musical performances in neighboring towns. Then came Jodi, loaded with beach bags and towels. She and William had bonded a few weeks into his relocation to Pelican Town. The savvy-eyed military wife had recognized a soldier without a washing machine, and invited him to stay for dinner at least once a week while he was getting his land established. She was a good woman, and William didn’t miss how Kent’s body relaxed at the sight of his family home safe. He ignored his own pang of lonely jealousy.

He didn’t belong here now. Time to go.

“Hey, William,” Jodi said, while Sam slipped away to put Vincent to bed. She began to unload her bags and Kent crossed over to help.

William turned away at their gentle greeting kiss.

“Evening, Jodi,” he said, sticking his hands into his pockets. “I was just about to head out.”

She beamed at him and looked around the kitchen. “You are always so helpful at cleaning up after your little He-man Woman Hater’s club.”

“Hey,” Kent protested, poking her shoulders. “Only one of us is a he-man woman hater. I happen to think you girls are pretty neat.”

She laughed and William gave a small smile.

“You two take care,” he said, nodding at them. “I’ve got an early day tomorrow.”

They waved goodbye and William stepped out of the cheerful house into the quiet summer night.

It was warm, despite the darkness. The river seemed to run slower as he walked home. The cicadas
sang and chirped in the air, and the humidity of the season made it easy to start sweating even with no sun. He went all the way down the path, turned a right at Marnie’s ranch, and started up through the farm.

The solar lights were still on, a glowing path towards his home.

His empty. Dark. Lonely home.

William turned on the light to the porch and Ingrid blinked at him from the deck chair. She slowly sat up, extending one front leg and then the other, walking through the stretch as if she were made of rubberbands—then trotted to his ankles and gave him a body slam.

He reached down to scoop her up.

“You’re gaining weight, girl,” he muttered, opening the front door.

He didn’t bother locking his doors this far out in the country. She climbed up his shoulder and gave a loud purr in his ear as he walked into the dark kitchen, snapping on a light so he could fish out her cat food.

The jingle of kibble cascaded into her dish and William set it down, not bothering to tell her to eat on the floor like a proper cat. Ingrid did what she wanted, and gave bloody payment to anyone who thought to tell her otherwise.

“You’d miss me if I were gone, wouldn’t you, Ingrid?” he asked.

The only answer was the crunch of kibble.

While she ate he went outside to the porch, and sat down on the step with his boots.

The steps he’d sat on while Shane had touched his arm with tenderness and curiosity.

*Button it down.*

William focused on his first shoe, taking the brush to the side of it, knocking off dried mud. Each stroke was like brushing away the moment of softness. He wiped it clean after, rubbing a microfiber cloth over the metallic eyeholes.

He’d been good at buttoning those feelings down for days. Buttoning them down when he’d see Shane walking, or when they had to work together side by side. It was ridiculous to feel so in tune with a person he barely spoke to. Stupid and self-sabotaging to crave that closeness.

He put the boot down and reached for the other. The swish of the brush was meditative and it lulled him, as did the crickets and other nighttime summer sounds. Lulled him into a daydream, where, for a moment, he let himself picture it.

His front door opening and someone coming through with children, excited to see him.

His traitorous mind supplied a face on that masculine form. A face that had a look of softness when it saw him, just as it had when it touched the marks under his tattoos.

William let the shoe drop and sighed.

*Dream on, Bauer,* he thought grimly, pushing to his feet. *Dream on.*
For a guy who had crappy sleep at night and a hangover each morning, 5:00 am should’ve been a bitch. And well, it was. The pounding head and grogginess. The awful tasting mouth. Sometimes Shane even woke with sharp pains in his side below his ribcage. He’d roll out of bed, toss an NSAID down his throat, and wait for the coffee to brew—coffee he’d spike with three shots of whiskey.

That was how he survived those mornings. Pills, caffeine, and booze.

But waking at 5:00 am for William’s farm wasn’t anything new. It was when his stupid body always woke up, even all those years working at Joja when he could’ve slept in longer. He was simply unable to fall back asleep, tossing and turning pointlessly if he tried. And unlike retail, farm work really agreed with Shane. He was going to be hungover regardless, and the fresh air sure as fuck beat the smell of mop detergent and stale truck exhaust in Joja’s back halls. And hooking up fifty cows? God, if that didn’t beat dealing with customers.

Shane would’ve gladly hooked up three hundred cows rather than deal with a single fucking customer.

The only person he had to deal with at work these days was William.

William didn’t require service with a smile, nor write Shane up for swearing when he stepped in manure. His voice was deep and calm, rather than that annoyingly high, chirpy way people in customer service spoke. He knew how to use small talk in a way that didn’t bother Shane at all, and even better—he knew how to use fucking silence. He never insisted on filling every gap with conversation. William was, outside of beating Shane to a pulp on their maiden voyage, a really easy guy to be around.

Well, except for his apparent allergy to shirts. But at least this week he’d stopped with the winks and sweethearts.

On Friday at quitting time, Shane wandered off to the side of the house where he’d hidden a six-pack that morning. Not the cheap-ass Joja cans he used to buy by the case, but actual stout that was best drank at room temperature. His boss never served him shitty beer, and Shane wasn’t about to look bad returning the favor. He came around the house again and dropped his offering on the porch rail.

William let out a low whistle of appreciation, tilting the carton to the side. “Good shit, Daniels.”

“Least I can do after drinking yours every night.”

“Complaining?” William hauled two heavy wooden chairs from the back of the porch, then set the drinks between them. He plopped down and cracked one open, and after a long drink gave a sigh of satisfaction. “Nice. This one your favorite?”

Shane shrugged, sitting down and grabbing one for himself. “It’s okay. Nobody here’s got the selection Zuzu does though.”

Contemplative, William leaned back in his chair, staring over the sleepy afternoon fields. “Guess I’m going to miss having the company this weekend.” He frowned. “It’s been awhile since I knew someone was coming around every day.”

Shane looked into his beer.
It made sense. Shane knew he hadn’t been the most stimulating of company, but when he wasn’t ‘having a bad week,’ William seemed like the type of guy who enjoyed other people. Maybe after working all this time alone, anybody would’ve done it for him.

Still, it felt like a kind thing to say.

“This week has beat the fuck out of working at Joja,” said Shane, attempting to return the kindness.

William looked over, cautious, as if expecting there to be a catch at the end.

Face heating, Shane immediately stared back down into his beer.

But he was going to miss it too. He liked the quiet out here, no crowded aisles or beeping registers. Just animals and nature and the sounds of their labor. The work itself was fucking satisfying. Shane liked how it slowed down his mind for once, and how it made his body exhausted and muscles sore. And he liked finishing the day on this—relaxing with a beer, and company that wasn’t a little girl or a nosy aunt.

They never spoke of the first night on the porch. Shane wondered if William thought the same things he did. About how weird it was, to go from violently throwing fists, to softly touching scars, to sitting around like two average guys, pretending they’d done neither.

Conversations were lighter now. They discussed work, William pointing to the fields with the neck of his bottle, telling Shane what was to come the next day, the next week, the next month. Discussed sports, batting back and forth about the previous night’s recaps, hating on the same announcer who never swallowed his spit before talking. They swapped stories of animal rearing, and talked of William’s home brewing process.

Business with a little pleasure, was all.

It was peaceful at this hour, full of late summer warmth. The flies droned. The leaves rustled softly. Shane couldn’t stop thinking about how well the first week had gone. He kept waiting for the catch, but William seemed pleased with how much experience he already had from the ranch, and even more pleased with how quickly he picked up on new tasks.

This was, Shane realized, his foreseeable future.

William absently rolled his neck, then reached up and scratched his hair, dirty and matted with the grime of the day. “I’ll be gone Saturday night. Going to see my parents for Sunday brunch or whatever.”

“Oh…” Shane said. This was a topic they hadn’t touched on before. “You, uh. You guys do much family shit?”

William nodded. “These days, yeah. Mom and Dad…well, I owe them a lot. They’re good people.”

Decent parents?

Apparently they did exist.

“So what the hell do you do at a brunch?” Shane asked, feeling dumb. “I mean, is it fucking breakfast or lunch?”

William laughed. “You sit quietly and try not to break anything, while everyone my mom knows comes by and tuts over you.” He took a drink, shaking his head. “Mom’s on like, every fucking
charity society known to god.”

“Oh,” said Shane. “You’re talking about hell.”

“Fuck yeah it’s hell. Last week it was save the penguins. Week before that, we were saving Gotoro orphans. Who knows what it will be this week.” He tossed his empty, going for a second. “I wanna know,” he said, cracking it open, “when it’s gonna be Save the William from Tittering Morons and Stupid-Ass Fruit Drinks.”

Shane almost spit out his beer.

“Used to think a normal family would’ve been nice,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “But glad as shit I don’t have to deal with stuff like that.”

“Yeah?” William said, voice curious. “You got Marnie. She’s pretty normal.”

Shane stopped laughing.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Marnie’s good. Dunno why I said that.” He tossed his empty too, the glass clanging hollow in the metal bucket.

The noise sent a wave of irritation down his spine.

For a moment, Shane saw all the times after first moving into the ranch when he’d carefully hidden his whiskey bottles in the trash. Burying them under the top layer of garbage so they wouldn’t be seen. Cushioning them with plastic bags or paper towels, so they wouldn’t make noise if dropped to the tile when changing the bag.

Yet his dumb ass hadn’t fooled Marnie. She wasn’t fucking blind. Not six months had gone by when he caught her filling a box with empty jars—spaghetti sauce, salsa, jam—and right alongside them, the fifth of Jack he’d tried to dispose of the night before.

“Pierre recycles glass now,” she’d said, not looking at him, nesting in the final jar. “Your bottles can go in the bin under the sink.”

Which meant Shane started storing empties in his spare drawers or under the bed, until collecting enough that it was worth making a stealthy trip to dump them off. Which was just a fucking farce anyway—both pretending they didn’t know that the other person knew.

“She can be a fucking pain though,” he added.

William shook his head. “Fuckin’ straight women, man,” he said, as if this had been a long-standing complaint in his life.

Shane took a long drink, staring moodily across the fields.

More like, fuckin’ ungrateful piece of shit.

What was he doing, shit-talking his aunt to his boss? Marnie was a saint. Shane was the one who’d crashed into her life with a backpack full of issues, stuffed so tight that when it unzipped they exploded all over her life. So he had to put up with her nosiness. Boo-fucking-hoo. It was her fucking house. It was her free time being stolen to take care of his damn kid, while he worked and drank and passed out early with a bottle at his side.

“So,” William said, waving a hand. “She’s a pain, you don’t have a normal family. Sorry I
interrupted. Continue.”

Shane stared down the neck of his beer, irritated with himself for even bringing it up.

“Marnie’s good,” he said darkly. “Puts up with a lot from my dumb ass.”

“Yeah?” said William. “Like what?”

Of course William wasn’t about to let it go.

Why couldn’t this guy be like most people, and just keep talking about himself?

“Forget it,” he snapped. “Didn’t mean to start down some horseshit memory lane.”

William frowned. He leaned forward, elbows rested on his knees, bottle between his fingers.

“Didn’t mean to poke a sore spot, man,” he said, looking into the beer and swirling it.

 Fuck yeah it’s a sore spot.

“Not a sore spot,” Shane argued. “But just because we’re sitting down with a few beers doesn’t mean we have to bond over shit.”

The words were a boomerang. They sailed out of his mouth and then flew right back, socking him in the stomach.

What was his problem? Like he’d shown up today with the gift of beer in one hand and a shotgun in the other, shooting up the place. And not just any place. His fucking workplace. Snapping at William, his boss, who’d done nothing to deserve Shane’s ire and could probably fire him for being a bad drinking buddy if he wanted to.

Shane drank the remainder of his beer, irritation with himself ramping. When it was empty he forced a look at William, unsure what to expect.

He was glaring at Shane, his tattooed fist clenched around the neck of the bottle. “Well at the rate you’re going, sweetheart,” he said coolly, “we really don’t have to bond at all.”

Shane grunted. He chucked his bottle in the bucket with a bang, then grabbed a fresh beer and stood up, stalking across the porch as he cracked it open.

William tossed his own empty in the bucket. “Don’t bite my head off because you can’t keep your shit straight, man.”

Shane froze.

His heart slammed in his chest as he saw the image again—eyes, searing into him like a branding iron at the bar. Those same eyes, looking softly between a lock of fallen hair on the porch.

His heart slammed harder.

“Been fucking waiting to say that one, yeah?” He spun, stomping down the steps and into the yard, where he tipped his head back and drained the full beer in one pulsing swallow.

Slow down. What the fuck are you doing? Slow down, just breathe, you’re throwing a fucking tantrum, what the fuck is wrong with—

William paced to the other side of the porch. He took several long, hard swigs, glowering at Shane
over the bottle. When it was empty he set it on the railing, eyes still pinning him down. In a very, very soft voice he said, “Go on home, Daniels. I’m not doing this with you today.”

Adrenaline raced through Shane like wildfire.

The gall—the fucking *gall* of this asshole’s calm. Like he wasn’t thinking the *exact same shit* as Shane right now; like he wasn’t thinking how much they should end this week in another fucking beatdown. The soreness of the last fight was long gone and something in Shane—something clearly fucking demented—needed to feel it again.

“Yeah?” he taunted, emboldened by his own need. “I know you’re not scared, asshole! So what the fuck is it?”

William slammed both his hands on the railing.

“MAYBE, Sadsack,” he boomed, “I promised your fucking aunt that I wouldn’t put you in the hospital, because apparently that fucks with your goddaughter. But you wanna go, baby boy? We can fucking *dance!*”

The words rang through the silent afternoon.

Shane’s heart continued to race, the deep voice echoing in his ears.

*Jas.*

The one person whose name could cut through his bullshit.

Shane strode several steps forward, and with a wind-up from his gridball days, pulled back his arm and sent the empty bottle sailing into a tree trunk twenty yards away.

It hit dead center and shattered.

He stalked across the farm, refusing to look back at William, knowing if he did he’d lose control just like last time. And it was *that* particular fucking knowledge that did it. Knowing what real intensity tasted like—having it smashed into the side of his face until he tasted its blood. Shane knew it, and William did too. And now they sat around on porch chairs drinking beer after an honest day’s work, chatting mildly about mild things, pretending they didn’t.

He was halfway across the field when William’s voice boomed again.

“I BETTER SEE YOU MONDAY AT SIX!”

Shane flipped him the bird without looking back, then jammed his hands in his pockets.

It wasn’t enough to pretend they hadn’t, for one violent moment, been really fucking alive together.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!

So…our current update schedule has been pretty brutal. Chapters are getting longer,
and life has, unfortunately, caught up to the writers. After this week we’ll be swapping our weekly releases for every other Saturday. That said? Please read with confidence! This story is planned/drafted in extreme detail, and updates (though longer between) will absolutely remain regular.

In the meantime, follow us on our tumblr for extras, or join our discord server! It’s a place for our readers to chat about Star Burst and just hang out in general. We’re all really friendly!

As always, we love to hear from you.

Star Burst will update on Saturday May 26, between 2-4pm PST.
William had been in plenty of stupid fucking fights when he was growing up. Stupid fights that never ended with more than a fleeting sense of victory or wound-licking failure.

Victory tasted like copper pennies in his nose and throat.

His earliest memory was sitting sullenly on the corner of the tub with his mom kneeling in front of him. She wore a white skirt suit, her hair pulled up in pearl combs. There was an alcohol-soaked cotton ball between manicured nails, her soothing voice whispering, “Words, son, words are better than fists,” as she dabbed a wound he’d gotten over his eye.

Fast-forward to twenty-odd years later. He was the winner of a word fight, and it felt like all he’d accomplished was swallowing a hive full of bees. It buzzed in his stomach as he drank a six pack of his newest brew. It rolled under his skin as he milked the cows, and hauled the weekend milk into the dairy. The bees tingled as he slammed buckets and smashed doors behind him. They were a droning roar in his ears as he collected eggs. When Hellfire bit him he felt their stingers, and he glared at the bird’s beady eyes as she clucked and flapped her wings.

The frustration drove him to grab a chainsaw and load his four-wheeler. From nine to six, William murdered trees.

The hum of the chainsaw drowned out the buzzing in his ears. He sliced branches, splinters flying as he let his weapon of war bite into the wood. Sap and pollen filled the air, coating his hair and beard, covering his shirt to create an itchy layer of wood chips.

No matter how many chops he made, no matter how loud the buzzing in his head, none of it drowned out Shane’s stupid fucking voice.

Just because we’re sitting down with a few beers doesn’t mean we have to bond.


Was that all they were doing?

Bonding?

Shane had reached his hand out to touch those scars. William hadn’t asked him to understand the
bullshit in his life. And hell, he’d said no, hadn’t he? Scrambling away that day...the panic so clear in his face when William had told him he might do something stupid.

Stupid, like reach for more than any employer had a right to ask of his employee.

Did Shane just want to hang out and drink? Maybe that’s why he’d brought the damn beer—so he didn’t feel guilty about drinking all of William’s. Maybe that’s all William was. All any of this was. A paycheck. Beer. A break away from people.

Nothing real.

His chainsaw slowed and he panted, realizing the shadows were getting long. He leaned back on the ladder, holding it with one hand, then kicked the machine off and threw it to the ground.

In the past the movement might’ve made him sore, but now it sent screaming pain through his spine from the overextension. Shouting, he clung to the ladder.

He took a deep breath in.

Exhaled.

Then, moving like an old goddamned man, he climbed down and looked at the carnage of felled trees.

It hurt to move, but he couldn’t stand there and rot, now could he?

He limped to his four-wheeler. Around him the wind kicked up and he could smell moisture in the air, the clouds starting to darken to a murky gray.

I know you’re not scared, asshole! So what the fuck is it?

What was it, William? What was it that stopped you? Were you afraid?

Did you know that if you pinned him again you’d do something fucking stupid, you hungry psycho?

Shut up.

William missed the bees. They didn’t talk to him about this bullshit.

He looked at the logs. He’d have to get them before the storm hit or they’d rot, and he wouldn’t have time before going to Ma’s tomorrow.

If he went to Ma’s.

Groaning, he rolled and loaded each one into the back of the wagon, stacking the heavy chunks while his spine creaked and throbbed. There was relief in the pain. Worrying about his back distracted him from how Shane had trembled, practically asking for one more taste of violence.

He weighed his own deferred need as he started the ATV. Just because he’d managed not to throw a punch yesterday, did not mean his head was screwed on tight enough to keep from introducing a new dance step tomorrow. He’d call it the Brunch Room Blitz. The signature move would be smashing the crystal punch bowl into twenty thousand pieces. The papers would write it up as an exclusive event, only offered by registered members of the Fuckwit Society.

The jostling of the four wheeler was agony, but he managed to get the machine parked. It was dark
by the time he limped to his house, forced to stop several times to lean on fence posts. The goal was simple: get inside so he didn’t pass out in the yard.

As he neared the porch something crunched under his boot. Shards of broken glass, scattered under a tree. A pang hit him.

With a curse he kicked the pieces to the side. He’d have to get a damn broom out here to clean it up. Later. When his back wasn’t being a twisted piece of shit.

A shame rest and a shower wouldn’t untwist his head.

Marnie was the one bright light of the Daniels family.

When Shane looked down the line of crap humans littering his family tree, disguised as adults, the difference was stark. For all the headaches she gave him through her cheerful, chatterbox ways—all the moments she could ‘be a fucking pain,’ as he’d so graciously told William—Shane knew Marnie Daniels was good. Truly good. She refused to be dragged down by her blood.

Unlike Shane, who was just as shit as his lineage.

Saturday morning he made an entire pot of coffee and dumped it in a massive thermos, along with a generous helping of whiskey—enough to carry him through the whole morning and afternoon. That was how he survived his weekends.

Usually.

Saturday was different.

It’d started at ten that morning. The coop was cleaned, the horses out grazing in the pasture, and Shane had just started sweeping stalls when Marnie bustled into the stable.

“Shane,” she’d said nervously. “The radar just showed a nasty storm coming in tonight.”

“Got it,” he’d answered, not looking up.

“We need that huge feed order ready for Monday afternoon, and if the hay isn’t off the fields by tonight it’ll be ruined. I tried calling Hunter but he never picks up on the weekend. Could you—would you, please, handle that today?”

Shane could do a lot of chores drunk, but driving the tractor was not one of them. Collecting hay meant cutting himself off now while he barely had a buzz. He’d wanted to say no. Wanted to tell her the storm was not his fucking fault, and he wasn’t about to let it interrupt his day-drinking.

Except that would be biting her head off, just like last night.

He’d grunted in affirmation.

“Thank you,” she’d said softly, then paused to add, “I truly hope you know how much I appreciate all you do.”

After she’d left the stable, Shane stared at the door for a long time.
The large fields were covered in a fluffy layer of pale gold, the cut hay having dried in the sun over the last three days. Shane spent hours gathering it, Marnie’s decrepit old baler hooked up to the tractor, spitting out messy bundles that would have to be tightened and retied before being shipped.

He tried not to think how much it would piss William off, dealing with such a shoddy baler. The Bowery ran like a well-oiled machine. By comparison, the ranch barely chugged along.

Once done, the trailer parked in the storage garage, he’d grabbed gloves, twine, scissors, and his thermos from the stable. The coffee was cold, but it was a fucking waste to dump that much whiskey, and Shane had downed far worse things in his life. He’d spent the next few hours drinking, tightening loose bales, and repacking the ones that had busted open during the drive.

It was late afternoon when the air became damp, and suppertime when the first clouds rolled in.

The wood of the trailer creaked and sighed under Shane’s boots. He cut a line of twine, slipped it around a rectangle of hay, and glanced out the window as he jerked it tight.

The clouds were stormy and grey, creeping over the setting sun.

“Shane?”

Marnie stood in the entrance of the storage barn, fingers on the doorframe. Her auburn hair was extra frizzy, another reminder of the coming rain.

“You skipped dinner last night and lunch today. Please come in for a decent meal? I’ve made a casserole, and Jas helped me bake cookies this afternoon.”

Shane looked down and yanked another cord of twine. “Still got a lot to do.”

“But you’ve been working so hard today…” She sounded nervous and hesitant again.

Asshole. Putting her on edge.

He tied a knot. “Thanks,” he said, in a softer tone. “But I’m good.”

She didn’t leave, and Shane felt her eyes on him as he stacked three more bales to the side. The hair on the back of his neck raised, and he was unsure whether from her gaze, or just the electricity in the stormy air.

“Something else?” he asked, shoving a fourth bale into place.

Another hesitation. “I just—I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Yep.” He lifted a fifth bale. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

She took a few steps inside, standing next to the long table that lined one wall of the barn. Her hand brushed over it, dusting off a snowy layer of hay particles that had floated down.

“Your first week on the new job,” she said. “It went well?”

Oh, yeah. I got this great new boss, and decided to impress him by throwing a fucking tantrum on his porch yesterday. It went swell.

“Yup.”

Marnie leaned against the table, crossing her arms and watching him. It wasn’t an angry cross;
merely one that said she was settling in for a conversation.

Great.

“Bill must appreciate it,” she continued, “having an employee who already knows so much of the business.”

Shane dropped a bale of hay. “He goes by William,” he said quietly, adjusting it on the stack.

“He does?” It was apparently not what she expected to hear. “You mean to tell me I’ve been calling him wrong all these years?”

“Gus started the Bill thing. He prefers William.”

He ignored the odd feeling that rolled through his stomach at saying William’s name aloud to his aunt. He also ignored the voice that whispered, *You’re drunk and saying things you wouldn’t say sober.*

“Heavens,” Marnie said. “That’s embarrassing. Well, Farmer William it is then.” Another pause. “But you two get on well? I mean, I know it was a one-off…but considering…”

“That we kicked the crap out of each other?” Shane said, testy. “Yeah, we get on fine. Really made things level and shit, and now we’re best friends.”

“Shane—”

“Marnie, I swear. I work, he’s happy, I leave. End of story.”

“Alright” she said, just as testy, raising her hands in mock surrender. “Excuse *me* for asking, I won’t make that mistake again. Now tell me—will you come in for supper? Or would that be too intrusive? I can always bring it out here instead. You can eat with the cows, use one of the hay bales as a table. Perhaps this as a fork?”

She grabbed a three-pronged garden tool from a canister, holding it up.

Shane grunted as he yanked another cord tight. “Yeah, right. Use one as a table, and watch the food end up on my lap when it falls the fuck apart.”

He threw the bale on the stack with too much force—and seconds later Marnie followed suit with the tool, chucking it back in its tin. Shane flinched as metal-on-metal rang through the barn.

“Because it’s so simple,” she shot, “to go buy a new baler. I’ll cut a few items off the grocery list next week, shall I? Pick one up with the saved pennies?”

She crossed her arms again, anger and hurt in her tearful eyes.

Shane paused with the bale he’d just stacked, leaning into it with his weight against his forearms. *You. Fucking. Jackass.*

“Sorry,” he muttered.

For a moment nothing but damp silence hung in the air. It was darker than when Marnie had come in, the sky now blanketed in grey clouds.

“Yes, well, me too,” she whispered. “Because it’s either the horses or a baler this year, and I’ll
give you one guess which of those the ranch can survive without.”

He lifted his head. Even in his partially drunken state, this caught Shane off guard. William had been surprised to learn Marnie was downsizing her herd, but Shane knew losing the cows would be nothing compared to the horses.

She once told him she’d lived and breathed them as a girl. That she’d checked out stacks of horse books and equestrian magazines from the library, and dreamed how one day she’d grow up to have her own. And with that same quiet, resilient strength that had kept her out of the clutches of hereditary alcoholism, she’d made her dream a reality—moved to the country in her thirties, and spent all her hard-earned savings on a ranch. And horses. Horses she groomed and talked to and loved. Horses that she’d ridden daily, until hurting her back the previous year.

And now if Shane was hearing her properly, she was going to sell them.

It made sense; the cows brought in regular money. The horses existed purely for her company and pleasure. And for Jas, who loved them just as much. Who, like a young Marnie, checked out talking horse stories from the library, and who begged Shane to take her riding every weekend.

He glanced out the window to the pasture, where the four horses still roamed beneath the gathering clouds.

“You have to?” he said quietly.

She rubbed the corner of her eye with a sleeve. Her anger was gone, leaving only a sad, weary woman in front of him. “I’m well aware of how much worse that baler has gotten, Shane,” she said. “I know it won’t last another season.”

Shane knew the underlying message: if they couldn’t fill feed orders, they might as well board up the whole damn ranch.

He nodded.

She wiped her eyes again, gave a sniff, then stood up straighter. “So,” she said, strengthening her voice. “Supper?”

Shane shook his head. “Gotta finish up. I’ll eat later.”

“Yes, I figured.”

There wasn’t any heat in the words. She spoke with resigned understanding; her nephew was no stranger to avoiding meals when he had an excuse. She simply gave the table a few pats of her hand and turned to walk out of the barn.

“You’ll bring the horses in?” she asked, pausing in the doorway.

“Yeah.”

She nodded and left.

Once her figure had grown small in the distance, Shane grabbed his thermos and swigged the rest of the cold coffee and whiskey, shuddering as it went down. The damp air was growing chilly, and goosebumps crept up his arms and under the sleeves of his t-shirt.

His head swam. It swam with the refresher of booze, and the whole conversation that had just
happened. It swam with memories of last night—shouting at William, snapping at Marnie, ignoring Jas. It swam with the weight of realizing how much worse Marnie’s finances were than he’d thought, and how if he cut back on drinking, he could set aside enough money to make a difference.

Swam with the knowledge of how un-fucking-likely that was to ever happen.

He jumped off the trailer and dug in one of the toolboxes for the electronic moisture tester. Even though the hay was bone-dry when he’d collected it, this bought him a little more time, and he went bale by bale to get a beeping read on each one.

A few minutes later, thunder rumbled low in the distance.

“Shit,” Shane muttered. He looked out the window, where the grey sky was growing black.

Marnie had mentioned the rain wasn’t to hit till after midnight, but with thunder it was dangerous to leave the horses out any longer. He chucked his tools into the bin on the table, grabbed his thermos, and closed up the barn. The hay was safe and dry till Monday, and Hunter could deal with whatever was left.

The horse round-up went fast. For three of them, at least. Daisy did not like storms. The thunder had spooked her, as Shane knew it would the moment it hit. He managed to snag the harness over her head, and attempted to coax her restless, back-stepping hooves forward.

“C’mon, Daisy Dukes,” he murmured, using Jas’s favorite nickname for the chestnut horse. “Sooner you’re inside, better you’ll feel.”

Daisy jerked her snout as if looking for thunder behind them, her tail giving a few nervous flicks. It took several minutes of stop-and-start before Shane got her into a steady walk at his side.

He patted her neck. “Good girl.”

Once in the stable, the horses tucked safely—and in Daisy’s case, anxiously—into their stalls, Shane paused and looked around, a slow, sinking feeling in his heart. He closed his eyes and wished he could just sleep out here.

Well, you never did finish cleaning this morning.

That was right. The stables had been abandoned when Marnie asked him to collect the hay. And it’d be irresponsible not to finish, wouldn’t it? He just had to brave his family for a quick but necessary stop inside, and then he could easily make the chores stretch until bedtime.

Ignoring Jas a second night in a row was shitty, but he had no fucking energy for anyone right now.

When he entered the kitchen she was at the table, art supplies out, markers and crayons scattered in a rainbow around a paper canvas. She looked up.

“Uncle Shane, are you done with work?” Her voice was hopeful. “Can we play a game tonight?”

“Maybe tomorrow, kid,” he said quietly, washing his hands while his eyes adjusted to the bright room.

She popped a cap off a red marker and sighed, grumpy. “It’s always tomorrow.”
He cut himself a piece of the dinner casserole and shoved it in the microwave, listening to the sound of her furious marker on the page as the timer ticked down. “Where’s Aunt Marnie?”

Jas didn’t look up. “In the shower.”

“Why don’t you see if she wants to play a game?”

“Because,” she said, now uncapping a yellow marker. “She won’t play video games.”

Fair enough. Marnie liked cards. Old Maid, Go Fish, Crazy 8s. It was Shane who played the console with her. Shane who let her trample his ass on the gridball field, and set off remote-control nukes in her favorite shooter.

The microwave beeped and he pulled out his food. “Look,” he said, grabbing a fork that wasn’t a garden tool. “Tomorrow we’ll play something together. Promise.”

He was almost out of the kitchen when he heard her mutter, “It’s always promise.”

Like a papercut—sharp and precise.

Shane forced his mind from the stinging sensation and went to his room. From the back of his closet he dug out a heavy fall jacket. He tucked the half-full bottle from his sock drawer into its zipper liner, then scarfed down the casserole before heading back to the kitchen.

Jas’s art supplies were abandoned. She must’ve gone to her room.

The whiskey sloshed in his pocket as he walked outside. He focused on the sound, imagining moments from now when it would warm his throat and smooth the sting of that papercut.

*Selfish dick.*

Yeah, well, maybe once he was drunk his brain could tell him something he didn’t already fucking know.

Shane spent his whole evening with the horses. One by one he led them into the spare stall so he could clean, all the while draining shots from the whiskey and trying to keep his mind off anything outside the stable walls. He grew drunker and drunker, until—in the middle of sweeping—he stumbled, at the last second catching himself on the wide broom.

He pressed it into the floor to keep steady, staring down at its rectangular bristles and swaying side to side.

He was a piece of shit, he realized, with sudden profound clarity. He was a piece of shit, wrapped *inside* of a piece of shit, and topped off with—yep, that was right—another piece of fucking shit.

A clap of thunder hit. Shane jerked up just as Daisy gave a whinny, prancing backward, her eyes shiny and terrified.

He set aside the broom and went over to her.

“Won’t leave you, girl,” he slurred, rubbing one hand under her chin, the other on the side of her nose. “I’ll stay here tonight, if you’re scared.”

And Shane did. Maybe he was a selfish dick to people, but he could at least do right by the horses. He spent the rest of the night speaking soothing and increasingly thick words, sitting on the bench with one of the stable blankets pulled over his legs.
The rain came just after midnight. It pounded hard on the roof, and when Shane leaned his head back against the stall, its rhythm lulled him to sleep.

William could swear he smelled mud. He thought, for a moment, something crawled and bit him. Something small. And there was pain...so much pain.

Thunder slammed through the house like a bowling ball knocking down pins in an echo chamber.

His eyes opened.

Movies and television shows always made waking from a nightmare look dramatic. Sitting up in bed. Panting like you’d been running a mile rather than laying on your back for hours. William, still with his head on the pillow, tried to remember what he’d been dreaming of. Horrible flashbacks never occurred more than once or twice a year; times like this, he’d only get the vague impression of wetness. Of discomfort. Of heat.

He pushed up on an elbow, rubbing his face, running a hand down his beard. He realized that he’d sweat through his shirt, shorts and sheets.

Feline purring cut through the disorientation. Ingrid, his ungrateful and often recalcitrant cat, was curled in a hot little ball on his lap, her paws kneading through the sheets, sharp claws digging into his thigh in protest of his movement.

He relaxed, the sound of her purr louder than the bees he’d had in his ears. Louder than the half-remembered dream, a dream he already couldn’t fully touch. Louder than the storm that raged outside. He leaned back and closed his eyes, focused on petting the cat, her soft fur anchoring him to the present.

For a half hour he tried to doze, but his sheets had become clammy. Ingrid began to insistently walk up and down the mattress, slamming her shoulders against him, demanding food. William grumbled but got out of bed, stripping himself and, much to Ingrid’s protest, the sheets as well.

“They’re wet,” he told her, tossing the whole sweat-soaked bundle into a basket. “C’mon Ingrid, have some standards here.”

She responded by grooming her inner thigh, one leg up over her head.

William changed clothes, moving stiffly. His back was pounding, and his head kept tempo, pulsing on the downbeat—a regular concert of aches.

Ingrid forgave his bed-making after he poured crunchy cat food into her dish. While she ate, he picked up the white plastic handset he’d inherited from Pops. He dialed his parent’s house number by memory while rubbing through the stiffness of his back, eyes on the dark sky outside. The sun was completely hidden in clouds. A grim haze lingered over the farm, a light, steady rain falling, though thankfully the thunder was soft and distant. The fiercest part of the storm had moved east.

“William?”

“Morning Ma,” he said, watching as Ingrid ate.
“It’s six am,” she said.

“Yup. Wanted to give you a heads up that I’m staying home today.”

She was silent so William waited her out. She expected him to explain, but then again, she was used to disappointment. He won the game of silence-chicken less than thirty seconds later, when she let out a cloud of static against his ear.

“Well for heaven’s sake, why not?”

“It’s raining today. Don’t wanna make the drive in the wet.”

“Your father could come and get you.”

“Ma. Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a two hour drive. Look, I’m not coming today but I’ll be back up next week.”

“Are you alright?”

He hesitated. The question was soft. Intent. He didn’t want to lie to her. She had a way of figuring out the blatant falsehoods. Yet what was he going to say?

_Sorry Ma, I’m put out that the guy I hired doesn’t want to ‘bond’ with me, even though I’m sure he’s lying to us both. Also, was a moron and threw my back out yesterday. And the peanut on the shit sandwich is that this fucking weather makes me want to sleep for one hundred years. So yeah, not feeling like spending time with you and your posse of petty bitches today. Ta._

“Feel fine,” he said, trying to infuse a smile into his voice. “Just...not up to the drive.”

If sighs were neon signs, the one she gusted out would’ve flashed dissatisfaction.

“Son,” she began, and William’s shoulders tightened at the familiar lecture in her tone.


He hung up.

She rang back immediately. Sliding his finger down, he snapped the ringer off. It was a fantastic feature.

He turned away from the silent phone and went outside to face the rain.

Shane woke with a cold body, stiff shoulders, and a kink in his neck.

Why was it so cold?

Why was it so _hard_?

Why wasn’t he on a pillow?

He opened his eyes to see arched rafters high above him.
Groaning, he turned over—and promptly rolled off the bench he’d been sleeping on, landing with a thud on the stable floor.

“Godfucking…”

Clearly you made some genius decisions last night.

Once the shock had passed he pushed himself up, noticing the empty fifth of whiskey on the ground. He rubbed a hand over his face. Ignoring his pounding head, he checked the watch on his inner wrist.

6:42 am.

The horses were at standing rest. It was still dark outside, a steady rain pounding on the roof. Shane closed his eyes, listening to the wet patter. He weighed the risk of going inside for coffee. Marnie milked the cows every day at six, but she was often in and out of the house during that period, and he didn’t particularly care to explain that he’d slept with the horses.

His need for coffee won.

With the empty bottle tucked into his jacket, Shane trudged out of the stable. He was in luck; the light to the cow barn was on, and walking through the rain he saw a silhouette move past one of its windows. Marnie was probably unhooking the cows from the milking machines now. He dropped his bottle in the recycling bin next to the house and went inside, where his luck continued, a pot of coffee already made and waiting in the carafe. He quickly poured himself a mug, went to his room to drop the usual wake-me-up inside, and ducked back out to the coop before anyone saw him.

Much as Shane didn’t love mornings, and much as he’d woken every day for the last five years with a hangover…he had to admit that mornings on the ranch were better than any he’d had in the city. The chicken coop, which started as one of his daily chores, had quickly turned into an escape. It was a short, blissful time each morning that Shane spent with animals who didn’t care how much he drank, or how crappy he treated the people around him.

The chickens only knew he was the guy who gave them food, and they seemed to fucking like him for it.

He stepped into the coop and flipped on the light, met with the bright smell of hay, barn wood, and feathers. The flock of birds immediately strutted toward him, clucking louder, and much as it should’ve grated on Shane’s headache he found it soothing.

Noises helped. The patter of rain, the clucking and shuffling. They massaged away some of the self-loathing thoughts.

The earthy smell was a comfort too. He remembered visiting the ranch in the summer as a boy, when he’d made the trip with his dad in their rusty black truck. The moment they pulled down Marnie’s road, Corey Daniels’ lip would curl and he’d make some snide comment about manure. But Shane had always liked that part of the countryside. They were smells associated with the couple of weeks each summer when he didn’t have to walk on eggshells for once. They were smells of relief; of waking up to breakfast and “Good morning, Shane!” instead of a thwap on the head with a newspaper and a growl of, “You miss the bus and your sorry ass is walking to school, you hear me?!”

These days, it was Shane doing the grunting. Shane being the abusive dickhead who made his
family walk on eggshells.

Shells created from the same eggs that made him breakfast, no less.

One of the chickens stepped on his boot, knocking into his shin. Charlie. Shane always knew Charlie by the little nick on her red comb, and the way she pushed to the front of the crowd. He bent over, offering his hand, and she nudged into it the way a dog or cat might.

“You just want food,” he said softly, scratching her. “But at least I can’t fuck that up.”

He went to the shelves with the feed, then paused, staring at the bag. Turning back around, he looked at the coop.

It was clean, or at least as clean as it could be first thing in the morning. The birds were healthy, the nesting boxes full of eggs to be collected. The coop was the one thing in his dumb life he’d ever taken pride in, but now, having worked on the farm, Shane realized how *homely* it looked.

Part of that was unavoidable. William’s coop was newer, the wood fresh and the beams bright. Short of telling Marnie to rebuild with non-existent funds, the shabbiness couldn’t be helped. But there were other things; things he’d not noticed until this week.

Though he’d bought them used from an auction, William’s feeders were clean and uniform. Marnie’s had been collected over the years as her flock grew, and were a ragtag bunch of shapes and sizes. While they didn’t harm the chickens, they didn’t utilize the space well either. Not like William’s, perfectly lining one side of his coop.

It was poorly organized here too. Marnie’s ledgers and logbooks were in a messy pile in a crate, and the tools and cleaning supplies were thrown haphazardly on the shelves in a way that would’ve made William’s eye twitch.

Shane fed the birds. Refreshed the wood shavings on the floor. Grabbed a bunch of egg cartons and clean rags, and went to the nesting boxes. Wiping each egg with a cloth, his focus remained critical. There was space along the back of the coop, he realized. Room for a shelf to run perpendicular to the nesting boxes, so the cartons could be stacked conveniently until the job was done. He could install hooks for the logbooks, and to hang bags for the clean and dirty rags.

He spent two extra hours in the coop that morning, sorting tools, rearranging supplies, stacking crates. He organized everything as much as possible, and thought about his paychecks.

Being a jerk to Marnie was one thing. Doing nothing to apologize was another.

No, he couldn’t afford a new baler on the spot. He couldn’t yet hand her a check that would turn their fortunes around. But he *was* going to be making time-and-a-half what he’d made at JojaMart. He’d even questioned the amount, when William first brought it up—but his boss had simply raised a brow, saying “Man’s work? Man’s pay,” and had refused to discuss it further.

Maybe he could ask William to keep an ear out for more auctions. Find Marnie some good deals, stuff that was affordable.

*Except you were a jerk to William too. Bet he can’t fucking wait to jump at a chance to help you.*

Was there anyone in his life he wasn’t a jerk to?

William, check.
Marnie, check.

Lewis, double check, considering Shane had decided two years ago not to even give him a chance.

Jas, triple check. Because she had the least understanding of why he was such a douche all the time.

Shane went back to the house before noon. He shoveled down some of last night’s casserole, then showered off the overnight filth. Once clean and in fresh clothes he walked to Jas’s room.

The door was open. She was inside, sitting on the floor and playing with her dollhouse, her hair in neat pigtails that Marnie had clearly done.

Shane rapped his knuckles on the doorframe and she looked up.

“You ready for that game?” he asked.

She gazed at him, skeptical. “Right now?”

He paused. “Only if you ate lunch already.”

“Aunt Marnie made me peanut butter and banana,” she said, lowering her doll.

_of course she did. Because she’s actually a decent thoughtful human being who takes care of the people she loves._

“Then yes,” Shane said. “Right now.”

The dolls were abandoned in an instant as Jas jumped to her feet. Stopping in front of him, she looked up with glowing eyes.

“Last one there’s a loser,” she said, then tagged him.

She tried to race off, cackling, but Shane knew this game and snagged her around the waist at the last second. He lifted her off her feet and tossed her over his shoulder, carrying her to his room like a sack of potatoes while she squealed injustice.

Today he’d make it better at home, and tomorrow he’d make it better on the farm.

When William had something to focus on, he could ignore the wet. If he had a reason to put one foot in front of the other, it wasn’t different from marching patrol. While staring at eggs and writing numbers down in little boxes, he could ignore the way the damp rubbed him. Hosing down floors and laying out fresh straw staved off flashbacks. When inspecting cows, he wasn’t thinking about the smell of his own fear-sweat, or how the rain drummed on the roof.

The fact was, rainy days happened, and for a farmer they meant good crops and a lower water bill. Focusing on the necessary work got him through the unpleasant haze, and William used every single ounce he had left to get his girls milked, the eggs collected, and all creatures fed sans mental breakdown. When done he went inside and stripped off his wet clothes for a second time that morning, then dug out more beer from his fridge.
Today was a good day to be drunk.

He decided to play a game. Every time his traitorous brain started to remind him of something inappropriate, he drank. Whenever he felt frustrated about said forbidden topic, he drank. When he began to regret his decisions, both in the last few weeks and in the last few months, he drank some more. One by one, he dropped brown bottles into the glass bucket, until he had a little army of dead soldiers. Hour by hour, the tightness in his joints loosened and the focus in his head blurred.

After his last beer he wandered around his empty house, swaying from door to door. He stopped in the guest suite, flicking on the lights and glaring at the beautiful, tastefully decorated space. The double bed had a grey and blue blanket, and the neutral window curtains were tied back to reveal dark skies. He walked in—nearly tripping over the fancy-ass rug his mom had bought to ‘pull the room together’—and snapped them closed.

The bathroom was next, but it was just as impersonal as the guest room; another space he’d let his mother loose in after expanding the house. He returned to the kitchen instead and poured a glass of water, and after shutting off the lights took it into his office where he sank into a chair and tried to work.

His vision was so blurred he slammed the ledger books closed.

Admitting defeat, he stumbled to bed and passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He’d barely closed his eyes when the alarm ripped through him like a knife—his head throbbing in time with the ‘beep beep beep’.

Groaning, he turned it off.

The daily aches were compounded by a hangover. It took twice as long to get ready; twice as long for his body to warm and stretch. He waited while the coffee brewed, and after it was poured stared into his mug as if the dark brew could give him some answers. Only he wasn’t sure of his questions, and one long swallow later, he stepped outside to meet the day.

He froze in place at the sight that greeted him.

Shane was there, picking up the glass he’d smashed on Friday afternoon. He didn’t look up, quietly gathering the broken brown pieces.

Each one felt like a shard pulled out of William’s chest. He couldn’t draw his eyes away as Shane crossed over to the porch, stopped at the empties bucket, and dumped the glass into the bottom. The sound was loud in the still early morning, those little pieces tinkling in the metal pail and ringing like a clarion bell to clear the air between them.

He raised his eyes and William stared back.

I’m sorry.

There was no more blatant way Shane could have said it.

William felt the tightness un-knot in his chest with the silent apology. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out the good gloves he usually used, and tossed them over.

Forgiven.

Shane caught them, as if by accepting them he was also accepting the forgiveness. William’s neck
and shoulders relaxed.

“I’ll get the south barn,” he said. “You can start at the coops.”

Shane nodded and silently headed out.

William went to the milking barns. When he stepped inside, he turned on the radio and let country music play into the silence.

It was a few hours later when the attack hit.

William had been pushing fertilizer in a wheelbarrow, mind on the melon patches. A reading taken on the soil that morning showed that the nutrient level was low. When he walked under a tree, heavy with rain from the night before, the birds in the branches launched themselves into the air, shaking the leaves so hard a burst of water fell right over his head.

It was so sudden, the rustle of the tree, the surprise of the wetness, the shock of the cold.

He lost his grip on the wheelbarrow, jerking his head up and staring into the empty branches, for a moment—just the shortest of moments—seeing those hateful Gotoro faces as they dropped…

Nothing.

Because nothing was there.

William’s heart raced.

His shirt was soaked, the cloying moisture choking him. As if splashed with acid, he ripped it off, and trembling despite the warmth of the summer morning, flung it into the tree.

It should have been worse yesterday, with the constant rain, the thunder and lightning. Today was sunny. But the sudden surprise was too much like that day.

Sucking in air, vainly attempting to ground himself, he looked up.

Tree.

Not jungle tree. Just a regular tree.

*Pull it together. You are losing your shit over a bit of water.*

He hauled the wheelbarrow up and shoved it ruthlessly towards his goal. If he just kept working, he’d be fine.

And he did keep working, mixing soil, checking the plants. After several hours of hot sun to dry up any residual moisture, William knew he was back on saner ground. It was almost lunch time, and —fertilizer supply exhausted—he turned back to the house, needing to clean up and get dry clothes.

He was at the porch before he saw, folded neatly on the top step, the grey t-shirt he’d flung on the ground.
William stared at it, then glanced at the east side where Shane was working the morning’s dairy haul. He couldn’t see him, just hear the sound of the pasteurizing machine as Shane monitored the milk’s process from raw to regulation.

Swallowing, he looked back down at the square of fabric.

What was this fucker’s deal? He was a scared rabbit if you so much as winked at him. Yet picking up the glass…folding his shirts…how the fuck was William supposed to ignore this attraction if he was going to be so fucking sweet and thoughtful all the time?

He snatched the shirt up and went inside.

*He’s not playing fair,* William thought darkly as he dumped it into a hamper. He pulled a fresh one out and put it on. *I’m trying to make things freaking professional, but if he keeps acting this way…*

What way? Like a decent fucking person?

*Shut up.*

He glared at himself in the mirror.

“You will control your fucking feelings, Bauer,” he growled, pointing a finger. “He’s your employee. You owe him a level of goddamned space.”

The bastard in the mirror didn’t really seem to be listening, but he’d done his best.

He went out to the dairy barn where Shane was working, and tapped on the doorframe.

"Lunch."

Shane glanced up. “Almost finished.”

Wary, William waited. Was he going to say something about the shirt? Was he going to ask why the fuck William had spazzed out like a crazy person?

Instead Shane turned back to cleaning the hoses, his eyes locked on the task like it was the only important thing in the world.

William returned to the house…leaving the door open.

The open door was more than a lunch invite. It was a brick on the foundation of trust. He had, unwittingly, shown a slice of his crazy, and Shane had responded with that same discretion he'd demonstrated after their first fight. Maybe, much as Shane said he hadn't wanted to bond, he at least understood.

William built sandwiches, opened a bag of chips, and laid the plates out. Just as he was sitting down, Shane appeared in the doorway.

He hesitated. After what felt like an uncomfortably long time, he finally stepped inside.

William dug into his sandwich so he wouldn’t unconsciously reveal the relief on his face. He’d been worried Shane was going to just grab his lunch and go eat on the porch. Even now, as Shane sat beside him, the thought of that rejection made the food in his mouth go down like chalk. It was too easy to mess this up. Too easy to move too fast towards, God forbid, friendship.

Just as he was debating whether to break the silence, Shane spoke.
"I do this thing sometimes, where I'm a jackass," he said, and took a bite.

William looked up. He regarded him a moment then shrugged, shoving over the bag of chips.

"It's whatever man. Off day."

Shane accepted, sprinkling a few chips on his plate. He set the bag aside after and picked one of them up, but didn’t eat it. “Hey, so…” He flipped the chip over in his fingers, inspecting it. “You, um. You doing okay?”

William paused mid-bite.

He thought through his options. Settling for the course of least resistance, he relaxed, smiled, and gave a shrug.

"Of course," he said, taking another bite. "Just another fucking day, right?"

His foot twitched under the table from the lie. It felt as though he’d stuffed the truth into a ball and it was vibrating to get out. He tried to lock it down, but the traitorous limb just bounced harder.

"Look,” said Shane, dropping his eyes back to his plate. “I can, like…leave you alone today. Go home when the work’s done. You don't have to entertain my sorry ass after."

You can be alone again.

William’s hand snapped out, locking onto Shane’s wrist. He couldn’t handle any more solitude today. He’d met his limit. The shit in his head was too loud when he was alone.

They both froze. Shane stared at the wrist.

His eyes flickered up but William couldn’t meet them, too startled and shaken by his act of desperation. Because, despite his intentions, grabbing Shane was the exact opposite of giving him space.

William released him, each finger peeling off with a surge of willpower.

What was he thinking? It was so stupid, to reach like that. A fucking crazy-ass move. Yet, just as he was sure Shane was going to get up from the table and back away slowly, he reached into the hoodie he’d draped over his chair. From inside he pulled out a small bottle, and placed it next to William’s plate.

"Dunno if you like whiskey,” he said quietly, “but the beer wasn't such a hot idea last time.”

William looked at the bottle, then at Shane. He slid out from the table and crossed to his cabinet to retrieve two crystal-cut rock glasses, which made a heavy, solid thump as they were set down. The bottle squeaked as the lid was twisted off, and two shots of amber relief settled in the elegant cups. William tapped their glasses together.

He swallowed it whole. Shane did the same.

Leaning back in his chair, William watched the man across from him.

This was Shane’s appeal. Simple actions. Simple solutions.

He held up the glass, regarding it. "Mom bought me these. Said I needed something with class in my man cave.” He put it down, and revived by the burn of whiskey, reached forward to finish his
sandwich. "Like your mom buying you glasses makes something classy."

“I guess.” Shane shrugged. "I mean, you can tell your mom she has good taste or whatever. That shit makes ‘em happy."

*You make me happy,* William thought, as Shane went back to eating.

He knew he was staring and reluctantly pulled his gaze away. They could pretend as though nothing big had happened. As if Shane hadn’t seen William’s desperation. As if he hadn’t, in his way, reached right back.

"Yeah,” William murmured, eyes locked on the plate. “Happy."

The silence that settled was companionable. As if nothing between them had changed.

Even though William knew, everything had.

Chapter End Notes

To our readers: thank you for the amazing continued support! We appreciate every comment, kudo, and bookmark so much.

You can follow us on tumblr [for behind-the-scenes stuff, or join our discord server to chat about all things Star Burst (or just to hang out with a group of really fun and positive people!)](https://discord.com)

*Star Burst* updates every other Saturday
Next update is June 9th, 2-4pm PST.
Ever since Shane brought out his liquor at lunch two days ago, he and William had switched up their afternoon routine. Instead of beer, they sat down with a few carefully poured shots. It was something he’d always pictured for lawyers, stock brokers, or other white collars schmucks—people who didn’t allow themselves the pleasure of drinking straight from the neck of a bottle. Yet here he sat with his farmer boss, in a low wooden chair that had unspokenly become his, sipping whiskey neat from a rock glass.

Even stranger was not drinking it alone. Whiskey was, in Shane’s eyes, meant to be a lonely drink. Not something you casually split after work.

Your boss, he reminded himself firmly, staring down into the amber liquid. Not your friend.

Because everyone drank with their boss. If he squinted, it could’ve been Morris in that deck chair. Or Phillip, from the Zuzu store. The one that used to berate employees for a crooked name tag, and gave instructions to Shane as if he was mentally slow and hard of hearing.

Right.

During those porch drinks, Shane looked at William and tried to picture the guy who had grabbed his wrist in that moment of unexplained terror. Who’d been so startled by a bit of water, he’d flung away his wet shirt as if it were a snake. It was really damn difficult. William was at ease after work. He drank slowly. He’d tell Shane something that happened in the fields, dragging tattooed fingers through his hair, laughing loud.

Solid. Steady. Miles away from whatever had shaken him under that tree the other morning.

Not that it was any of Shane’s business.

Wednesday started off as usual; the milking, the coop, the normal routine. Except when Shane emerged from the storage barn, wiping his hands on his jeans, William called him over to the parked truck.

“Going out for delivery this week,” he said when Shane got close, nodding at the crates of blueberries lining a nearby fence. He opened his tailgate. “Help me load ‘em up.”

Shane climbed on the back of the pick-up, sliding and stacking crates as William handed them
over. For a moment they existed in that silent, rhythmic stride that sank into place when working side by side. Then Shane saw it: a cloud of dust billowing over the gravel road, and the little silver car responsible for kicking it up.

Whomever was behind the wheel honked several times as they zipped up the drive.

“Shiiiiiit,” groaned William.

The vehicle parked near the house, and Shane’s mouth went dry when the engine cut.

*Does he get real estate agents out here?*

The woman inside held a compact, expertly applying lipstick in the little mirror. When finished she snapped it shut and dropped it in her bag. The door opened. A dark blue pump stepped out, making a neat hole next to the car.

The lady who emerged was in her middle years. Her creamy red lipstick was a bright contrast to her blue dress and shoes, and the white pearls resting on her collarbone. She pushed sunglasses on top of her head, looking around the farm with approval. At seeing William she broke into a big smile.

“Well thank goodness, you're actually alive out here! After you didn’t answer your phone this morning, I was worried.”

William gave a frustrated sigh, dropping his crate of berries on the tailgate. He crossed over to the woman, giving her a peck on the cheek. “Mother. What a surprise.”

Shane froze with the crate he’d just picked up.

Well, shit.

She accepted the kiss graciously. Then—

“Who is that?”

Of course it couldn’t be a real estate agent. No, it was someone he’d actually have to meet, to once again demonstrate how much he sucked at social niceties.

Heart racing, he adjusted his final crate on the stack. He briefly recalled what William had said on the porch last Friday, before the fight. Something about his mom throwing brunches, being on charity committees, and forcing fruity drinks on you. It’d been difficult to picture at the time, but now Shane had no trouble at all. She was the kind of person you looked at and thought: society.

Yet despite how obviously related William and his mother were, seeing them now side-by-side—the same blonde hair, same complexion—Shane struggled to wrap his mind around the fact that this refined little bird of a woman had given birth to his big tattooed boss.

William rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s my new hire, Shane. Mother, you can’t just—”

“Hello!” she said enthusiastically, waving.


“Oh nonsense, I want to meet him. It’s about time you got some help around here.”

Shane bit his lip. He knew he ought to get off the truck and go introduce himself, rather than stand
around like an idiot, but he wasn’t sure he could. He was too aware of his own body. He was going
to trip getting down. He was going to make a damn fool of himself.

“Daniels,” said William, pinching the bridge of his nose. “C’mera a minute.”

“Daniels?” his mother repeated, smacking his shoulder. “Goodness William, you’re not a soldier
anymore.”

Shane was miraculously able to climb down without mishap. He walked over, palms sweaty.

William rolled his eyes. His expression was aggravated, yet tolerant of the tiny woman next to him.
“Daniels, this is Ma. Ma? This is Shane Daniels. Now will you stop—”

“Shane! Angie Bauer. So good to meet you! Could you help me with something?” She shot a
reproving glance at William. “Since my son isn’t offering to assist his mother.”


“Excellent. Clearly you have manners.”

She turned toward her car, and Shane turned to William.

I am so sorry, William mouthed.

Shane glared at him.

Angie popped open her trunk, grabbed a box, and walked over to shove it into her son’s hands.
“You skipped Sunday, Will. It’s rude.”

He groaned, marching toward the house as Angie returned to sort through more boxes in the trunk.

“Um,” Shane said, hating how dry the word came out. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

She flashed a brilliant smile. “Has my son been a good boss? I’ll spank him if he’s bad, you
know.” She turned her head toward the house. “YOU’RE NOT TOO BIG TO TURN OVER MY
KNEE, YOUNG MAN!”

“MA!”

“He’s good,” Shane said, his face roasting pink. “It’s good work.”

She gave an approving nod, stacking a few boxes into his arms. Through the crack in the flaps
Shane saw a couple of pies, their delicious warm scent wafting up.

“You, er, made these?” he asked, scrounging for something polite to say.

Angie softened. “I did!” She closed the trunk and crossed to the passenger’s side, pulling out an
elegant little clutch. “Would you like to take one home?”

“Oh. I didn’t mean—”

“Because I made enough for an army.” She rolled her eyes toward the house. “That glowering
behemoth of a son can’t eat them all anyway. Pick one out, I insist.”

“Okay,” Shane said quietly, not wanting to insult her by refusing. “Thanks.”
Angie walked up the porch, Shane following. She sighed at the can of empty beer bottles, pushing it with her toe. “William! For heaven’s sake, son, I didn’t raise you in a barn.”

“I’m a bachelor, Ma!” he called from inside. “You don’t like the way my house looks, call first.”

She stepped into the kitchen, giving it a once-over. “Have you boys eaten lunch yet?”

William leaned against the fridge. “No. We were working. It’s what happens during the daylight hours.”

“Did you put away—”

“I put away the food.”

She crossed her arms. “Don’t sass me, William Joseph.” Then she nodded at the table. “Shane darling, over there is fine.”

Feeling slow and stupid, Shane set the boxes down. He wondered if Angie knew that he and William had eaten lunch together in the kitchen the last two days. Most people would probably consider it a better break to eat on the porch, but after toiling in the hot sun, eating indoors was refreshing. They’d even talked a bit more yesterday…

*Because she can totally tell that your ass sat in his chair, just by looking at it.*

William, as if sensing his discomfort, waved a hand. “Daniels, if you wanna go back—”

“What, you’re not going to feed him? Shame on you, Will.”

At that William looked to the ceiling; the look of a man who would rather die here and now.

“I—I’m okay,” Shane stammered. “Not hungry.”

“Shane, you ignore him honey. I’m making lunch,” Angie insisted.

“He said he’s not hungry,” said William.

“Oh, you boys are always hungry!”

William threw up his hands. “Fine. Whatever. Cook. Do your woman thing, I still have to finish what I was working on.”

She put her clutch down and began to pull out pans and utensils.

“C’mon,” William groused, stomping outside, nodding for Shane to follow.

He felt a plunge of relief at the direct order. Not an open-ended introduction, which he was expected to respond to. Not an offer of food that would make him feel greedy to accept, or rude to turn down. Nothing that required improv on his end. No, it was just instruction. Beautiful, soothing instruction, that saved him from standing awkwardly in the kitchen.

As soon as they were out the door Angie called, “AND THROW OUT THOSE BOTTLES!”

William snatched the bucket up.

“Daniels, I’m sorry,” he said in a low voice as they headed down the porch. “She does this. Just sort of pops up like a goddamn pimple.”
Shane wasn’t sorry—he was only relieved to be out of the house. It felt \textit{good} to be alone, just the two of them. So good he even felt a little bold.

“It’s cool, William Joseph.”

William, opening his recycling bin, froze for a moment. “Ha, ha,” he said sarcastically, tossing the bottles inside.

Shane flushed. Maybe that was too familiar of him.

“Guess I’ll, um. Get back to my shit?”

“Yeah.” William sighed, scrubbing his hand through his hair. “Just...don’t make her wait for you to get to the table, or she’ll be screaming holy hell later. Best way to deal with Ma is to give her what she wants. She won’t stay long. Just enough to embarrass the shit out of me.” He gave Shane a pained look. “Unless you want to knock off early today, and leave me to her tender mercies.”

The offer was tempting, but something stopped Shane from accepting. Maybe it was that look on William’s face—the one that suggested Shane was leaving him to be devoured by rabid wolves.

He shook his head. “Don’t wanna be rude...she wanted to give me a pie and shit...”

William clapped him on the shoulder. “Dude. Her pie is pretty fucking delicious. I don’t blame you.”

His hand remained there, and Shane glanced nervously at the farmhouse. “So what,” he said, trying to ignore the slight squeeze it gave. “I do this lunch, I get credit or something? Can skip out on the next one?”

“Yeah. Fuck, I’d owe you. She’s always less intense if she has an audience.”

When William finally pulled his arm away, Shane let out a breath. He nodded.

“The battle plan. Do whatever. When she starts hollering, we go wash up. We eat, and I’ll try to get us out of there as soon as possible.”

His face set as if mentally girding his loins, and he started back across the field.

For a moment Shane only stood watching after him, the warmth on his shoulder lingering.

William worked as if harvesting the tomatoes would somehow make his mom go away. She was always pulling this bullshit, randomly popping up as though she half-lived there. It felt too damn much like being spied on.

When he’d first moved out to Pops’ land, his parents had celebrated his independence by giving him blessed and appreciated silence. It had lasted a whole three months. Then, to ‘surprise’ him, Ma had dropped by—just in time to witness a slap across the eyes by an errant cow tail. In an effort to stop her fussing, William had steered her out of the barn, into the house that Pops had left as a ramshackle and unrenovated shack.
Compared to her cathedral ceilings and shining hardwood floors, Ma told him that he was only a step above homelessness. She’d flown into a lecture over all the work that needed to be done, as if William didn’t fucking know what a giant load he’d taken on.

Still, Bauers didn’t shy away from a challenge. His first winter had been a flurry of visits, measurements, and new decor. At the end of Wintersday, she’d taken pictures of his cozy and rustic house and put them in the family newsletter.

Like all battles engaged in with his mother, annoying her was a game. Starting that spring he’d begun expanding his house, sending her into stitches over each disruption. She’d come in with design ideas and sweep over the place like an interior decorating Napoleon, and then he’d change the territory like Duke Wellington.

Unfortunately he’d run out of room to expand unless he wanted a second floor, and his back injury made any extra stairs an accident waiting to happen. He settled with games on a smaller scale now. Like putting things where his short mother couldn’t reach them, just to see the looks of exasperation on her normally perfectly poised face. Once, when he’d been living at home and she’d been particularly tyrannical, he’d found all her step stools and hidden them in a fit of pique. Her voice had rung through the house to come reach things for her. She’d not found it funny at all.

Just as he was wondering how much she’d disrupted his kitchen today, Angie came outside. She dragged one of his deck chairs over to a metal triangle hung high on the porch, and climbed up to whack her spoon against it.

William glanced over to see Shane put aside his shovel, giving the house the same look one might give the gallows.

He felt inclined to agree.

He turned on the outdoor spigot and began to suds up his hands, scrubbing off dirt. The scent of pot roast, veggies, and Gretchen’s yeast rolls wafted from the house. If Ma would just bring Gretchen, then at least someone else would be around to help punch her persona as Queen Bee. His mom might like to give the illusion of being a domestic goddess, but all the food she’d brought was part of the catered meals that his parents subsided on.

When Shane joined him at the water pump, William put on his ‘social’ goggles, taking stock of his appearance.

Shane’s t-shirt was a low-quality fabric, sweat-stained and with hay dust clinging to it. His dark hair—which hadn’t seen a pair of professional shears since God knew when—stuck to the sides of his head. His face was ruddy, his chin dark from its five o’clock shadow. The cheap jeans he wore every day had darker stains on the knees, where he’d likely been crouching to scrub the chicken coops.

It was, William thought, a normal-ass look for anyone who had real fucking work to do. But his mother was a wild card in what she’d seize on, to hit a fucker with weeks later.

"Take off your shoes or she'll take off your head," William warned, eyes falling to Shane’s feet. His boots were caked in mud and shavings, bird droppings spotting the tops.

"Damn," Shane muttered, stepping back from the pump. "Some leash she's got."

He wiped wet fingers against his pants, leaving long, dark streaks on the denim before walking towards the house, not giving William a chance to say anything else.
William glowered after him as he made his way to his fucking doom.

Fine, he thought, scrubbing up to his elbows. Go forth and drown, you ungrateful shit.

While washing he slowed, his eyes drifting to his forearm, up to the stylized angel sitting on a marble pillar wrapped in roses and thorns. The face was hidden by a shining halo, and her hand held a sword dripping with red, each drop forming a flower in the thorny briars.

Poe, his tattoo artist, had created the piece when he was clean, a tribute to his parents who had supported him during recovery.

Did he come off as a momma’s boy? Well, shit, what was Shane supposed to think? His mom showed up out of the ether like a damn tornado in pearls, and William just did whatever she asked him to.

Still. She was his mom. She’d gotten a superintendent fired when he was in elementary school, after an unfair ruling had suspended him for two weeks. She’d been on every booster club and PTA possible. She’d stayed up with him the night before boot camp, and probably was the only person he could cry in front of without shame. When in the hellhole that was the Gotoro frontlines, his care packages came like clockwork: warm, dry socks, a plate of his favorite cookies, and letters of news from home in every box.

Let Shane think he was whipped. His mom knew the truth.

William dragged behind him, stopping at the steps to untie his boots. Half to make his mom wait, and half because he wasn’t quite sure what the battle plan was for this visit.

From inside, he heard her asking Shane when he’d been hired.

“Uh.” Shane’s voice hesitated. “Last Monday…”

It’d only been a week and a half, he realized, putting his boots to the side. It felt like longer.

William walked into the kitchen, taking in the scene with a glance. His mom had, somehow, found the stupid, lacy apron she’d bought last year. He thought he’d hidden the damn thing better. Yet it was another game the two of them played—whenever she left after one of her self-imposed improvement sprees, he rearranged her set-ups, hiding things in obnoxious places.

She carried a dish to the table, sporting her costume of domesticity. She’d laid out a huge feast, completely out of proportion to the three people in the house. William leaned down and brushed another kiss over her cheek, skin that had been conditioned with three different types of moisturizers and a dusting of powder. She smelled like Paris, her favorite scent.

He squeezed her shoulder once, tugging on the apron and casting her a raised brow.

You found it.

She gave him a smug smile, subtle and easily missed if someone hadn’t been raised to see that slight turn of her eyes.

Of course I found it, the look said.

Satisfied that the apron had proved her point, she took it off, and sat down at the table.

William glanced at Shane, who was doing his best imitation of a silent robot. He didn’t meet eyes
with anyone as he scooped helpings onto his plate, and then began to eat as though the act of consuming the food would give him invisibility. William sat catty-corner to him, following his example. The sooner the food was gone, the sooner his Ma would head home.

He counted to ten in his head while he ate. At three, she tutted.

"When was the last time you had a decent meal, son?"

William swallowed his bite. "Last night. Leftover frozen pizza."

This did not make her smile.

William knew she wanted him to say something. Wanted him to introduce Shane. Wanted to open up the floor to questions. She practically vibrated with the need for him to speak. She moved with deliberate grace, cutting potatoes and taking exact sips of tea as if the ghost of her finishing school teacher were watching, instead of her goading son and his silent farmhand.

William let her twist on the vine.

He’d almost finished his plate when she finally gave a soft cough. Her ankles crossed then uncrossed under the table, the soft soles of her pumps rubbing the tile.

"So," she said. “We missed you Sunday."

Oh no she didn’t…

William paused in the middle of scooping out a fresh helping of garlic potatoes. He felt her laser beam focus, and like any good warrior who sensed a weakness, she pressed.

"I called you back and you didn't pick up, Will."

He sighed, replacing the spoon.

"Yeah, sorry. Was raining. Makes the signal bad out here."

She stiffened, catching the lie. William narrowed his eyes at her, and flicked a glance at Shane, the message loud as he could make it: Not. Here.

She followed his gaze, then as if uncocking a gun, softened her shoulders.

William didn’t trust her retreat. Before she could try another verbal volley of attack he went on the offensive. "What kind of pie did you bring?"

"Apple, blueberry, and peach," she said, frowning.


He focused on his meal, not his mother. She wasn't fooled, her eyes on him like weights. He knew she was scrutinizing. He felt her assessment on his face while he ate. Were the lines there new? Had he been staying clean? She looked at his fingers, nails, and clothing, then rested on the inside of his arm.

After a moment she pulled her gaze away. Like always, when she thought too hard about what he’d done to himself once upon a time. She glanced around the room, casting for a subject, and he’d just started a new bite of pot roast when she found one.
"I’ve invited Henry this week."

William choked. As he coughed, he saw the cool triumph in her eyes.

"Ah ha! You were avoiding Henry!"

He grabbed his tea, swallowing it down, glaring at her through his sudden asphyxiation tears.

"No, Ma," he managed to wheeze. "No one wants to hear about Henry."

He didn’t need this today. He didn’t need Shane, who’s status in his life was blurred enough, to get a whiff of his mother’s matchmaking.

"Well, I don’t see why not. He’s a lawyer, you know. Very accomplished."

A headache began to bloom. "Ma…"

"What?!" She made the word over-the-top, then pouted. "You're all alone up here. I worry."

It was a bullshit pout. It was a fucking show. And it wasn’t even for him—it was pure goddamned theatre because she had an audience. And here he’d thought she’d be more discrete if there was a relative stranger about. So this was her game? Ignore me and I’ll make it so painful that you will never do it again?

There was only one way to deal with her stupid fucking games.

Head on.

"I am not going on a blind date with Henry.” William leaned back, and nodded his head towards Shane, who had been glued to his plate during the entire mortifying exchange. "Besides, this is embarrassing. Don't make Daniels sit through your matchmaking."

Shane’s knife scraped his plate with a squeak. His face reddened.

Instead of backing off, she doubled down, focusing on Shane.

"Fine. Shane? You interested in a nice lawyer from Zuzu? Because William is apparently going to throw away opportunities."

"Ma!"

"What?"

William groaned into his hand. Did she also think Shane was gay? Could she sense something else too? That maybe it was not just William’s wishful thinking, but a kernel of truth?

"I'm uh, good, thanks,” Shane mumbled, before taking a hard swallow of iced tea.

No defensiveness. No saying he didn’t like guys. Just that he was good without Henry The Lawyer tossed at him like an out-of-season handbag.

*It doesn’t mean anything.*

"He's good,” William snapped, irritated at his errant thoughts. “Leave him be."

She lowered her eyes to her plate and with false contriteness said, "My apologies, Shane."
"No need.” Shane gave a small, uncomfortable shrug. As if grasping for a lifeline, he nodded at the food. "This is really good. Thanks."

She paused, caught off guard by the compliment. Probably, William thought, because unlike some of the idiots she liked to surround herself with, Shane’s sincerity was obvious.

Defeated at last, she shoved her chair back from the table. Her heels clicked a frustrated staccato into the kitchen with the empty roll plate.

Was is possible? Was she done?

William glanced sideways at Shane, then turned back to his food and rubbed his forehead. He was almost finished. Soon he could wash the dishes and pack her into the car—

"Cameron asked about you Sunday."

Ice hit his chest. He felt the creeping fingers of that name tighten around his throat.

"Thank goodness his divorce is almost finalized,” Ma said, scraping leftovers into a tupperware. “Poor dear. It's been very hard on him.”

That was an understatement. His ex-fiancé had nearly been beaten black and blue by his then-husband Roy.

When William had gone home last Wintersday, Cam had been staying at his parents' place while the beginnings of his divorce went through. The last few months had been strange between them. It was clear that Cam was looking for a damn rebound, yet William’s feelings about his ex were… complicated.

Could Shane see that Cam’s name was like a damn knife?

William flicked his eyes over, but Shane was looking away.

"Cameron is an old friend of ours, Shane,” Ma continued, opening aluminum foil over the pie tins. “It's so sad when these things don't work out."

William let out a slow breath, packing all that shit back into the damn box his mother kept trying to kick. He smoothed his face, pushed back his plate, and asked the one question that nagged him.

"Did that restraining order go through?"

"I believe so. He's getting most of the estate."

"Good,” he said. Cam deserved it after putting up with Roy’s bullshit. “Good for him.”

William glanced over at Shane again. He was clearly uncomfortable, his back hunched as if trying to put space between himself and the table, all without moving his chair.

Ma swept back in, laying out pie; a tiny piece on her plate, versus the huge chunks that she’d cut for both himself and Shane. An idea hit William as she sat down.

"You should introduce Cam to Henry," he said. "Lawyers are good for divorced guys."

Ma cocked her head, thoughtful.

"Huh,” she said. “Maybe you're right." Then she pointed her fork at him. "You know, you don’t
call enough, William."

The argument was familiar, the complaint as common as gripes about the weather.

"Sorry," he said.

She turned to Shane now, as if looking for an ally in her exasperation. "I swear. He just goes off for days and no one can find him! What is a mother supposed to do?"

William ignored her and figured Shane would too. Except apparently not. The fucking Sadsack, who couldn’t do more than grunt most days, finished chewing his bite of pie and bit the inside of his cheek, the hollow visible. He caught William’s eye, saying, “Call your mom, William.”

He said it casually. Mr. Didn’t Want to Bond, except for willingly hanging out and doing shots after work. Mr. Not Going to Let You Catch Me Looking, except William knew he totally did. Mr. It’s All Just Business, except here he was, teasing and sucking up to his mom. And it was starting to bother William, how the small things were making him so drawn to Mr. Never Gonna Happen.

He shivered as Shane looked back down.

Ma beamed, and William resisted the urge to drive his foot into Shane’s chair to knock him over.


He and Shane both choked on their pie.

"Boys,” she chided. “Small bites."

William swallowed, eyes watering from near death-by-pie.

"Sure! Sounds great.” He raised an evil eyebrow at Shane. "Doesn't it sound just peachy, Daniels?"

Shane, the little shit, ignored him.

"This is really good pie,” he said.

Ma was thrilled to have a new ally. "Well good. That's settled." She turned her wrist to the side, the mother-of-pearl in her delicate watch flashing. "I've got bridge tonight or I'd stay longer."

William stood. "Well, thanks for the food, Ma."

“Yeah,” Shane echoed. “Thanks a lot.”

*Oh, so now you're on my side.*

Ma walked past them to retrieve her purse from the kitchen. She looked dubiously at the food she’d brought him to last the week.

"I could at least—"

“Nope!” William stepped in to cut off that line of thought. “Nope. I'll clean up."

She smiled, and pulled an apple pie out of the box, handing it to Shane. "There you are. I hope to see you again!" She leaned over and, to William’s complete surprise, kissed his cheek.

Shane froze underneath the gesture.
Great Ma, William thought without any amusement. You broke my farmhand.

She headed for the door. Shane remained a statue, holding the pie with the same befuddlement as if someone had handed him a baby.

Ma approved. She had Shane marked as an easy target for the future—of that, he was sure.

"Be good boys!" she said, breezing out.

William followed her through the door. So quietly that he didn't think she could hear, he muttered, “Call before you drop in next time.”

Turning, she raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “What is the point of calling when you don’t answer your phone?” She pressed a farewell kiss to his cheek, and with a *hmm* of pleasure swanned down the steps.

William stood at the top of the porch and watched her go. When satisfied that she was far enough down the road, he went inside, letting the door swing shut and beelining to the fridge. If anything would drive him to drink, it was his mother and her fucking surprises.

He pulled out two beers, tossing one to Shane without looking.

"We. Survived.” He cracked the top off on the handle of the fridge. “Thank fuck.”

Shane popped the cap with his bare thumb. "And I thought Marnie was bad.” He paused with the beer halfway to his mouth, as if rethinking the statement. "Not like—not that your mom's *bad* or anything. She seems nice..."

He drank to cover up the lie.

"Dude. She's a terror. It's fine.” William leaned a hip against the counter while he drank, regarding the mountain of food she’d left. He let the buzz of carbonation and alcohol settle in his system, and scrubbed his face with his free hand. "I didn't think she'd just appear like that."

“Yeah,” Shane agreed quietly, rolling his neck from side to side.

For one moment, the thoughts William had been suppressing surged up. The way Shane’s shirt clung to him, hard labor already hardening his chest and shoulders. His jeans, cheap as they were, hung looser on his hips, and…that was exactly where he needed to end that particular line of thought.

He looked away, taking a long swallow of beer before beginning to gather his leftovers.

This was all so stupid. It could have been avoided completely.

"Should have just gone Sunday,” he muttered, stacking tupperware and crumpling up the tin foil.

Shane sank back down at the table with his beer. "Why'd you ghost on her?"

William froze.

Did he really want to know? Since Friday’s quarrel, William had kept all conversation strictly on work or sports. They’d talked a few times about what needing doing the next day, while unwinding on the porch. But this? It felt dangerously close to bonding.

Yet, as quickly as the offer was extended, Shane pulled it away. "Nevermind. Not my business."
Yup, William decided. *Dangerously close to bonding.*

“After you finish that, go ahead and start cleaning up the dairy equipment,” he said, letting the subject drop like a hot potato.

Shane hesitated. “You want any help in here?”

“I got this.” William focused on separating out the sides from the main courses.

“Okay.”

Shane shotgunned the final two thirds of his beer before walking out, closing the door softly behind him. A few seconds later there was a hollow bang on the porch, when he dropped his empty bottle into the bucket.

William stared down at the plastic tubs, then let out a breath and opened the fridge.

He rolled his eyes.

His mom had pushed his beers to the back, moved the condiments, and thrown out perfectly good leftovers from last week. He grimly stacked the rest of her meals, and because he couldn’t stand it, rearranged the condiments the way he liked: most frequently used at the front, less common ones in the back.

*Why’d you ghost on her?* Shane had asked, as if it were a simple question with simple answers.

*Because*, he thought. *I was too busy feeling like a spurned asshole after you threw your goddamned temper tantrum.*

Which was part of the truth.

Out of habit, he snapped on the weather channel, letting the forecast of sunny days and high temperatures soothe him as he worked. Stacking plates. Putting trays and serving spoons in the dishwasher. Wiping down surfaces. Once everything was done and the lights turned off, he stared for a moment through the front window, his eyes resting on a tree in the distance.

Pulling what was left of his beer, he put on his boots and went outside—where he saw the bottle that Shane had dropped.

He could still hear the ring of glass as he took the steps down, back to work.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you all for sharing another week with us. <3

If you’d like to see more, come follow us on **tumblr**, join our **discord server**, or just drop us a line in the comments. We love to interact with readers!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is June 23rd, 2-4pm PST
Stitches

Chapter Summary

In Which Men Get Wet and Wild

Trigger Warnings:
(Real ones this time!)
-Blood
-Needles
-Rushing water

Also watch out for:
-Towels
-Angry table wiping
-The “friend” word

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

William couldn’t count the number of times when training a cadre of recruits that some monster-sized kid marched into camp thinking his muscles made him Private Badass. Large recruits usually had brains like eggs. Crack them once, and the gooey bits came oozing out.

On the opposite end, he’d seen plenty of out-of-shape guys cringe and shuffle into a deck of boys, fear in their eyes at the crew of screaming instructors constantly in their face. The quiet types? They lived in their heads. Their bodies might not be the machines that Momma Military wanted them to be, but they tended to be harder. Perfect bodies meant bupkis. The only muscle that mattered regarding strength was the mind.

William’s training proved that over eighty percent of success was dependent on that grey matter between the ears.

A strong mind compartmentalized. If a man sliced his priorities into boxes and stayed in those boundaries, then he could focus on getting things done. Focus was the ability to shove the shit he didn’t want or couldn’t deal with into a separate box.

That’s how William handled inconvenient feelings. It was how he accepted unchangeable facts. When all else failed, he pulled out a box full of nothing and moved in.

Sunday morning, he put on nice clothes, drove to his parents’, and sat like a good little addict. At least, until Cameron came in with a clique of post-divorced friends he’d accumulated over the past six months. To avoid unnecessary drama William escaped to the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves and helping on dish duty. It was dual-purpose camouflage. It kept his mother off his back, and gave him some good points with Gretchen.

Gretchen Dewitt was a calming woman. He had aunts and uncles, but none of his blood relatives had ever been as involved in his life as her. While he scrubbed plates and pans, she moved behind him, short and concise orders flowing out of her like a general.
The only acceptable response was a chorus of “Yes, chef.” It was like “Yes, sir,” but more subdued.

Two hours later and William said his goodbyes, heading home. He should have been pleased; it was a successful brunch by his standards. Minimal contact. Minimal drama. Minimal stress. Yet, driving home, he stared at the passing billboards and didn’t feel triumphant. He was cut adrift, floating back to his own life, untethered from his upbringing. How was it possible to be around so many people and yet attached to none of them? How did Ma stand it? She slipped in and out of her friendship circles like a butterfly sipping from the nectar of their different flowers. It was so easy for her.

Had it ever been easy for him? He didn’t speak to any of the people he’d known before joining the military. High school, the “best” time of his life, and he’d done what was asked. He’d been involved in the in-crowd. The yearbook had him in twenty or thirty different group photos, and one of his mother’s mantles displayed his hundreds of pictures. But none of it stuck. No one from that time was real or present anymore.

He decided thinking about it was useless and returned to the nothing box. A void. A zone of silence. When he got home, he stayed in that box. It was a safe place for his mind to live, where he could do things like organize spreadsheets of crop output, finish up emails to his different retailers, and plot out seed orders for next season. But there was one exception to this mental discipline.

Shane Daniels.

The fucker had the bizarre and frustrating ability to slide out of his assigned box of ‘Don’t Go There’, take an imaginary seat next to him, and watch from the side, as though he could see right through William’s emptiness.

Or, he’d thought days later, watching Shane push a wheelbarrow of feed across the path between barns, you’re imagining it because you’re lonely and horny.

Things continued to stay platonic and professional, which, after a shot or two at the end of the day, left him greedy for more.

He was sure they’d had a moment. A moment that William had let slip past.

Sometimes, he felt those phantom fingers on his arm. When he was about to drift off to sleep; when his mind was weakest and wanted to think maybe it was more than one-sided, this attraction. He cured those errant hopes by recalling the panic on Shane’s face when he’d realized how intimate they’d been. Punishing himself, he replayed the way his eyes widened and limbs scrambled, inches from touching a lit coal.

Do you want to ruin a good thing, Bauer?

No. No he didn’t. It had been less than a month after their violent clash. If something was forming, it was delicate and too easily crushed by impatience.

Despite his devotion to the nothing box, Shane continued to impress him. Things William wanted done, Shane did without being asked. Times he needed a tool—before words for the request had formed—Shane silently handed it over, as if reading his mind. William caught himself excited for a glimpse of him walking onto the property in the morning. He treasured the hours they silently toiled together, William driving, while Shane tossed up the harvested and bundled crops into the truck bed. And the best part of the day remained those couple of drinks they shared on his porch, words skirting anything important.
The outside world didn’t seem to realize they were creating agricultural harmony over here.

Wednesday morning while checking the hops crop, William stepped between the vines, and instead of walking through mud of properly irrigated soil, dust clouded around his boots.

The. Fuck.

He knelt down, and when his fingers brushed the ground, they touched bone-dry pipes. Frustration boiled through him. The little iridium spigots had cost him an arm and a leg, yet here he was, kneeling in dust. How dare they malfunction. He looked at the huge field and pulled his handkerchief out to mop his neck. Time to go to the barns, get his tools…and hunt a farmhand.

Shane hadn’t had a chance to start on the coops yet, and he was winding the last of the auto-milker tubes when William stomped into the barn.

"C'mere. Need some help."

Shane hung the tubes and walked over. "What's up?"

"Fucking goddamned motherfucking sprinklers," William groused, turning towards the hops fields.

As they got closer, the breakdown was more widespread. Not a single crop in the entire section had been watered. They paused at one of the big valves and William turned it, rewarded with a big fat dose of nothing.

Shane eyed it with him. "Giving you shit, huh?"

William nodded. "I think there is a plug in the line. Either that, or the pump's gone bad. Again."

He hoped it was just a plug. That would be a hell of a lot cheaper to fix, but there was only one way to find out. He pointed at one side of the field. "The line starts there, and ends" —he pointed towards the pump next to the porch— "there. You take that row, and I'll take the other. We'll meet at the source. Holler if you see a break or leak."

Shane nodded, heading east.

It was over a half hour of hunting holes in the line before William got to the pump. Metal rattled angrily on the corner of its valve.

That was not good.

He knelt down and checked the meter. It read as ‘No Pressure.’ Yet when he touched the side, it was icy cold and sweating. Then why wasn’t it…

Before he could complete the thought, the piece he’d been touching jumped. The little gear shot out like it was a bullet. William ducked but fire cut across his eyebrow, a burst of sparks snapping through his face in a lightning bolt of pain.

"SON OF A BITCH!" he swore, cupping his eye, blood pouring through the wound. There was another squeak and the top bolt of the pump shot water up and over him like a fountain. Seconds later, boots stomped behind him.

"Holy shit," Shane breathed, concern and horror in his voice.

As if he had summoned the water demons from hell, something else in the pump snapped, and the fountain burst higher, the gushing water making it hard to hear. Hot blood poured down William’s
face, undeterred by the pressure he’d put on the wound.

"THE FUCK YOU DO?" Shane shouted.

Excellent fucking question.

"I barely touched it!" William called over the loud stream. "Grab the wrench and let's see if we can't get the waterline shut down."

Shane snagged the correct tool without direction, staring at William as he handed it over. “Your face!”

Yup, his face. William pulled off his shirt and pressed it against the cut, yet it just bled faster, his vision a blur of pain and pink wash.

"I'll live," he said grimly, looking down at the brittle, piece-of-shit pump. He’d inherited the finicky thing from Pops. It looked as though some of the older parts had finally given up the ghost. He moved his makeshift bandage from his face. He wasn’t going to be able to see with the wet cloth over his eyes, and he’d need the leverage on the wrench. He took the tool from Shane and wrapped the bloody and damp shirt around the edge of the handle. With a grunt, he stepped into the rush of water. The wrench needed to clamp onto what was left of the screw, yet as soon as he put it into place and tried to push, it slipped.

“Goddamn it,” he growled.

Shane knocked him out of the way, grabbing the shirt, and took a more secure hold on the wrench. With both of them fighting the water, they were able to place it over the valve. Shane held it firm and William tried to shove it forward, but even though his legs were braced, he couldn’t get the lever to move more than a few inches. His back burned and he gasped, getting a mouthful of bloody water. He turned his head and spit. The waterfall over them was wearing on his nerves but he ignored it, mind on the task.

“Stand here,” he barked, pointing. He wasn’t able to be the main force, not with his back and the mud. It was too much.

Shane moved, obedient. He took position at the front and William grabbed onto the wrench behind him.

The pressure was painful, the tool slick. William grit his teeth, flexing against Shane as they wrestled with the valve. The water was so loud, he had to shout in Shane’s ear to be heard.

"On the count of three!"

Shane shivered from the icy water. He nodded, his jaw tightening.

“One, two”—together they rocked—“three!”

Slowly, screaming, and creaking in protest, the valve started to close, the waterfall growing more sedate. Instead of a pounding torrent, it was a softer sheet.

"Again!" William ordered.

This time he didn’t count, and they were able to get a few more inches.

He was still bleeding. His back pulsed in time to the cut over his eye. Under their feet the ground
had turned to mud, making their leverage precarious. The water eased enough that he could be heard.

"Almost," he said. Then, unable to help his pleasure in the unintended closeness, he teased, "You got one more in you, Daniels?"

"Fuck off," said Shane. But there was no anger in the words, and he tensed, ready for another round.

"Good man," William grunted.

Once more, on instinct, they moved together, finally shutting the sonofabitch off.

William sagged against the body in front of him, panting, triumphant despite the aches and discomfort. He’d never have been able to do this alone.

He realized his arms were still wrapped around Shane’s. Their bodies were glued, wet and hot against one another. Afraid he’d crossed a line, William slowly drew back. His hands ran over Shane’s shoulders, the feel of that steady muscle flashing his fantasy from a few weeks ago through his mind, and reluctantly he let go.

Shane stood like a statue, panting. After several deep breaths, he brought his hands to his head, rubbing them through his dark hair. William watched, entranced, as water streamed off their ends, down his neck. He couldn’t stop staring, and slowly Shane turned his head.

It was like plugging into an electrical socket.

His heart began to pound.

He’d felt it too.

William knew he looked a mess. His left eye was closed, blood mingling with the water that dripped from his hair. But he felt Shane taking him in, seeing him in this moment, as if he’d never seen him before.

He wanted to close the distance. Wanted to taste Shane’s mouth. To touch him again, his arousal giving a preview of how it would feel to press against that muscular body; how it would feel to pin him against the wall and stain him with bruises and bites. To relieve this pressure that boiled under the surface of his skin.

Then Shane’s gaze left his face and flickered over his shoulder, locking on something behind him.

William turned, trying to see through the half-blindness. Coming down the field in the distance were two figures, one short and one tall.

When he turned back, Shane was wringing out his shirt, looking the way a man looked when he was about to face the firing squad.

William grabbed his shirt off the pump handle and with a sharp inhale, pulled the cold, clinging thing back on. He was trying to place the figures...just in time for Marnie to call, “YOO HOO!” in enthusiasm across the field.
Still wringing his shirt—more out of anxiousness than any assumption he’d get the sucker dry—Shane took rapid mental inventory.

He was soaked.

William was soaked. In a bloody damn t-shirt.

Soaked, bloody, and both of them were panting.

Marnie was getting closer, but what had she seen? Their bodies pressed together? Had she noticed the pump behind them? Or was it just her grown nephew and his hulking gay boss, soaked and panting and…

Oh god.

Shane ran his hands over his head, heart beating frantically.

The fucking image lingered like a hologram. Even with his gaze glued to Marnie and Jas walking up the slope of the field, all he could visualize was William’s face. Wet blonde hair plastered to his forehead. That intense, steady stare, with one eye closed against the dripping blood, his other eye locked onto Shane.

He looked at the real, current William, but he was only stretching his lower back while watching the approaching figures.

God, he needed to stop fucking stretching. He needed a shirt that didn’t show the outline of his tattoos through its wet fabric. He needed to rewind time, to get all this taken care of before Shane’s family walked in on the scene.

“That Marnie?” said William, and Shane was shook to the realization that, much as he’d paused, the world around him had not.

He took a deep breath, wringing another section of his shirt. “Guess it’s my turn,” he muttered, glowering. “Fuck.”

William exhaled. “Yup. Fuck.”

Marnie and Jas were close now. Shane gave up on his shirt. It was pointless; the water ran off his body in rivulets, and he knew they both looked like they’d just taken a dip in the lake.

“Boys!”

“Hello, Miss Marnie,” William called back, giving a wave.

Miss Marnie?

Shane sped several yards ahead of him, and once within earshot hissed, “What the hell are you doing?”

She rolled her eyes, the usual exasperated look when he swore in front of Jas.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she asked, and for the first time Shane noticed the picnic basket in her hands. “You haven’t eaten lunch yet, right?”

Shane stared at her, then at Jas.
It was half-days at school for her this week due to parent-teacher conferences. He tried not to think about Marnie going to hers yesterday rather than him. In her small fist was a cluster of wildflowers, ones that grew along the dirt road between the ranch and farm. She took in his sopping appearance with a skeptical expression—one that asked if this was really his new job, since it seemed to include running through the sprinklers.

Behind him William called, “You can bring that food right on up to the porch!”

The fake cheerfulness cut through Shane’s guilty thoughts, and for some reason made him want to choke his boss’s wet neck.

“C’mon, Jas,” said Marnie. “You haven’t officially met Farmer William yet. Now you’ll get to see who Uncle Shane works for.”

William veered toward the house, and when Marnie and Jas followed Shane knew it was fruitless to stop this good-neighbor bomb from exploding. He sighed and sped forward again, falling into step with them. “Look,” he said under his breath. “We had a problem with the water pump. Could you let us clean up before you come crashing—”

“Shane, I swear, you act like our stopping by is the worst thing that could’ve happened to your day.”

Well, it fucking is.

When they got to the porch, Jas’s attention shifted to William. She stared unabashedly as he kicked off his boots, and Shane couldn’t blame her. The beard. The colorful tattoos. The enormous presence. He wasn’t like anyone else in town, especially up close; like she was suddenly standing in the enclosure of an exotic bearded bird.

“Sorry, ma’am,” William said, and if he noticed Jas’s staring he didn’t let on. “You caught us right in the middle of a small crisis. My sprinkler’s pump went out and I was about to call a plumber. Come on in, make yourself at home.” He nodded inside and glanced at Shane. “Daniels, I got some spare clothes if you want to dry off too.”

“Oh!” said Marnie cheerfully, waving her hand. “Don’t let me keep you from your call. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Of course they did.

Once inside, William went into his bedroom, leaving the door open a crack. Shane looked anxiously between Marnie, Jas, and that door. He was cold and uncomfortable, but couldn’t decide what was worse: spending lunch in wet clothes, or waltzing into William’s room as if he lived there.

“Shane, do you know where William keeps his glasses?” Marnie asked. “Jas picked some flowers on the way here.”

Shane pulled out a tumbler from one of the cupboards. His face grew warm, realizing he knew such an intimate detail about William’s kitchen.

“Just—gimme a sec,” he blurted after setting it down.

He needed to get out of here.

Heart hammering, telling himself to calm the fuck down—it was just a stupid tumbler, and Marnie
was not going to read into it—he pushed William’s bedroom door open and stepped inside.

Another mistake. William stood in only his boxers, a pair of dry pants in his hands.

Shane had seen enough shirtless Williams in his time on the farm that it shouldn’t be anything new. But it was different inside a small room, under artificial light. Different when it was also a pantless William, with the discovery of a tattoo on his calf, and just how damn fit the lower half of his body was.

*Don’t. Look.*

But it was too late. Shane was already blushing when William turned his head. Casually, as if he weren’t standing there almost naked, he nodded toward the neatly made bed. Folded on its end was a towel, a pair of sweats, and an old ‘Farmer’s Basket Fair’ t-shirt.

Shane licked his lips and woodenly walked over to pick up the stack. “Gonna, um. Gonna take these in the bathroom.”

William shrugged, stepping into his pants. “Suit yourself.”

Staring at the floor, Shane walked past him and ducked into the bathroom. Once inside he shut the door and twisted the lock, which clicked loudly. Loud enough to hear from the outside.

*What the fuck. What do you think he’s gonna do?*

He peeled the wet shirt from his body and started to dry off. As he rubbed the towel down his face, across the stubble on his chin, the movement slowed, then stopped.

It was William’s towel. Fluffy and freshly laundered, yes, but his towel all the same. Probably used to dry his body before. The fabric that was on Shane’s face right now…

He shoved those thoughts aside, heart racing harder. He was not about to think these things. He was not about to *feel* these things. This was stupid, dangerous territory that he had zero permission to be in. And he’d been here before. He’d fucking *lived* here; a realm of touching, looking, and tiny intimate moments that meant fucking zilch, because he was nothing but a lovestruck idiot misreading all the neon signs.

*It’s a stupid fucking towel. What about hotels, dumbass? You gonna think about all the bodies you’re bumping with if you use one of those? It’s a stupid. Fucking. Towel.*

He stepped into the sweats, closing his eyes as he tied the drawstring.

It wasn’t just the towel. It was the clothes, that smelled like William. It was the tidy bathroom, inside an equally tidy bedroom, and the bed made with neat hospital corners, belonging to a man who made Shane’s heart race in a way he thought it never would again.

When he finally emerged William was dressed, squinting in the mirror at the cut over his eyebrow. He touched the edge of the gaping wound and scowled, then picked up a tube of glue to gently squeeze over it.

“Hey,” he said, glancing at Shane in the reflection, holding the two sides of the cut together.

“There’s a first-aid kit in the bathroom under the sink.”

Shane stopped in his tracks. “Oh. Yeah. Er—one second.”
He retrieved the kit, and William dug out a square bandage.

“Thanks. Don’t want to scare that kid of yours more than I already have.” Wincing, he pressed the adhesive down. “Fuck. I’mma have to stitch that shit tonight.” He met Shane’s eyes in the mirror. “Good job earlier, Daniels. I’d have been boned without you.”

Shane looked away, uneasy.

“Was nothing,” he said quietly. He crossed an arm over his chest to grip his shoulder, tugging it while glancing around the room. “Sorry about them, by the way. Didn’t know they were coming...”

William chuckled and closed the first-aid kit, turning to clap Shane on the back. He gave a slight squeeze. “Same shit, different toilet, man. C’mon. Let’s go face ‘em and maybe get that pump fixed today, yeah?”

Marnie had all the food set out in the kitchen. Unlike Angie the previous week, his aunt had brought a cold spread: a half dozen types of crackers and cheese, freshly cut fruit, and potato, pasta, and egg salads. Jas’s flowers were splayed in the tumbler of water at the center of the table.

William grinned at Marnie. “Well ma’am, aren’t you the sweetest? This looks great.” He pulled out a chair, winking at Jas. “And you too, little lady. Thank you both very much.”

Shane clenched again at his sudden howdy-do tone.

“I hope we weren’t a nuisance showing up like this,” Marnie said. “But Shane was telling me all about your mother’s lovely visit last week, and I figured it couldn’t hurt to give you boys a little surprise as well.”

*Telling her all about it?*

Shane narrowed his eyes. It’d kill her, wouldn’t it? It’d kill her to, just once, interpret events as they’d *actually* happened. For instance, having been bullied into a corner at dinner about the going-ons of the farm, until he’d blurted about Angie’s drop-in under sheer duress.

“Oh did he now?” said William, layering food onto his plate. “Well, it’s mighty kind, Miss Marnie.”

Jas sat quietly, once again staring at William. Her shyness hit Shane with a pang. It was a recessive trait, inherited from her mother. He knew it wouldn’t be five minutes into lunch before the extroverted, opinionated little girl came out of the woodwork—the side from her dad.

Sure enough, she grew brave.

“You have a lot of tattoos,” she said to William.

“Sure do, Missy,” he said smoothly. “I like art so much I put it right on my skin.” He turned to Marnie. “This egg salad yours? It’s amazing.”

Marnie beamed. “Eggs fresh this morning! And how are your chickens doing?”

William nodded toward Shane. “Now that I’ve got the bird whisperer? They’ve been great.”

“Oh, isn’t he so good with them? It’s uncanny!”

Shane stared at his plate, poking a piece of fruit with his fork.
“Yep,” William said. “Hellfire doesn’t even bite me anymore.”

Polite confusion crossed Marnie’s face. “Hellfire?”

“It’s what I call one of the mean chickens. Then there’s Brimstone. Sulfur. Malice. I figure call a spade a spade.”

“Ah,” she said, chuckling. “We’ve got a few of those ourselves. But Shane’s got them under his spell too.”

Shane—about to bite into a carrot stick—snapped down extra hard.

“Bernard never bites Uncle Shane, but he bit me yesterday!” Jas chirped. “Wanna see?”

“Sure do,” said William.

“Jas!” Marnie cried. “That’s not appropriate.”

“What?” William crunched into a cucumber slice. “Just a little scar sharing.”

It was Jas’s turn to beam, though hers was smug.

The smugness was familiar, and not just because it was another trait inherited from her dad. It was the same look she got when Marnie told her no, and she was able to retaliate with her trump card: but Uncle Shane said I could. And now…it was because of William.

She held out her injured pinky finger, and Shane tried to ignore the pit in his stomach.

William leaned forward to see the tiny cut. “I got myself a bobo this afternoon,” he stage whispered, “but I can’t show you ’cause I need to stitch it.”

“Oh?” Marnie looked up. “Surely you’ll go to Dr. Harvey for that?”

William shrugged. “Eh, just a little stitching. Ain’t nothing I gotta worry that doc about.”

“Have to be careful with cuts out here. Not the cleanest work, farming,” said Marnie, with an unnecessary amount of mothering in her tone. “Infections are nasty business. I really wish you’d —”

She stopped herself, and Shane knew she’d realized they were discussing infections while eating. She smiled, embarrassed, and scooped more fruit onto her plate. “Pardon me.”

“He can take care of himself, Marnie,” Shane muttered, face hot.

“Yes, well, you boys always think that. Such stubbornness.” She shook her head, as if they couldn’t possibly know better. “I mean that in the kindest way of course,” she added to William.

He coughed. “Well, appreciate the concern Miss Marnie. Shows what a sweetheart you are.”

Shane tried not to choke on his potato salad. He knew that word out of William’s mouth only meant one thing, and it sure as shit wasn’t a compliment toward his aunt.

“How about you?” William continued, in a clear drive to change subjects. “How’s the ranch doing?”

“She’s doing,” said Marnie, and Shane was grateful of her obliviousness for once. “Jas is old
enough to learn the ropes now, and she’s been a great helper. Haven’t you Jas?”

Jas wrinkled her nose.

William nodded. “Looks like you come from a family of helpers. Daniels over here has been a lifesaver.”

She turned to Shane. “Why does he call you Daniels?”

Shane froze, fork halfway to his mouth. A dart of irritation shot through him.

“Dunno, kid,” he said. “But you can call him Bauer, if you want.”

Jas looked like she didn’t know if he was joking or not, and William laughed. “Well, I used to be in the army. You call your coworkers by their last names. First names are for friends. Good friends. Just a habit, I guess.”

If the first one was a dart of irritation, this one was a damn arrow. Shane glared at his plate, shoving in a forkful of food.

You idiot. You’ve known all along he’s not your fucking friend.

He chewed.

Should start calling him Bauer myself.

His fork stabbed another bite.

Wearing his fucking clothes right now too. His fucking CLOTHES. Asshole.

“The army?” Jas’s voice perked up. “You had a gun?”

“Jas,” Marnie chided again.

“It’s okay. Yes, Missy, I had a gun.” William leaned back, done with his meal. “You two like pie? My mother sent me home with some Sunday.”

“We just so happen to love pie,” Marnie said. “Isn’t that right, Jas?”

“I’ve never seen a gun before,” Jas said, still focused on the last topic. “Just in video games. But Uncle Shane has knives! He’s teaching me tricks.”

Marnie looked at William sharply. “Not,” she said, as if he might object, “with real blades, mind you.”

Shane rolled his eyes at the table.

Knife tricks. Shooter games. The occasional ‘damn’ or ‘hell.’ In swooped Marnie with her disapproval. He’d survived a lot fucking worse at Jas’s age, and none of those things were scarring her, least of all the bladeless balisong.

“Well,” said William, pulling down a pie tin, and cutting some pieces. “After a person gets done with service, they don’t keep the gun anymore. But I think knives are real useful. Just gotta be careful with them.”

“I agree,” said Marnie. Clearly wanting a subject change, she added, “Seems you boys get along
well out here! I’m so glad this situation has been working out.”

William nodded, walking over with the pie. “Oh yeah. In fact, other than my pump shi—” he hesitated “—shutting down, it’s been a good week.”

“And what luck Shane started with you before that happened! Looked like a two man job, for sure.” She grabbed Shane’s shoulder, giving it an affectionate wiggle. “I’m just glad he’s got a job out in the sunshine. He’s always been so good on the ranch, and JojaMart was depressing as the hills.”

“Marnie,” he hissed, jerking out of her grip.

_Please. Keep treating me like a four year old in front of my boss. Really. You have no idea how good this feels._

“What?” she said. “It’s good, Shane. Looks like you’ve already got a friend out here too.”

That word again. That _fucking_ word again.

Dropping his head to his hands, he aggressively rubbed his temples. Warmth was rising, the burn of craving that whispered how much he needed a drink; how much easier it’d be to contain this bubbling anger if he had a few shots of liquor in him.

Marnie? She didn’t _fucking_ deserve his resentment. She put up with so much, and Shane knew any decent person would be grateful. They’d be thanking her ass every day.

And yet, here she was, doing a million small things that pushed every one of his buttons in sequence.

“He just as much a chatterbox with you?” he heard her ask William.

Shane looked up as William set down his fork, finished.

“Don’t mind it. Sort of peaceful, actually.” He pushed back his chair and stood. “Hope I won’t come off as rude, Miss Marnie, but I need to try and call that plumber today if I have a prayer of getting water to my plants tonight.”

“Oh, not at all!” Marnie smiled, placing her napkin down. “We’ll be on our way, I know you boys have a lot of work to do. And you keep those leftovers.”

“Mighty kind of you.”

Shane stood with the rest of them, silent and tense. He ought to have felt relief at their departure, but his head had gone too dark. The coals within were hot, growing redder by the minute, and it was taking all his focus not to snap.

“Bye, Uncle Shane!” Jas cried, her small arms catching him around the waist.

He hugged back, not really registering it, and through a filter of static watched as she walked out the door with his aunt.
When Marnie and Jas left, William expected Shane to be relieved.

If one were to express relief by stalking around and glaring at things, then sure, he was relieved as hell.

William started cleaning up, and Shane followed. He loudly stacked plates and balled up used napkins as though he could crush whatever was bothering him. When he threw them away, the trash bin rocked from the impact.

"Break my can and I break your head, Daniels," William warned.

"It's a fucking napkin."

William raised his eyebrow at the dark tone.

A second later Shane dumped leftover food scraps, once more with too much force. The plastic liner sank, tipping it again. If he kept that up the whole thing would fall over.

"What got your panties in a wad?" William asked, placing rolled cold cuts into a container.

"Maybe the fact that they're yours," Shane shot.

Well. If that didn’t just get the heart racing.

"So you're thinking about my panties?" It was an in. "Must have made quite an impression."

Shane snorted. "Not as pretty a sight as you fucking think."

"Liar," William said. "My ass is fantastic."

He put the rest of the containers down and turned to face Shane. The stubborn, denying jerk was refusing to look back. Waiting him out was as effective as giving a brick wall the silent treatment. How could he be fine ignoring this growing…whatever it was between them?

William sure as fuck wasn’t.

*Now to just get the scared sonofabitch to admit it.*

Shane flipped the faucet on to wet a dishcloth. The stream shot out, spraying both the counter and his shirt before he slammed it off. He strangled the excess water from the rag, swearing.

"All that grinding against the pump got you flustered, Sadsack?" William taunted, unable to help himself. "Don't worry. I won't tell."

Shane shoved past him and aggressively wiped down the counter, refusing to make eye contact. "Fuckin’ seeing what you wanna see, man," he said in a tight voice.

William stalked closer. Too close, apparently; Shane flung down the rag and stormed onto the porch, pulling at his borrowed shirt as if it were made of itchy wool instead of soft cotton.

Frustration goaded William to follow, words he’d been holding back pouring out. "Oh, you tired of talking now?" he snapped. "Not surprising. All that repression has got to be exhausting."

Shane stopped in his tracks, his back going rigid.

They were getting close to violence, William realized. So close to another explosion between them.
He focused on Shane's reaction, a sign that he was getting through—something other than the swing/miss of a connection. Yet, he'd made a promise not to let it go that far again. And Shane didn’t want that either. Did he?

William watched him walk towards the steps. Just when it looked like he was going to leave peacefully, Shane’s foot shot out, kicking the bucket of empty beer bottles with a bang that sent them rolling over the porch.

Rage flared in William’s chest.

He wanted to kick something that bad? He’d give him something to fucking kick.

Two strides across the porch and he was down the steps, his arm thrown over Shane’s shoulder in a surprise headlock. He hauled him back and Shane’s feet shuffled, trying to keep his balance against the sudden attack. William pinned his arm, hauling up on the thumb. It kept him immobilized.

“Why the fuck do you think it’s okay,” William snarled in his ear, “to kick my shit?”

He let Shane hurt himself against the grip, knowing the minute that the fuckwad relaxed, the pain would ease.

Shane was stupid, so he struggled. “Fucking touch me again, I swear!”

William held the pin, keeping control on the hand until he shut up, focusing his mouth on breathing instead of making empty-ass threats. More flailing around. More pain. William’s heart slammed. Shane thought this was touching?

*Baby boy, you don’t know fuckall about how I could really touch you.*

The wrestling match was good, even if it wasn’t what he craved. Not like at the pump when they’d moved in unison. Not like the other day when he’d stayed, despite William’s unsolicited wrist grab. Not like the first day on the porch when he’d reached back, fingers on puckered flesh, eyes soft and shy.

Finally he broke. He hung against William’s arm, limp and sweating.

William was shaken. Not just by how hard it was to let Shane go, but also by how much he enjoyed holding him still.

"We fucking good now?"

He’d intended the phrase to be a growl. Intimidating, to remind them both who was boss and that they better be good, damn it. Instead it came out soft. Not like talking to an angry bitch who’d crossed the line, but as reassurance that this wasn’t a make-or-break moment.

Stiff as a pole, Shane rubbed his elbow down to his hand, glaring at the ground. "We're fine,” he muttered. “I got work to do."

William stayed put as he headed toward the barn.

*It's never enough.*

He watched him go, feeling what was becoming a familiar swirl of frustration. This attraction? It wasn’t okay. Shane was his subordinate. The power difference here was completely unequal, and only a douchebag looked at an employee like he was a potential lay.
Or more.

Despite knowing it wasn’t right, Shane had inexplicably become more over the last couple of weeks. Not just a worker he paid, but someone who understood the way it felt to be alone and trapped in his own head. And today? The attraction was there. He knew it was.

*We have got to resolve this somehow.*

William considered following him. Laid out a pros and cons list about confronting it head on, and damn the consequences. They could talk about it, and maybe Shane would look him in the face and deny what William was projecting.

Then again, maybe he wouldn’t.

He was just about to turn back to the house when dust kicked up down his drive. Squinting, he sank back on his heels.

The plumber was here.

He gave one more look toward the barns.

Later, he decided, stepping up the porch. For now, they both had work to do.

Shane hated the way, ever since meeting William, that he lost control.

He was used to freaking out alone, tucked behind closed doors and darkness before giving way to his deepest frustrations. Screaming into a pillow. Smashing a hand into the side of his head. Balling knees to his chest, and using them to hide the tears. That shit? He kept it far the fuck away from other people.

Until now. Throwing beer bottles and kicking buckets, right out in the open at his fucking job.

Not that it’d always been at his job with William. There *was* that whole nice-to-meet-you with their fists off the clock. But they’d both been drunk then, looking for an outlet for their own twisted moods. It’d been so uncharacteristic for Shane, who usually spent his time at the bar trying to blend in with the worn stool, the only exchange of the night being, “Can I get you a refill?” and a nod.

He threw bag after bag of feed onto the shelf in William’s storage barn, grunting, and on the fourth one a tear ripped through the plastic mesh. Seed sprinkled out in a fine waterfall to the ground.

Shane groaned.

He dug through a couple of wooden crates until finding a bag that would fit the torn one, slipping it over top and muttering in frustration as more seed poured at his feet.

How many boxes had he blown out in the back storage of JojaMart from slamming them too hard? When he was agitated and alone, it was always like this. Throw things harder. Move shit with more force. Smash spoiled potatoes against the far wall of the garbage chute, pitching them like baseballs that had personally done him wrong.
William…he just…he fucking knew how to press every damn lever.

Shane wished he could be wearing his own goddamn clothes. Not these slightly baggy sweats, or this shirt that smelled of musk and citrus, and some other warm scent he was trying—without success—to ignore. He’d never worn a scent. It was obnoxious, getting whiffs every time he bent over. Didn’t he get enough of William throughout the day? As if he needed those tattooed knuckles knocking on his mental door when he was just trying to finish his damn job.

He slammed his shovel on a hook. It rattled the whole rack of tools, and William’s dark warning flashed through his head, the one about not breaking his shit.

Fuck you, dude.

Shane gave the rack another shove as he walked away, rusty metal clanging behind him like a crude wind chime.

Fucking Marnie too. Popping in by surprise, a week after William’s own mother had just done the same. Like a more cracked, colorful, clueless version of Angie, with her “Yoo hoos!” and cheese spreads, talking about Shane’s work on the farm as if it were a meeting of the boy scouts and not his motherfucking job.

What had William said once? Something about straight women being the bane of his existence? Fuck, if that wasn’t the stupid truth.

Not like the asshole had to be his friend to make a decent point.

By quitting time he was sweaty and dog-tired, having exerted twice the usual energy on his chores. He felt a bit better, too exhausted to hold onto the bad feelings so tight.

Wiping his forehead with his arm, he squinted out the open door at the low-hanging suppertime sun. It scorched the fields in blinding gold, and beat down on Shane’s shoulders as he left the barn and slowly walked back to the farmhouse.

He didn’t know what to expect. Not that he planned on staying for the usual happy hour, given their fight, but he’d never gone home without some kind of goodbye. If not beer, what was the fucking protocol for a clock-out on this job?

Nearing the house, he slowed.

Classic rock drifted from a radio, soft music enveloping the porch. On the railing was a fifth of whiskey and two rock glasses, sunlight shimmering on their rims.

Apparently the protocol was liquor.

William, once again shirtless, sat in the corner with a long mirror propped in front of him. Tools were laid out on a cloth, and he wore a pair of clean latex gloves, examining his cut in the reflection. The first-aid kit was open beside his boots. Only now did Shane realize how fucking massive it was. He’d been too distracted in the bedroom to notice. William was either preparing for an apocalypse, or really just hurt himself that often.

He selected a cotton swab, and glanced up when Shane stopped at the steps.

Their eyes met.

One look into that gentle blue, and the tension in Shane’s chest gave way. It wasn’t just release. It
rolled down his body like water, cool and cleansing, and left him with the same feeling as the morning after their last fight, when William had tossed him the gloves.

*Forgiven.*

Much as he had the ability to make Shane more angry, frustrated, and uncomfortable than anyone else in the world…when the moment was done, it was done.

William returned to his reflection, dabbing his cut with the swab. “Pour me one too, eh?”

The bottom step creaked under Shane’s boot. He walked to the railing and uncapped the whiskey. Still cautious, keeping an eye on William, he poured them each a shot. Liquid trickled into glass, loud in the sleepy afternoon air.

William turned back to the tools. He picked up a curved needle, threaded with black sutures, and clamped a pair of tweezers around it. “You ever gotten stitches before?”

Shane recapped the whiskey.

“No,” he said, pulse quickening as he walked the shot over. He placed it on the chair arm, and stepped back against the house, watching through the mirror.

William let out a breath and shoved the clamped needle through the bottom of the gash. It pierced the top side, and with a grunt of pain he pulled the thread through his skin. Though puckering open on the sides, it sealed flush under the stitch when he twirled the tweezers. After three more knots he cut the thread, then grabbed the whiskey and downed it.

“Again, please,” he rasped, tapping the edge of his glass.

Shane retrieved the bottle and poured him a second, more generous serving.

He stepped back to watch as another stitch was punctured into place, and his gaze slid from the surgery to the artwork on William’s back. He’d seen the tattoos many times over the last few weeks. Never this close, though, nor with this leisure. At first it was just admiring the detail and shading, but then Shane noticed the unevenness of the skin beneath them. Little bumps and rivets. Mesmerized, he followed them down the spine. Just like the barbed wire camouflaging his track marks—more scars hidden by ink.

His line of sight broke when William leaned closer to the mirror.

“I hate doctors,” he muttered, tilting his head and examining the newest stitch.

A surge of appreciation rushed through Shane. He hated doctors, too. Hospitals. Clinics. ERs. They all took his head to a bad place. Marnie had tried so hard to get him to see Doctor Harvey after their fight, but Shane had flat-out refused.

Fuck doctors.

William threw back the second shot, and Shane looked down, realizing his drink was still untouched. An inch of warm amber liquid rested in the bottom. He tilted it, watching the surface slip gently from side to side.

“Probably wish you had something stronger, huh?” he said.

“Nope,” said William, grim. “I don’t do stronger.”
Shane’s face grew hot.

He’d only meant something stronger to drink. Absinthe, Everclear, anything beyond the 40 proof whiskey in their glasses. But of course. To William, that meant heroin.

*Stupid, insensitive asshole.*

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“It’s nothing, Daniels.” William lined up the needle against his wound. “No harm, no foul.”

Committing once again, he shoved it through his skin.

Shane watched the process all over again. Stitching, twirling, knotting. He wondered how many times William had done it before. Surely in the army they had nurses to take care of things like this, but the movements were so practiced and focused that it couldn’t be his first time.

William snipped the final thread and sagged.

“Jesusfuck, you must think I’m a crazy motherfucker,” he said, dropping his tools and rubbing the non-stitched side of his head. “Sane people go to a doctor for this shit.”

Shane shrugged. “I dunno,” he said softly. “If you can do it yourself…” He handed over the bottle of whiskey. “But yeah, you’re a crazy motherfucker.”

William twisted off the cap, barking a laugh. “That’s more like it.”

He poured two shots in his rock glass. This time when he threw them back, Shane joined him, the booze a snappy burst down his throat. He closed his eyes, and remembered being in the bathroom earlier that day—the DANGER signs that had flashed through his head like a storm warning.

William slammed his empty glass on the arm of the chair. He groaned, then with a soft laugh peeled off the surgical gloves and dropped them aside.

Shane’s heart raced.

*You’ve only known each other a few weeks. This is bullshit. Just because he’s the first person to give you attention in years…*

It meant nothing.

If he let it mean something, he deserved whatever crash came his way.

The radio switched songs. William began to close up shop, just as a cloud shifted over the sun and dropped them into shade.

Lost in thought, Shane stared into the bottom of his empty glass, until the sound of chair legs scraping against wood caught his attention. William had dragged the chair back to its usual spot against the house. His mess was cleaned up, the first-aid kit sealed off to the side, and he sank down just as the clouds parted to reveal sunlight once more. He poured another shot, then wordlessly held out the bottle.

Shane took it.

“Fucking today,” he muttered, pouring one for himself.
William nodded. “Fucking today.”

They threw the whiskey back in unison.

William stared out at the fields, which were finally getting a good watering. He rested his head in his hand and blew out a breath.

“You ever just feel…” he started softly. “Just…fucking alone, Daniels?”

Shane stilled.

Of course he felt alone. Who the fuck didn’t? But, right now, it was the last thing he’d expected to hear. He tucked the bottle of whiskey into his elbow, then grabbed his chair from the side of the porch and dragged it next to William’s.

“Doesn’t fucking everyone?” he said, quietly pouring them each another shot.

“Maybe.” William accepted his. “But with so many people on this dirtball, you’d think it wouldn’t be so hard to just…not be alone.”

They drank.

This was dangerous, Shane knew. They hadn’t drank this much together since his first day on the job. An open bottle between them, no less—something almost impossible for him to resist. But dangerous or not, William’s words struck deep.

“I dunno.” Shane swirled a lone drop of whiskey left in his glass. “Always seemed pretty hard to me.”

William watched him, cheek resting in his palm. “Me too,” he said, closing his eyes. “Fucking sucks.”

Shane bit his lip.

He wanted to capture this image. Not because William was handsome. Not because he was shirtless, or had a freshly stitched wound that drew Shane’s gaze like a magnet. But because in the last few weeks, he’d never seen him look so damn human.

Almost, almost, touchable.

“Yeah,” Shane said, staring at him. “It does.”

William rubbed his eyes, as if they were bothering him.

“I’m fucked. You might as well head home.” He pushed out of his chair, unsteady. “You got a nice family and shit, Daniels. Glad I got to hang out with ‘em.” He headed into the house, pausing in the doorway. In a gruff voice—one stripped of its usual certainty—he said, “See you tomorrow?”

Shane twisted the cap on the whiskey.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, walking close enough to return the bottle. “For sure.”

William’s fingers brushed his as he took it. Shoving the whiskey in his back pocket, he nodded at Shane, eyes red.

Then he turned inside and closed the door.
Shane curled his hand in a loose fist, rubbing the fingers slowly with his thumb. The ones William had just brushed against with the lightest of touch.

He shook his head.

*Snap. The fuck. Out of it.*

Shoving both hands in his pockets, he headed home.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for spending another week with us!

We love to hear what our readers think of the chapters, so if you have a moment to drop your thoughts in the comments, it’s much appreciated.

For more SB stuff, follow us on [tumblr](#), or join our [discord server](#). We’ve got a great group of lovely & supportive people hanging out!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is July 7th, 2-4pm PST.
The clink of glasses in his mother’s sunroom rang through his ears like tinnitus. The wicker furniture squeaked when he shifted. William always worried that he’d wind up on the floor in a pile of white-painted splinters.

Jane Whatsherface perched on the opposite chair, her blonde hair an artful tangle of curls, her dress a fashionable cut in pastel yellow. William had retreated to the enclosed porch to avoid the crowds. Only once he’d sat down, who should swan in but the very people he’d been trying to politely ditch.

“You know, I also got the house on the coast,” Cam—the object of his objections—said, swirling a mimosa between long brown fingers. “I think I’m going to sell it.”

William knew that was a lie. When they’d been planning their doomed wedding, Cam had plastered brochures of sunny beaches and surf over every surface of their apartment; never mind the fact that constant wet skin and sand triggered William’s PTS like smashing a button.

“Oh,” simpered Jane, “it would be so much work to maintain. I don’t blame you.”

William glanced at his watch. Two hours had passed and he was ready to clock out of his weekly check-in.

“Though,” Cam said, as if he’d just thought of it. “Will, do you want to come tour it with me before I put it on the market? Angie says that you finally hired someone. They could watch the farm for a weekend.”

William drank down the rest of the champagne-spiked OJ to hide his glare.

_The Bowery isn’t a fucking dog. I can’t leave a bowl of kibble next to a water dish._

“Don’t know much about houses,” he said, rolling the flute between his callused fingers. He’d kill for some damn whiskey-laced coffee to cut the sweetness of the drink.

Cam sighed, as if cut to the quick. Jane leaned over and squeezed his arm.

“Well, Cam, congratulations on the divorce. We’re all so happy to see you get what you deserve.”
William watched the exchange, noting how Cam held his flinch back at the unexpected touch. Gloria, Cam’s mother, used to do that: squeeze his arm while digging her nails through the sleeve. Cam hated to be touched anywhere that wasn’t his shoulders or back. But did he pull away? No. Because they might know he wasn’t Ma’s perfect little Prince Charming. Instead, he gave a smile and kissed cheeks, playing nice before waving her off. She tipsily made her way back to the crowd.

“That girl is going to break something,” Cam said.

William put the glass on the end table and caught Cam giving him one of his patented ‘Well hello handsome’ looks.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he asked.

“You best be careful yo mama don’t hear you talking like that.”

“She won’t unless your narc-ass tells her,” William said. “I mean it, Baker. What the hell is up with you?”

“I don’t know why you’re being crude.” Cam sniffed, that polite affection on his voice again.

“We’ve barely seen each other outside of these godforsaken tea parties, and now you want to go away for a weekend? The rebound that bad?”

Cam coughed at William’s words. “I am not rebounding,” he snapped.

“You’re a fucking basketball,” William said, pushing to his feet. “I mean. I get it. I’m fucking hot shit.” This earned a glare, which was better than fucking bedroom eyes. “Baker, maybe go reach for balls that are actually interested in you playing with them.”

“I swear to God, if I hadn’t seen your baby pictures, I’d think you were found in a dumpster with a sign that said ‘free baby’.”

William flipped him off and took his stupid tiny dishes to the kitchen. Cam followed, skirting past tables full of well-dressed women, men in suits, and children in their Sunday best, dashing towards the back yard to play ring toss.

“Where are you going, anyway?” Cam asked.

“Home,” William said.

“Why are you wearing a bandage over your eye? And you’re moving like you have rubber bands on your back. What are you doing to yourself?”

“Working.”

“Working doesn’t translate to hurting.”

“Butt out, Baker.”

“Will, honey, I’m trying—”

William slapped his hand back when it reached for the bandage over his eye. “Hey,” he said, glaring. “I mean it. Ain’t happening. Whatever this”—he gestured between them—“is? It’s on your side. So handle your shit.”

Gretchen tutted from the stove.
“Tell William he’s being a stubborn ass, Gretch!” Cam cried.

“Leave me out of that mess,” Gretchen warned, tossing some popovers out of their tins and into a basket. “It’s bad enough that you’re learning habits from Angie. I’m not getting between whatever lover’s quarrel—”

“Not lovers,” William snarled.

”—the two of you are involved in this time.”

They all stopped talking when the kitchen door swung open again. It was Ma. She was on a mission, carrying a small tray of dirty flatware, eyes scanning the room. “Gretchen, are we out of —”

She paused, frowning at William and Cam.

“I’ve got Josh running a fresh pastry basket,” Gretchen said, handing a basket of popovers, danishes and croissants over the counter.

“Right,” Ma said, still distracted. “Will, you’re leaving already?”

“It’s almost one. I need to go home and do evening milking.”

She sighed, as if this was the worst news she’d heard all day. “Well, I’ve got to keep the mayor distracted. His daughter got a tattoo and he’s having a meltdown.”

“You’d have some experience dealing with that,” William said, pulling his jacket on, tattooed knuckles popping out of the end.

“Indeed.” One brow poised, she leaned forward to kiss him goodbye. Just when he thought he was going to get free, she said, “Before you go son, nip upstairs and let Cam take a look at that eye. It’s hideous.”

William’s temples pulsed. “Ma, I—”

“William,” she said, her voice leaving no room to argue. “I ask for very little. My friend Cameron is a nurse practitioner and very experienced with treating macho, bullheaded, military showboats. Let him at least make sure the skin on your face won’t rot off and you can go home and play with your cows. Hmm?”

William closed his eyes, grunted, and turned on his heel to stalk upstairs.

The hallways were dead silent compared to the hustle and bustle of the downstairs. He went into a massive, expensively decorated bathroom, bigger than his guest room.

“Sit,” Cam ordered, pointing to a padded chair that matched the rest of the ostentatious decor. He took off his blazer and began to roll up his sleeves.

“Don’t be thinking,” William said, plopping down, “that we’re playing doctor.”

“Would you stop whining, you enormous child?” Cam ran hot water and pulled out the first aid kit, going through it with a critical eye. “Now. What happened to your face?”

“Angels came from heaven and beat me with the sexy stick,” William deadpanned.

Cam rolled his eyes.
“The longer you stall, the longer this takes.” He found a pair of exam gloves and pulled them on. “Now, I would not object to that, so if you want to continue spending quality time together—”

“I got hit by a rogue lugnut from my water pump,” William growled, irritated all over again that Cam had just made sarcasm outlawed.

Cam pulled the bandage off the eye, squinting.

“Who sutured this?” he asked, tilting William’s head. His hands were gentle, wrapped in smooth latex. Not a thing like the rough, work-hewn ones he’d been fantasizing about.

“Me,” William said.

Cam glared down at him. “This is your eye, Bauer. One wants to keep needles away from it.”

“Seemed like a pretty small cut.”

“I didn’t teach you to suture so you would stitch your face. It was for emergencies!”

“Well, it was pretty emergent not to bleed all over myself.”

Cam groaned and went back to the kit, breaking out supplies and slamming them down. He turned back with an alcohol-soaked swab. “At least tell me you injected something to numb it.”

“Whiskey is God’s natural numbing cream.”

Cam scowled, cleaning around the sutures. “You know you shouldn’t be drinking.”

“Oh god,” William said. “Don’t you fucking start.”

“You’ve been off the heroin for over four years but we still can’t get you off the booze.”

“The heroin,” he snapped, “was a fucking problem. Alcohol isn’t.”

Cam smeared anti-bacterial cream into the cut. “You’re an idiot, because you really believe that.”

“I do not have that problem.”

“You stopped going to meetings, and you refuse to get help.”

“I got help,” William said as Cam pulled off his gloves. “Works five days a week, and talks a whole lot less than you.”

“Not farm help, you dickhead. I mean help for your Post-Traumatic Stress. When did you last go to your doctor and get scans on your surgical sites?”

William stood and snatched a band-aid from the box, pressing it against the cut. “Are we done here?”

Cam huffed. “Someone has to worry about you, William Bauer.”

“I’ve got a mother,” William said, turning towards the door. “Don’t need another.”

Cam stalked him down the stairs, through the kitchen and to the garage. “William.” He reached out, grabbing his forearm. “Wait.”

He froze at the tug on his jacket.
“What?” he asked, not bothering to turn around.

“I mean it. I’m worried about you.”

William rolled his eyes and pulled his arm back, starting toward his truck, parked farther down the street. Cam doggedly followed, long legs keeping up with William’s brisk pace.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re all alone out there. Isolated. That’s not good for you.”

“Farms are peaceful, Baker. Fresh air and all that good healthy shit.”

“You aren’t a very good hermit, Bauer,” Cam retorted. “Angie said you were beat to hell three weeks ago. Said you looked like a reject from an action movie. Now you’re showing up with a bloody eye—”

“Accidents happen,” William protested.

“I’m trying to make sure that you’re okay!”

William turned and threw his hands up. “And I said that I’m fine!”

Exasperated, Cam fisted his hands on his hips. “Will, you—”

William cut him off by pulling out his keys and hitting the fob. Down the street, his truck beeped, the lights flashing like a signal for safety. “Look,” he said, “you have been having a hard time. The ink is drying on your papers. It’s real now. I get that you’re a bit freaked.”

“Me?” Cam said, caught off balance.

William glared, spearing him in place with his eyes. “Yes. You. Stop trying to distract yourself by mollycoddling me. I’m fine, and going to be fine.”

Cam sighed and crossed his arms, but instead of getting angry and defensive like the old days, he sunk in on himself. William clenched his jaw as they walked toward the truck again.

They arrived, and as he grabbed the handle, in a vulnerable voice, Cam asked, “Do you ever think about us? The way it used to be? When we were good?”

Not when I can fucking help it.

“Cam,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Don’t do this.”

“I mean it, Will. Things are different than they used to be.”

William stared up at the blue sky and let out a breath, eyes tracking one of the fluffy white clouds that crossed his view. The clouds were sharper somehow, easier to see. The air wasn’t so stuffed with shitty memories and guilt.

“Yeah, they’re different,” he agreed, “because I don’t love you anymore.”

He opened the door and started the truck, then drove away and didn’t look back.
Monday went like Thursday and Friday. That is to say, nothing fucking happened.

Instead, they worked. Talking? Who needed to talk when he could nod, grunt, or point for something?

The afternoon was filled with harvesting blueberries until the tractor broke. When William needed to buy a part to fix the combine, Shane stayed and prepped the repair, cleaning off the smashed fruits that had gunked up the gears, saving at least an hour of labor.

Later, while drinking after work, William wanted to say thank you, but sensed Shane would take it wrong.

Tuesday and Wednesday were the same. Small emergencies cropped up, and before William could do more than heave out a frustrated curse, Shane was there, a silent and willing hand who followed instructions the first time. Leak in the water tanks? Shane remembered where he’d seen William’s patch kit. Bovine abscess? Shane held the cow in that strange and calm state he lulled them into, while William completed the cleanest and quickest wound drain of his entire agricultural career. Clog in the drain? Shane went in with the waders and snaked out the clog while William held back the rest of the sewage.

He didn’t bitch about the nasty work. Didn’t grouse about all of the legitimate messiness. Just accepted his whiskey with a nod, and sipped in the twilight silence that settled on the summer evening.

Thursday afternoon, nothing went wrong. It was a long and repetitive day of back and forth effort. They pulled in bushels and bushels of purple fruit, and ran them through the processing bins to puree into jams. It was sticky, hot work, yet when Shane was walking across the farm after, leaving William alone on the porch, he wanted to turn back time for those hours of synchronized solidarity.

*You don’t make a very good hermit, Bauer.*

Tell him something he didn’t know.

Friday morning, William decided that if he was going to ruin whatever was between them by pushing for more, he’d better do it with a weekend to recover.

Because, he thought, as they rinsed out milking hoses, it was stupid not to try.

He considered how to broach it all day. When they were bottling milk. When they were loading up the deliveries for Saturday. When they were eating lunch. How he could just say, “Hey, wanna try to be more than friends and see how it goes?”

Only if he wanted to scare Shane into rabbiting.

As the sun passed its peak, an idea struck him. He waited until they’d culled the oldest berry bushes, plants too old to have another good harvest. After unloading the final set of branches into the compost heap, he pulled off his gloves and groaned.

“Fuck this day,” he announced, tossing them in the nearby toolbox. “I’m calling it, Daniels.”

The field was a graveyard of stubs, all cut down for the oncoming fall. William felt beat to fuck. He’d been distracted by his plan all afternoon.
“Want me to keep going?” Shane asked. “Don’t mind.”

There he went being all fucking perfect again, William thought with disgust. The boss wanted to take a break? Sure thing. Let me just keep going, because it’s what needs to be done.

He squinted out, searching for a reason to talk Shane out of this reasonable and hardworking statement.

“If you want to, I guess. We got done fast though. Last year I was at this till almost 9:00 pm.” He rubbed his back. “Sorry, that’s all I’ve got today. I’m going to the spa. You’re welcome to join, but if I don’t soak this back of mine I’mma wake up tomorrow as a pretzel.”

Shane paused, not yet taking off his gloves. “Spa actually helps?”

It helped so much he should be doing it two or three times a week.

“Yes. Heat and all that. I’ve been too bushed. Shouldn’t have put it off this long.” He rubbed his back, and felt Shane watching him. He might’ve thought he was subtle, but William saw the low-key nervousness as he jerked his gaze down.

“I, uh. Never really finished up in the coop yesterday,” Shane muttered. “I mean, I did but—I could’ve done better. I should go do that.”

Cocking his head, William stared. “You chickenshit, Daniels? Still afraid I’m going to eat you?”

“Need to do what you’re paying me for.”

William rolled his eyes. “You always scour those pens like they’re a hotel. Saw them this morning. I could eat dinner off those floors.” He started toward the house, knowing with an arrogance backed by long experience that his body was a striking sight from behind. “Lie to yourself, sweetheart. Don’t lie to me.”

Shane didn’t respond, nor did he follow, but William didn’t care. His plan was already set in motion.

He went inside, changed, and focused on packing up a duffle bag with extra clothes. Shane might try to pretend they were just dudes being dudes, but it had been a week and he hadn’t returned any of the clothes he’d borrowed after the pump fiasco. They’d affected him. William had seen him pulling on that shirt like it was going to strangle him.

He loaded the duffle with another pair of drawstring pants and worn tractor supply t-shirt like he was loading ammo into a canon.

*Even if he backs out later, that’ll give him something to think about.*

Extra towels, a pair of flip flops, and a fresh bottle of whiskey completed his preparations.

It took ten minutes to hunt Shane down. True to his word, he was kneeling in front of an already-clean feed trough, scrubbing away as if determined to put a hole through the shining perch. William’s eyes roamed around the pen, noting swept floors and fresh hay for the second time that day.

“Damn. You work fast.”

Shane glanced up, taking in his relaxed stance, changed clothes, and duffle bag. Grunting, he
turned back to his work.

Shithead.

“C’mon, Daniels,” William said, pulling out his secret weapon. He dangled the fifth of whiskey in front of Shane’s face. “Make sure my broken ass doesn’t trip and die on the way up, eh?”

The whiskey, William knew, was the deciding factor. It wasn’t the liquor, but the symbol of ‘work is over.’ Ever since Shane had seen him go Dr. Hacksaw, they’d spent every afternoon with a few shots at the end of the day. William liked to think of it as their tradition. God knew he’d never had a steady drinking buddy before this.

Shane sighed, reluctantly pushing off his knee. He grabbed the whiskey as he stood. “Part of the job description now?”

“Farmhand, you have the unique and questionable pleasure of a flexible job description. One day you can write ‘caretaker for crazy’ on your resume. Now stop waffling and come on.”

Without waiting for an answer he left the coop. When there were no footsteps behind him, he swiveled back around. Shane stood holding the bottle, frozen in place.

“What now?”

“Just…” Shane’s face flushed as he rolled it in his hand, watching the golden liquid slosh. “I don’t got clothes.”

Where we’re going, you ain’t gonna need clothes.

William shook his duffle. “Lucky for you, I’m a planner. I got extra.”

For a moment, Shane remained still. Then he sighed and tossed the bottle back. “Whatever. Make sure you don’t die. Fine.”

William caught it, slipping it into his bag.

“Good to have you on board, Daniels,” he said, heading out the coop door. “Love that proactive spirit.” He walked them toward the hill path behind his house that led to the village spa. “Such a can-do attitude.”

“Knock it off or I bail.”

William laughed. “Now if you do that, how are you supposed to win Employee of the Week?”

Shane shoved his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground as they walked.

For a few minutes William let the silence settle; that comfortable silence that formed when they worked side by side. Yet, it was happening wasn’t it? They were ‘off the clock’ despite William’s jokes about this being in Shane’s job description, and it was more intense than sharing a few shots at the end of the day on the porch. They’d be relaxing together...intimately.

He realized, with the interest of finding a new variation of a crop, that he was nervous.

Shane was nervous too, but unlike William, he hadn’t had a society mother to train the tells out of him.

After a few more feet, he nudged Shane with his elbow, nodding up toward the trees. “Leaves
change soon. Gonna be raking to do then.”

Shane glanced up, shrugged, and looked back down at the dirt road passing under their feet. “Raking’s not bad.”

*He swings and he misses.*

William tried again. “New season of gridball too. Fall brings out the sports.”

“Yep. ‘Bout that time.”

Sensing a window of an opening, William pressed. “Tunnelers ain’t got a chance in hell to make more than like, three wins max this season.”

Shane snorted. “You always spew horseshit, or just on Fridays?”

*Paydirt.*

“What, you think they’ve got potential? Nah, man. That coach couldn’t make a decent lineup if you gave him a ruler.”

“Oh come on,” said Shane, rolling his eyes. “Peters and Wallinburg are starting kickers this season.”

They bickered about gridball the entire way to the spa, Shane unable to let any of William’s observations slide without some hard fact about why he was wrong. The walk passed quickly, Shane rolling through a diatribe about player abilities, a damn-near encyclopedic list of previous plays, stats, and strategy. He was a walking gridball genius.

“See,” Shane said, when they reached the spa, “knew you were fucking mental weeks ago. But did I listen to myself? No, and now I’m working for a dumbass who thinks Carter is better off on the bleachers.”

It was, William realized, the most he’d ever gotten out of Shane in the entire time they’d been working together. He rolled his eyes as he held open the door for him. “Man, but look at his numbers! He gives one flashy play—one—and the sportswriters think he’s the next Green. He ain’t. He’s a one-trick pony, and lots of bookies are going to win some cash on losers betting their life savings on a wish and a dream.”

They entered the changing room, where William dropped his bag on the bench and pulled out the extra set of clothes wrapped in a towel, tossing them to Shane.

Shane caught them. “Nothing wrong with a one-trick pony if that trick melts the other teams’ face off.”

William laughed, trying to imagine the kick in question expanding into a pulse-wave that blew flesh off a stadium of fans like wax melting from a candle. He shook his head, remembering the previous argument, waving a hand to emphasize his point.

“Now, if that dumbass would put Henson on the field instead of having him warm the bench like a fart machine—”

“Henson runs like he’s got a flamingo up his ass.”

William grinned. “I mean, maybe he takes it up the ass, but boy can still throw. Which I’ll be
damned if we ever see Carter throw in a straight line.” He pulled his shirt off, folding it and tucking it in a locker, and reached for his belt buckle.

Shane froze.

William turned his back to remove the belt, making the movement casual. He stepped out of his shorts, revealing his swim trunks beneath, and observed Shane’s stiffness in the side mirror that hung from the locker door.

Shane opened the nearest locker and set his stack of things inside. He unfolded the towel, taking the clothes out one by one. Restacked them. Refolded the sleeve of the t-shirt that popped out. Fidgeted with the bottom of the shirt he wore, fingers curling around the hem before releasing it.

“So like, in your dream lineup, which you live in, which is more important? Strong kickers or strong runners?” William asked, seeking to break the tension that had arisen in the silence.

Shane reached for his watch instead of the clothes. “Kickers,” he said, fiddling with the clasp.

William sighed theatrically. “Now I know why this friendship is doomed.” He closed the locker door and wrapped his towel around his shoulders, heading toward the exit. “To be continued in the pool.”

He stepped out of the room and paused, staring into the empty walkway that separated it from the heated spring in the spa. If he did this, he was going to change it all. It wasn’t too late to turn back and claim he’d forgotten something at the house.

But no.

Even if this turned out for the worst, with Shane quitting after realizing how William felt, he had to do this.

Head on.

Life was too damn short to be afraid of being hurt.

The water in the spa was almost too hot to bear. William sank in slowly, feeling like a crawfish slipping into a boiling pot. The heat ran through his chilled bare feet, up his legs, and ballooned his swim trunks. His back—straining from the repetitive bend and rise of tending blueberry bushes—started to unknot, and he took his first deep breath of the day.

This might not be terrible. Maybe...maybe it would go better than expected.

He moved to the end of the pool and leaned against warm tile. It wasn’t sunset yet. The glass roof of the spa revealed fluffy white clouds that lazed across blue sky. The heat sank into his thighs, hips, and lower back, and the clock in the corner of the room clicked through the seconds.

Three minutes since he’d entered the water.

Today was a risk, asking to be off the clock together. William thought back to the full week of ‘hi, how are ya/fine, you?’ s that he’d been choking on. Nothing was going to develop past workplace comfort if he didn’t make an effort to reach again, but was it worth it? Stretching out an olive
branch beyond Shane’s paychecks had the potential to blow up in his face.

He was hyperaware of the locker room door.

What was taking him so long?

Four minutes.

Did he have second thoughts? Had he decided to leave? Did he sense that William had meant this beyond a ‘hey, come hang out’?

Five minutes.

Yeah. He’s gonna ditch you.

At six minutes, William was relieved to hear footsteps. He sank down, letting the heat boil out his tension. It was just Shane, who’d seen him daily for weeks. Who laughed at his stupid cow insults when dodging tails. Same solid, steady fucker who’d leaned into him as they’d stopped his rogue pump. William closed his eyes, exhaling slowly, and listened to the slap-pat of bare feet on wet tile.

Silence.

He opened his eyes again. Shane was standing over the water, the towel around him like a blanket. He wore blue boxers instead of swim trunks, loose around his thighs, with a band that rested on soft hips. William could barely discern the real shape of his body between the towel and the steam of the pool.

He looked as though he’d rather be anywhere else.

Stay cool. You relax and he’ll relax.

“Thought you fell in the toilet,” William said, keeping his eyes down. He floated in the heat, trying, as if through mental willpower alone, to radiate a sense of comfort. It was Shane’s choice. Was he in? Or was he out?

More still silence, the only sound the tick of the clock. Then a shift of fabric rustled against the towel. The hot water swelled around him when Shane entered the pool.

"Just slow" he said, tone as soft as Ingrid’s fur.

“Slow is better than never,” William replied.

On the way up the mountain, they’d been chatting about gridball, arguing scores and stats. Shane had a retort for any argument William made about a team’s potential. Yet now, in the soft spell of the water, he’d lost the confidence, as though they were strangers.

Ease him back into the familiar.

"You bring that whiskey?"

"Yeah.” Body stiff, Shane reached behind him, pulling the bottle from his towel. He offered it silently.

“Thanks,” William said, crossing over, and uncapped it to take a long drink.
It was important to get Shane back to that comfortable zone. Step one down that road was giving him some personal space. William leaned against the wall, keeping a safe ten inches between them, and passed the whiskey again. Shane accepted, closing his eyes and draining two shots.

William dipped lower into the water, half his beard submerged. "How long you been drinking to swallow so smooth, Daniels?"

The bottle slowed as Shane lowered it. "Longer than I should've," he finally said. "Fourteen, fifteen."

Who hadn’t been sneaking shots and drinks that early?

William remembered when he was twelve, one of his friends spending the night had dared him to get his dad’s scotch out of his office. They’d both been disgusted by the taste, and it was only through sheer luck that they hadn’t been caught and punished. He wondered if that had been the case for Shane too.

"Used to drink at parties n' shit," William said, reaching for the bottle, letting their fingers cross as he did. "You can imagine how Ma reacted."

"She's a force," Shane agreed, though his shoulders tightened at the touch. He paused. "I never went to parties."

For a moment, William wondered if Shane realized that their lips had touched the same glass surface. That in a way, it was an indirect kiss.

Kiss.

God, in this steamy room, William wanted to kiss him.

Instead, he raised his eyes to the glass tiled roof. "No? I guess I’m not surprised. Bet you didn’t like being around the other stupid kids." He tried to imagine Shane going to those parties. Standing by a keg stand, screaming ‘chug’. Dancing around in a group. Leering at William with scorn the next day at school, because of something stupid he’d done the night before. He couldn’t picture it. It didn’t fit Shane at all. "Bet you were the quiet type too, huh? The one who thinks before he speaks up."

As if proving the point, Shane thought. He picked his words out of the metaphorical coin box and laid each one down. "Probably not as much as I should."

It was a code, William decided. There was a pattern to unlock more words. High school sucked for everyone, so he swapped back to a safer topic.

"Why kickers over runners?"

Shane went predictably silent again, closing that first box of words to go find another. William took another swig off the whiskey while he waited, offering it when done.

“Wanna start off strong,” Shane said, accepting. “Weak kicks throw everyone off.” He took a deep drink. When he surfaced, he stared at the bottle for several seconds. “I was a kicker.”

“Shit, really?” William’s image of high school Shane shifted with the new information. "You played?"

Shane’s thumbs slid along the cap. "Just high school."
"Better than me," William said. "I was marked as 'does not get along well with others.'"

"Thought they only marked that shit for kids."

"Coach didn't like me." William let his eyes drift half-closed. Yeah. Coach hadn't liked him, because when he was nine years old, he'd gifted the guy's sadistic nephew with a concussion and broken nose, courtesy of his batter's helmet. "Guess he knew what I was."

A psychopath.

"What you were?" Shane repeated.

*Something abnormal.*

He remembered the loathing that had rolled off the coach. Remembered how he’d muttered that he was a little fag. William could understand disliking a kid for being a shit. He'd been no angel. But the look the coach had given him had nothing to do with fear. It was disgust, as if William had been some sort of abomination.

"No one," he said heavily, "wants a gay guy on their high school team, Shane. Guess they think this shit is contagious or something."

High school had been such a cesspool of that bullshit. Back when he was a terrible judge of people. Back when he was moving from day to day in a haze of adolescent angst. Back when he had no friends he could count on.

Now?

William looked at Shane, who was staring at the water. He did have a friend now, didn’t he? Did it count as true friendship if you also wanted more?

"People suck," Shane whispered.

William let his shoulders soften and stretched, resting his wrists on his knees. The blue sky was darkening, now streaked with red and purples. "True," he agreed. "Not everyone is like that though."


"Your back feeling any better?" Shane asked quietly, after they’d each had another shot.

"Some. How 'bout you? Gotta be sore from all that work I'm driving you through." William paused. "You like it better than Joja?"

*Do you like me better than Joja?*

Shane hadn’t met his direct gaze since entering the pool. He stared at the water in front of his chest, one hand absently drawing a circle in its surface. His eyes followed the ripples. "I like it a lot better."

Turning to face him, William set the whiskey on the ledge and nestled his head in the crook of his elbow. "I like it better too."

“Days aren’t as long.”

“Nope,” William agreed. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”
For a moment—just a moment—Shane looked at him. Then his hands flew out of the water, scrubbing his face with clean fingers as if just waking up.

It was fascinating. He’d never seen Shane wake up, and wondered how he slept. If he lost that constantly tense body language when resting, or if he was the type to curl into a ball and grind his teeth in dreamt anxiety. A trail dripped off the ends of his wet bangs, and he rubbed his eyes, stealing another look at William before turning back to the water.

"Yeah. I guess so."

William closed another inch. "It’s good at the farm, yeah?"

There was a beat where it seemed like Shane wasn’t going to answer. Then his lip twitched; a ghost of a smile. "It’s not too bad."

The micro-expression was fleeting, but William pressed his advantage. "I like that you don't mind hanging out after work,” he said. “Closest thing I've had to a friend in..."

The closest he’d had to a friend since Maxwell, who’d died in the trenches of Gotoro.

For the first time since arriving, Shane relaxed. He sank into the water, pulling William to the present. Leaning his neck on the ledge of the pool, he lifted his eyes to the glass roof and darkening sky. "Me too,” he said softly. "Beats the saloon. Gets fucking boring at the saloon."

"No shit." William rubbed his head, willing all uninvited thoughts of Max back into the dark hole they sprang from. He focused on Shane’s words, using them as an anchor. The saloon, where they’d had a fight and made drunken fools of themselves a month ago.

"Listen. The way we..." William coughed. "That night. Where we...where I...when we had that..." The whiskey was making his tongue clumsy. He tried again. "That fight. This is going to sound fucking weird but, that was one of the best fights I've ever had."

Shane shrugged. "Best one I ever had," he said. “Which probably sounds weirder, since I was the one eating dirt.”

William’s breath caught, but Shane seemed oblivious to the attention.

That first punch, knocking color into his night. The tree where they’d frozen together. The end, when Shane had surrendered.

He licked his lips, slipping one more inch closer.

Don’t fuck this up, Bauer.

“I felt fucking...like I had all this shit inside me. Angry shit. Poisonous. Just choking me.” He let out a breath, trying to banish the memories before whispering, “That punch? Like you'd opened a fucking steam valve."

He braced for the side-eyed look.

Shane bit his bottom lip, as if trying to determine how to best explain that normal people didn’t think this way. That it wasn’t healthy. That William should talk about his damn feelings, as if it were possible for them to budge and come out through something as insufficient as words.

He made William wait, apparently counting exact change for this transaction.
"It's gotta go somewhere," he said at last. "It's just...gotta go somewhere."

It was like pulling a weight off William’s shoulders. There was no judgment in the words; it was more than he had expected.

Shane understood.

His expression of amazement must have made Shane nervous, because he immediately rubbed his hands over his face again. "I'm not saying that right," he muttered. "Just…made me feel better too, I guess."

“It’s gotta get out,” William repeated, slipping closer. The words felt like a line in some guru’s manifesto to living your best life. In a low voice, reverent, he added, "I couldn't chew out of one side of my face. My ribs hurt for two days. Sore as fuck after that." He propped his cheek up, eyes locked on Shane. "Felt fucking amazing."

Folding one arm beneath the back of his head, Shane stared at the ceiling. “My shoulder was fucked all week. Didn’t really mind.”

The sane part of William pointed out how twisted it was to be turned on by someone taking pain. It was fucked to appreciate the bruises that had stained Shane’s skin.

"I’m glad you could take it," he said, voice gruff.

"Keeps you in your body, feeling like that,” Shane whispered. “Otherwise you go in your head and disappear."

The words resonated.

"You ever disappear, Shane?" William asked.

Shane’s head was tilted to the sky, eyes distant. "Can't disappear if no one sees you in the first place."

There was a misconception, William thought, by some men. They were always looking for the brightest star in the constellation, or tightest body in the club. The men around him sought youth and vigor, searching for a status symbol for their beds. Or money. Or validation.

William didn’t care about any of that.

"I see you," he said, quiet sincerity in his voice.

Shane slowly turned his head. He met William’s gaze and blinked, his face languid.

William wanted to memorize the way he looked. Wanted to carve the memory into his flesh; burn it into his mind so that he could never forget it.

"Hey, Shane? Do you trust me?"

The clock ticked behind them, checking off seconds. Shane’s chest grew still. “I think so,” he whispered.

Moving with deliberate care, William’s free hand cupped the back of his head. "Then...I've been wanting to do this since that first night," he said, locking their gaze. His thumb rubbed a circle in Shane’s hair, mingling the scent of sweat and musk with the steam. He swam in green eyes.
There was no fear. No trepidation.

Only trust.

William pressed his lips against Shane's, kissing him with the same softness that he cradled his head. He let it linger a moment, then gave him an inch, prepared for either consent or denial.

Shane’s eyes were closed, his mouth parted. Waiting.

Sliding both hands up, William cradled him closer. Threading fingers through his hair, he nipped his bottom lip, and rubbed the tip of their noses together, before slanting his mouth across the open invitation.

He tasted like whiskey, smoky and rich. At first he remained still, just letting it happen while William absorbed each soft sound, each touch. But the longer they made out the more comfortable he became, and when William slipped his tongue inside, it was like unlocking a door. Shane’s hand reached up. Holding the back of William’s neck, his body gave way, tucking into the kiss.

William groaned in encouragement.

“*Good,*” he murmured, heart drumming.

Hemming him in, he chased the tongue, and his fingers dug into Shane’s shoulders. Shane craned up to meet William’s mouth, his body slinking lower in the water. They tasted and explored, William using his height to keep control of their shared heat and breath, of what would make them feel good. His cock twitched, aching to grind into Shane’s hips.

Finally, needing to slow down before he pushed too far, he broke the kiss. He pulled away and looked down at his breathless partner.

"*God,*" he whispered, stroking a finger along that five o’clock shadow. “Shane…”

Shane’s eyes opened.

He blinked as if in a daze. Then his face went pale. “*William?*”

The whisper was edged with panic. His gaze darted over William’s face, as if he didn’t know where he was, or what he was doing. Alarmed, William pulled back.

Had he misread it?

No, he’d been so sure…

"*Hey,*” he said, voice cautious. "*Shhh. Hey, Shane, it's okay.*" He hadn’t let him go yet, and tried to squeeze his shoulders in reassurance.

But it was too late. He’d shattered it.

Shane jerked from William’s grip as though he’d been burned. He stumbled sideways, the water splashing as he put distance between them.

"*Oh god,*” he groaned, hands rubbing over his face. "*Oh god, oh god…*"

"*Shane, hey.*" William reached again. "*Dude, it's okay. Shane, look at me. Look at me.*"

Shane slapped his hand off and pushed further down the wall.
"No," he said, "it's not. It's not."

Stunned, William watched as he reached frantically behind him for the towel, hands fluttering over the tile until he made contact. "I'm not—" He struggled to open it, backing away. "I'm not—I'm not like this, okay, I'm not like you…"

William turned and hauled himself up on the ledge, ignoring the scream of pain from his back. It was faster to walk next to the pool than fight the water.

"Shane, stop! Let's talk."

Shane ignored him, doggedly stumbling up the steps.

“Look, I get it,” William said, almost beside him. “You didn't know before. That's okay. I know you're scared, but look, you don't need to be.”

“There’s nothing to get!” Shane snapped, still struggling with the damp towel. He threw it down in anger on the tile and scrubbed his hands through his hair, storming for the exit.

“Daniels!” William called. “Jesusfuck, dude, breathe for a minute. It’s OKAY.”

Shane just let the locker room door slam behind him.

William groaned in frustration. He’d known better. He’d fucking known better.

He scooped up the whiskey and both towels before stalking after him. The movement drove home how very drunk he was. If he was this messed up…

He pushed through the door. Shane was at the locker he’d stored his things in. He jerked it open, the metal rattling as it bounced against the other doors.

William hesitated, trying to figure out what to say.

Sorry I kissed you?

Sorry you didn’t acknowledge you might be gay until this moment?

Sorry I’d do it all over again?

There was no coordination to Shane’s movements. Panting like he’d gone three rounds with a prize fighter, he tried to tug on his pants, but he hadn’t bothered to dry off and the fabric stuck to his wet skin. When he finally yanked them all the way up, he leaned against the lockers with one hand.

With no warning—in a flurry of frustration—he struck his open palm against the metal, leaving it ringing.

William realized too late what was coming next.

The hand turned, and Shane drove the heel of it into the side of his head.

Dropping the towels and whiskey at the first impact, William crossed over as Shane pounded his skull a second time. On the third, he snagged him by the wrist, pinning his arm back.

“Will you knock that shit off?” he growled, shoving him against the locker. “Swear to fuck, Shane, if anyone is going to kick the queer out of your ass, it’s going to be me.”
He shook at the readiness that Shane had turned on himself, heart slamming when the man in his arms went slack.

*Don’t make it worse.*

"I'm going to let you go," William said carefully. "You're going to put your clothes on, and we're going to fucking talk about this."

Shane dropped his forehead to the locker, rocking against it as if the act of being still was beyond him.

"Yeah?" William hissed, needing that verbal acknowledgment—knowing if he didn’t get that understanding, he might have to wrestle him all over again. He waited for a moment. Then two. Right when he thought it would stretch into three, the rocking stopped.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, breathing hard. "Yeah."

Slowly, William let him go.

Though Shane didn’t move, his limbs still trembled. Remembering the disaster movie of him trying to put on his damn pants, William grabbed his shirt. “Raise your arms, dipshit.”

"I can do it," Shane muttered, snatching it back.

"Uh huh. Proved that real fucking good." William crossed his arms to hide that they were shaking too.

Shane messily shrugged into the shirt, getting caught several times, like he had with the pants. When he finally got it on—slightly crooked in the chest—he grabbed his watch from the bottom of the locker, and with drunken hands tried to hook it on.

William’s jaw hurt from how tight he clenched his teeth. He dug his fingernails into his elbows, watching, but after the first fumble couldn’t hold himself back. He slapped Shane’s hand and took the watch, buckling it on. "There is nothing wrong with you," he said, turning the face to the inside of Shane’s wrist, the way he always wore it. "Because if there is something wrong with you, then there is something wrong with me."

Shane jerked back his hand. He shook his head over and over, refusing to look up, just jumbling his clothes into a wad.

You can’t help him if he wants to get away from you.

William hated this. This was all his fault. Every single bit of it.

"Fine,” he snarled. “Go. Fucking run. But you can't hide from me, Shane Daniels. So when you get yourself figured out, you’re going to fucking talk to me.” He sank onto the bench, elbows on his knees. Pulling on his hair, he glared up. “Because,” he threatened, trying to infuse how fucking serious he was into the words, “you do *not* want me to be the one that has to find you.”

It was like trying to threaten a wall. Shane was already headed toward the exit, looking down, still shaking his head.

“Just leave me alone,” he mumbled. “Please, just leave me alone…”

He left without looking back.
William waited until the door to the spa closed. He surged up and slammed his fist into the locker. Pain shot through his knuckles, leaving a dent in the metal door.

"FUUUUCK!" he screamed into the empty room.

The shout echoed, the only answer a soft drip from the shower. He stomped over to where the towel broke the fall of the whiskey and scooped it up. Glaring at the amber liquid, he uncapped it and took a long swig. It burned sliding down his throat, and he let out a slow breath.

At least the whiskey couldn’t run from him.

Chapter End Notes

To our readers, commenters, and everyone who has shown us support: we appreciate you guys more than you know! Sharing this story gives us such joy, and knowing you are enjoying it too means the world.

If you haven’t checked out our discord server, come chat with us! We talk about SB, writing, life in general, and every other Friday there is a live reading of a SB chapter, which everyone is welcome to listen in on!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is July 21st, 2-4pm PST.
Age Nineteen

Garrett got home late, close to 1:00 am. Shane pretended to be asleep.

He was tired. Work had been shit, his Joja shift running two hours overtime that he wouldn’t even be paid for. They only scheduled him 38 hours a week, to avoid giving him full-time benefits. The ride home had also been shit. The late bus’s route took twenty minutes longer than usual, Shane stuck next to a mother and her crying toddler. And coming home was definitely shit, because Garrett hadn’t been there; he’d been on a date.

Rebecca. She’d lasted a month so far. One of the longer ones, though Shane had reason to suspect her time was over.

Shuffles interrupted the silence. Socks on carpet, and sighs in the dark. A body dropped onto a mattress. Then a pillow, hitting Shane in the back of the head.

Of course Garrett knew he was pretending. He always fucking knew.

“Sleeping,” said Shane, not moving.

“Yeah, okay, that’s great. But I can’t.”

“Try closing your eyes.”

“Shane!” Another pillow smacked him. “I’m coming over.”

He’d never tell Garrett—egotistical bastard didn’t need anymore fuel—but those were Shane’s three favorite words. They meant attention. Focused attention, attention usually spread between too many people, until moments like this when it zeroed in on Shane like a homing device.

Because that’s what he was. Garrett’s home, the center of gravity that all his social circles orbited. Through parties with the jocks. Chilling in parking lots with the misfit crowd. The girlfriends now buried on the wheel of his relationship rolodex. Through everybody, Garrett came home to Shane, and that was the best part of each day.

He plopped down at the top of Shane’s bed, reeking of pot. “Dude, it’s cold up here. Make some
Shane slid over, letting him under the blankets.

“I broke it off with Rebecca,” he said, settling in.

Shane’s heart gave a tiny, smug skip. “Yeah,” he said softly, trying to ignore the satisfaction. “Figured as much.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You wore your Tunnelers jersey. You always wear it when you’re about to dump their ass.”

“That’s…that’s bullshit?”

“Past year, at least.”

“That’s—” he paused. “That’s fucking obnoxious.”

“Yep.”

“Holy fuck, I’m a tool.”

“Yep.”

Garrett stretched his arms. One came to rest behind his neck and the other reached over, petting Shane’s head. They were silent a long time.

“You okay?” Shane asked.

“Yeah.” Garrett sighed. “Always okay, aren’t I? That’s why I fucking do it. If it’s not gonna bother me if we break up, what’s the point of being with them?”

Shane quietly agreed, but only said, “What was wrong with her?”

“Nothing.”

They looked at each other through the dark.

“Liar,” said Shane.

“Not lying.” Garrett turned his head to face the ceiling. “Nothing was wrong with her. Wholesome hot chick, right? Objectively beautiful, into all that outdoorsy and girly shit at the same time. I mean, the hobby resume was fucking proper. And she was super cool. And sweet.” A pause. “Like a popsicle.”

“So?”

“So nothing was fucking wrong with her! Fucking nightmare, Shane. If a mild sunny day was a person…”

“But she lasted a month.”

“Well, she’s a crier. They’re always tricky.”

“Right,” Shane said. “Way better to wait till they’re attached and shit.”
“Started trying to tell her at like, nine-thirty. Took me till now to get away, man.” Another pause.
“I did feel bad.”

“Felt bad she cried, or felt bad you had to stick around so long?”

“Little column A, little column B. Fuck it though, right? You and me, we’re good without ‘em.”

As if his girl-crazy eyes wouldn’t be peeled come Monday.

“Big talker,” Shane said.

“For real this time. You and me. No drama, just the good shit.” Garrett’s fingers moved over his scalp. “What’d you do tonight?”

Shane closed his eyes, absorbing the touch. “Waited on the edge of my fucking seat to hear about you and popsicle girl.”

“Dude, boring.”

They dropped into silence. It was comfortable, but didn’t last long.

“My classes suck this semester,” Garrett said. “You wanna go somewhere? I cut class, you cut work. We could go to the desert. Be fucking cool to camp in the desert.”

Shane snorted.

“What?” asked Garrett. “Sensitive to sand in the boxers?”

“Yes.”

“Guess that’s a no-go on Bora Bora too.”

“The hell is a Bora Bora?”

“Tropical island. So nice, they named it twice.”

“Garrett, go the fuck to sleep.”

“And miss out on what a grumpy shit you are at one in the morning? No way, man. Gimme more of that sweet talk.”

Grumpy shit or not, Shane loved this and they both knew it.

Garrett pulled him in, planting a kiss on his cheek. “Sorry for waking you up. Remind me to burn that jersey tomorrow, okay?”

*But I like that jersey.*

“Done,” said Shane quietly.

Garrett reached over to the nightstand for his stereo remote. Lights blinked electric blue in the black room when he clicked it on, and warm, jazzy hip-hop flooded the air. He set the remote down and his hand found its way back to Shane’s head, softly petting once more.

Shane had never listened to much music growing up, but Garrett was obsessed. His collection lined one full wall of his bedroom, floor-to-ceiling, and the top-of-the-line stereo had cost more than
Shane’s last six paychecks combined. No matter what they were doing Garrett provided a soundtrack, and the song playing now was one of Shane’s favorites; one he’d fallen asleep to dozens of times since moving in.

He tucked the blanket to his neck, focused on the fingers massaging his scalp in rhythm to the music. The sweet smell of pot mingled with Garrett’s aqua cologne, as familiar and comforting to Shane as the head-rubbing and hip-hop.

But he didn’t sleep. Tiring as his day had been, and good as that hand felt in his hair, Shane was no closer to sleep than before.

He was officially one month sober. It was his longest stretch since fifteen, when he’d started drinking hard. Since sixteen, when his best friend told him he had a problem. Since seventeen, when he tried but never made it more than a week, and eighteen—when Garrett had freaked to find him passed out cold on the bathroom floor.

He was nineteen now, and dealing with night after night of sobriety-induced insomnia. Hours of lying there, miserable, craving a drink.

Thinking.

*Imagining.*

The body next to him, sliding closer. Garrett winding an arm under Shane’s to hold him around the waist. Pressing his kiss first to Shane’s cheek, then his lips.

That hand on his waist sliding down. Slipping into his pants.

Rubbing him, the way those fingers did on his scalp.

Shane couldn’t stop the thoughts when Garrett touched him like this. He only waited until Garrett was asleep, then rolled to his side and tried to think of anything but the ache. Because it was never going to mean anything. Garrett had always been affectionate and touchy-feely, but he was straight—and constantly hunting down girls.

So many girls.

None of them understood him. Those girls hadn’t been his best friends for the past four years. They hadn’t lived in his house and slept in his room for the past three. They didn’t know that if Garrett showed up in a Tunneler’s jersey it was fucking over, or how afterwards he crawled into Shane’s bed to pet his head, kiss his cheek, and talk about it just being the two of them. They didn’t know what it meant to be Garrett’s person.

Which he was. Shane was confident about little in life, but knew to the bottom of his soul he was Garrett’s person.

An extremely extroverted child who’d grown up in a huge empty house with workaholic parents, Garrett craved attention like Shane craved alcohol. He reached for it everywhere, and because he was a charming fucker, he got it. But it was never enough, flitting from group to group, from girl to girl. He was never satisfied, except with Shane. Four years of being with each other every damn day, and Garrett showed no sign of tiring of him.

“Me and you, Shane. That’s all that matters.”

Early in their friendship Shane had been skeptical of those words, watching others come and go
through the revolving door of Garrett’s life. But it wasn’t long before he realized the truth: Garrett had claimed him. Pulled him to the other side of the glass, letting Shane watch the rotation as his right-hand man.

It was the best feeling in the world.

Sometimes it fucking sucked.

Shane always rolled over at this point. If his dick was hard, he did the courtesy of turning away to face the wall.

He didn’t know what possessed him that night. Maybe it was the sobriety. Sobriety had always fucked with him, and maybe if he was drunk he would’ve kept his head on straight. Because instead of turning to the wall, he stayed right where he was, and without stopping to consider the four years of intense friendship being put on the line, he placed his hand on Garrett’s stomach.

Garrett murmured softly, half asleep. Not thinking—only hearing that murmur, and the approval that seemed to go with it—Shane drew closer. He hugged his best friend’s side, feeling his warmth, and god, he couldn’t help it. That warmth made him harder; he’d been dreaming of this for years and it was actually happening, he was actually holding him like this…

“Hey.”

It was said in a whisper and for a moment Shane’s heart leapt.

Then Garrett lifted the hand, pulling it off his stomach and gently giving it back to Shane.

No…

“Shane.”

No, no, no.

Shane’s limbs snapped back out of pure reflex. He rolled over, his stomach doing flips.


The bed moved, and Garrett reached over to flip on the lamp. Pale yellow light flooded over Shane’s face as he lay there, frozen and staring at the wall.

“Shane. Sit up. I wanna talk to you.”

No, no, no.

“Fuck off,” said Shane, switching the lamp off, heart thumping so hard he felt sick.

Garrett turned it back on. His voice was firm now. “I said sit up.”

“And I said fuck off.”

“And I said sit up. So sit the fuck up.”

Shane wanted an errant bullet to bite through the wall. Take him right between the eyes. When it didn’t come, he did sit up, dropping his feet to the floor.

“C’mon dude, stay here—”
“What’s your problem?” said Shane, standing, his words scathing over the soft music.

“My problem is my best friend is about to run away rather than tell me what the fuck is up.”

“Nothing’s up.”

“Is that right? So like, not even your dick two seconds ago?” Garrett rubbed a hand over his face, murmuring, “God, I wondered if this would happen…”

It felt like a slap, hard and raw across the cheek.

“Fuck you, dude.” Shane, hands shaking, grabbed his hoodie off the back of the computer chair. “Just fuck you.”

“Shane!” Garrett was up now too. His fingers clasped Shane’s wrist, yanking him back. “Stay here and talk to me!”

“About fucking what?”

“Oh, I dunno. Maybe the fact that I was pretty sure you were gay, but didn’t exactly have proof until you rubbed up against me just now?”

“I didn’t—that’s not—” Shane jerked his wrist from Garrett’s grip, stammering, “You’re fucking MENTAL!”

“Well, one of us is!”

They were the only ones home, like usual. It didn’t matter that they were shouting, and now Garrett hauled up too, flipping the wall switch to illuminate the whole room. “Don’t fucking lie to me, man! I know you. This doesn’t have to be a big deal, okay? Nothing’s gonna change, but don’t freeze me ou—”

“Garrett,” said Shane through a tense jaw, slipping the shirt over his head. “For once, just shut your fat fucking mouth. You have no idea what you’re talking about. Fucking none. So shut the fuck up.”

“But what’re you thinking?” Garrett sounded desperate now. “Are you like, confused? Or do you know?”

“Maybe,” said Shane, tugging down the torso of the hoodie, “you should get some sleep, because your stoned ass is fucking delusional.”

He yanked a pair of loose jeans over top his flannel pajamas, feeling in the pocket for his wallet. It was too late for buses, but six blocks away was a 24/7 party store, one Shane knew had a night shift filled with young cashiers who never looked too closely at his fake ID.

“Shane!”

He ignored Garrett’s repeated calls, storming down the stairs, through the living room, kitchen, and hall. Once out the door he slipped to the side of the house, and stopped in the shadows to wait.

Garrett banged through the front door moments later, still calling his name. Shane kept hidden while he searched the lit parts near the house. Waited as he padded barefoot across the driveway, looking both directions down the street. Watched him pull hands through his thick hair and give a noise of pure vehement frustration, then re-enter his house, slamming the door so hard the glass
panes rattled.

Less than an hour later, Shane sat on the bench of a long-abandoned bus stop near the party store. He pulled a bottle of whiskey from its brown paper sleeve, and stared down at it through the dark.

*It’s only been a month*, he thought, unscrewing the cap. Not all that much to throw away, in the grand scheme of things.

Not like throwing away four years.

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**Age Seven**

It was dark, just a sliver of light shining through the crack below the door.

It was uncomfortable. There was nothing in here but clothes and dusty shoeboxes. Maybe a few cobwebs in the corner. A dingy piece of brown carpet to sit on, with no padding beneath.

It was lonely. Dad had said thirty minutes, but it felt like a hundred.

Why were minutes so long?

Shane’s eyes flickered to the shelf above him, to the box where the masks lived. He couldn’t see them, but knew they were there. The gorilla mask. The hockey mask. The ghost one with drippy red liquid like blood. The werewolf one, all wild eyes and predatory teeth. Dad wore them on Spirit’s Eve while passing out chocolate bars; a mask of generosity. Like he hadn’t worn one the night before, hiding under Shane’s bed and waiting until he was asleep to grab his ankles. As if he hadn’t laughed at Shane’s terror, or gotten angry when he cried after.

“*Don’t be such a little bitch. Your old man was just having a laugh.*”

Shane didn’t go out on Spirit’s Eve. He sat around and watched his dad get steadily drunker, answering the doorbell with werewolf growls that left the trick-or-treaters squealing rather than traumatized.

He drew his knees to his chest, balling against them. He wanted to cry, but crying wasn’t allowed. Crying was what got him here in the first place. Nobody wanted to listen to his goddamn crybaby tears.

More time passed. Whenever there was a noise—a creak in the floorboards, a sigh from the pipes—Shane’s heart took off in a gallop and he pulled tighter to his knees. He forced himself not to look at the shelf, but the masks’ evil eyes bored through the box anyway.

The house settled, the noises eventually falling quiet. Though the dark was still scary, Shane’s terror was replaced inch by inch with boredom. The evening wore on, the strip of light under the door going dim.

He was hungry.

It was cold.

He had to pee.
Reaching above him, he pulled a sweatshirt off its hanger and slipped it on. Tears burned behind his eyes; tears that were not allowed, and only brought more fear. Because if Dad finally remembered and opened the door to see him crying again, how much longer would he have to stay here? Thirty minutes was always the initial punishment, but he was usually forgotten for at least a few hours, depending how much Dad drank.

Tonight he must be very drunk.

Shane pulled down several more articles of clothing, bunching some under his head as a pillow, using others as blankets. The minutes dripped by like time had stopped working. He stared at the strip of light below the door, watching it fade until extinguished.

Nighttime.

Sleep wouldn’t come, no matter how long he closed his eyes. Every time he started to drift off, a noise would jerk him awake with the same panic as when Dad popped out from under his bed in that mask. Each time, a horrible sense of dread swooped over him. The pee burned too. Finally he couldn’t take it anymore, and standing in the far corner where he could hide it best, he peed on the carpet.

If Mom were home she’d have looked for him, but she hadn’t been home for three days.

Tears bubbled once more. He kept them quiet, though. Eventually he must’ve fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew was waking, needing to pee all over again.

Wiping his nose on his sleeve, he went back to the corner of the carpet. For a moment, he pretended he was a cat, and that corner was his litter box. It made him feel the smallest bit better. Like Aunt Marnie’s cat. He’d visited her for the first time last summer, a week in the country. Her barn cats lived outside, but during Shane’s stay, she’d been trying to teach a young one to do its business in the house. The kitten had really liked Shane, and Shane had really liked the kitten.

It didn’t cross his mind to bang on the door, remind someone he was in there. Banging on the door would’ve been too scary. His dad liked when he was quiet, when he was invisible, when he stayed out of the way.

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Age Twelve

The Daniels’ house was low on entertainment. They had one TV with minimal stations; a TV Shane wasn’t allowed to touch when Corey was home. It was always playing sports, and if his dad was not in a terrible mood, Shane sat down to watch with him.

There were rules, of course. You stayed silent. You never asked to have the volume turned down, even when it hurt your ears. You never brought up stupid questions. If Corey chuckled at something it was safe to laugh with him, but if he didn’t, you kept quiet no matter what.

Sometimes it wasn’t so bad.

“You see that kick, son?”

“Yeah.”
“You ever gonna be a kicker like that? Play on the team like your old man?”

“I dunno.”

“Wrong answer, Shane.”

“Yeah, I’ll be on the team.”

A chuckle. If he was sitting close enough, a hand gripping his shoulder. “Good boy.”

Shane liked sports. Gridball and soccer were his favorites. Sitting with his dad, he soaked in the coaches, stats, and trades. He learned what made a good play or sloppy one, and to think critically about strategy. As long as he caught Corey in a good mood and stuck to the rules, those were some of Shane’s favorite times.

While they lasted.

The most crucial rule of all: always plan your exit. Get out of there before either the sixth beer or five fingers of whiskey were gone. Any longer and risk the ‘You’re in the fucking way’ zone, which never ended well.

Mom said their neighborhood was dangerous and didn’t like Shane to play outside by himself, but she wasn’t around enough to enforce this rule. When she was home, she was too tired to care. She took pills that Shane was once screamed at for touching, and they made her fall asleep early, usually right around the time Dad was having his exit-beer. She’d catch him on the way to her room. With not-quite-focused eyes, she’d cover his cheeks with kisses, tell him he was a good boy, and that she was going to have a lie-down for a few minutes.

With the TV loud and Dad drunk, it was easy to slip out of the house unnoticed. All he needed was the spare key from the tin above the stove, and Dad’s old watch, which he’d given to Shane when he got a new one. It’d become invaluable. Shane needed to be back and inside his room before 9:00 pm, or else wait until after 10:00. The hour between was the most dangerous of the danger zones—being in Corey’s way when he was getting ready for bed.

Once outside, Shane had free reign for hours.

The neighborhood was rough. He avoided going past the bridge at the end of the street. When police cars drove down his road with their sirens on—when that pop-pop-pop came in the distance—it was always past the bridge. But he learned the shortcuts. Straight up two blocks, take a left. Slip through the set of bushes at the gas station. Cross the empty lot and stick to the sides. If he made himself quiet and unassuming, he was invisible, just like at home.

Shane liked exploring. It was so much better than being stuck in the house. He snuck into empty buildings, and warehouses that looked like they’d been abandoned during an apocalypse. He liked the colorful graffiti inside, the rats that skittered around. He found things, too: rusty spikes, broken tools, old clothing. His favorite find was a pocketknife. It folded in half, with a black-gripped handle and a dull blade, and Shane started carrying it with him on all his adventures.

Several blocks beyond the abandoned sector was a residential area, a neighborhood much nicer than his. A shallow ravine wound through the middle of it, with paved paths where elderly folks took their evening walks. Shane preferred going off trail. The woods were steep and exciting. He could hide in the trees. One time he discovered an old soccer ball—a little flat, hurting his shins when he kicked it—and brought it home with him.

But sneaking out wasn’t always an option, and it was harder to entertain himself in the house. A
few board games in broken boxes gathered dust on the living room shelf. The TV was off limits, and while Shane had a few old toys, they didn’t excite him like exploring.

He wished they had more books. The ones at school were nice, but he wasn’t allowed to bring them home anymore. In third grade he’d spilled water all over a library book, which Corey had to pay for after. It hadn’t gone over well.

Shane read what he could. Magazines tucked into the wooden rack beside their couch. Instruction manuals from the junk drawer, learning how to operate electronics he didn’t have permission to touch. He liked the comics and sports section of the newspaper, and flipped through the junk mail when no one was looking.

Catalogs were the best. It wasn’t even reading. Just pictures of all the cool things he’d never have.

Sometimes, Shane thought, imagining he had those things was probably as much fun as actually having them. They excited him, the remote control cars, the deer blinds and whistles, the foam-dart guns and air hockey tables. And something else excited him, too.

He snuck those catalogs into his room. He closed his door and flipped through the pages, past the ladies in bras, slowing at the section of shirtless men. Men in boxers. Men in briefs. Men showing the shape of their bulges.

It started just like all the other times.

The quarterly catalog came in the mail. He waited patiently for two days, until his mom and dad had a chance to look through it and throw it on the junk pile. That night he sat with Corey until halfway through the fourth beer. When the announcers on TV grew loud in amazement over the kick-off—“Once in a lifetime, Chuck, won’t ever see the likes of that in his career again!”—Shane got up, quietly slipped the catalog off the stack and into his shirt, and went upstairs.

He walked by his parents’ room. Mom was passed out on her stomach, one arm dangling off the side of the bed, a lock of hair over her face. It fluttered with each slow breath. Shane kept going toward his room, and closed the door once inside.

First he pulled out the new catalog from under his shirt, then one from under his mattress. He opened the old one, the creased spine falling open to pages he’d dog-eared. With careful precision he tore them out, slowly, so as not to make noise. Those were his favorites, and he placed them on a stack of other torn favorites from the past.

After everyone was asleep, he’d sneak back downstairs and swap the old catalog where the new one had been. No one ever noticed when he did that.

Figuring he had at least twenty minutes before Corey went to bed, Shane settled on the floor, flipping through fresh, glossy pages. He started at the front with the outdoor toys—trampolines, collapsible pools, sprinklers—and worked his way to the back.

Furniture.

Kitchen goods.

Clothing.

Then his door slammed opened.

“Shane, if I told you once, I told you a hundred goddamn times,” growled Corey. “You shut that
goddamn kitchen light off when you come up here, we ain’t made of fuckin’ mon—”

He stopped in his tracks.

He’d caught his son with his hand down his pants, the catalog open to the male models.

It made Shane dizzy, what happened next. Corey stomped on the magazine and kicked it backwards, ripping the page. In one motion he lifted his son by the shoulder of his t-shirt and shoved him against the wall.

“That’s how it is?” he spat, hot breath coming down on Shane’s face, reeking of beer. “That’s how it fucking is?”

Terrified, Shane closed his eyes, wishing harder than he’d ever wished in his life that he could disappear through the carpet. He was in so much trouble. He was going to be sick.

“Look at me!”

He tried to. The tone in his dad’s voice; it was so dangerous not to do what it told. But he was too scared to make his eyelids work.

“Fucking LOOK at me!” Corey screamed.

Shane’s whole body flinched. With great effort, he opened his eyes.

He’d seen his dad mad. Seen him furious, impatient, or pissed off. But this—this look of disgust, of absolute revulsion—was new.

“Know what happens,” he whispered, slurring, “to little fag boys?”

There was nothing to do but stay quiet, to accept whatever was coming.

He didn’t have to wait long. Corey yanked him up, and still holding the shoulder of his shirt, dragged him across the room; he opened Shane’s closet and shoved him inside before slamming it shut. Shane stumbled back, flattening against the wall as Corey began to kick the closed door. He closed his eyes and covered his ears, flinching with each shock that pounded and rattled the old wood.

Then silence.

Shane, too petrified to move, waited. Several minutes passed and it remained silent.

He sank to the floor.

It’d been almost a year since he last sat on this dingy brown carpet. Having learned the basic rules of survival—don’t talk back, don’t get in the way, don’t fucking cry—Shane’s closet punishments had grown fewer and further between.

It was dark and he couldn’t see the face of his watch, but it had to be close to midnight when he finally pulled clothes down from the hangers, wadding them into a bed.

Must’ve been after two when he couldn’t hold it anymore and pissed in the corner, like he’d been doing since the age of seven. Mom once said it smelled like old cat pee in his room, but Shane was too ashamed to tell her the truth.

Possibly around three, he took off his watch; Corey’s hand-me-down.
He pressed on the surface with his thumbs.

Nothing happened.

He pressed harder, wanting to crack that stupid fucking watch, but the glass was thick and remained infuriatingly intact.

Eyes burning, he threw it in the pee corner.

He could never do anything right. Not break the watch. Not turn off the kitchen light. Not even remember to lock his bedroom door, when he did the gross things that had caused that look of disgust to drip from his dad’s face.

His eyes kept stinging, but he hadn’t cried in ages and wasn’t about to ruin his streak. He wiped them over and over, catching every tear before it could roll. Before it counted.

At some point he must’ve fallen asleep, because he woke to the click of the lock, followed by footsteps. It was brighter now, too.

Morning.

He waited several minutes before venturing into the room. The closet door was splintered. His floor was empty, the ripped catalog gone, along with the clippings of Shane’s favorites. And there on the wall above his bed, stuck in the drywall with tacks: a dozen new pages, the girls in bras he’d always passed over.

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**Age Fifteen**

He didn’t know why Garrett followed him home that first day.

Shane in his faded t-shirt and dirty backpack, walking with his head down. Garrett in his designer jeans and messenger bag, looking like a preppy mannequin from the mall.

Shane with bloodshot eyes and messy hair. Garrett with good lips and freckles.

Shane suspended from being drunk in class. Garrett jogging to catch up, telling him he was so cool.

Yup. Showing up trashed to chemistry, and breaking beakers. The coolest Shane had ever been.

When they’d arrived at his house together—because Garrett, the weirdo, insisted on talking to him the whole way—Corey’s truck was parked outside. Shane’s insides had iced over. The first thing Corey liked to do after work was check the answering machine. He’d press play, crack a beer, and shake his head at the annoyingly long intros to each message. If he was home that meant he already had the news. He’d get mad about the suspension, but Shane knew he’d be pissed about the liquor, which was stolen from his stash.

Garrett had freaked when he came out with a black eye.

Shane just shrugged. It didn’t happen often. He only got hit a few times a year, and bruises like this were rare.
“Come to my house,” Garrett had insisted after. And Shane, who’d tried to get this guy to buzz off the entire way home, said okay.

It was the decision that changed his whole life.

Garrett lived in a ritzy neighborhood. Manicured-lawns. Long twisting driveways, with two or three cars to a family. His house was spacious and modern, his room eight times the size of Shane’s. He had a widescreen TV, a sleek computer, and a music collection worth thousands of dollars.

“Stay the night,” he’d said, after they hung out and played video games all evening. So Shane did, and it became a common phrase; so common that within a month they’d dragged the bed from the spare room into Garrett’s.

Garrett’s parents didn’t care. They were gone so often for work, they didn’t seem to notice they’d sprouted a second son. As for Shane—his mom had left months ago without so much as goodbye, and there was no resistance from Corey either. It worked out well for both father and son, keeping out of each other’s hair most days.

At first.

Corey began to suspect Garrett was more than Shane’s friend, and refusing to have an openly gay son under his roof, he delivered an ultimatum in the summer before 11th grade: cut the guy off, or don’t bother coming home.

Shane never told Garrett why he moved in. His dad being a generally abusive piece of shit was reason enough, and Garrett’s only regret was not making it official sooner.

Then came the pillows, the late conversations, the music.

The arm hooked around Shane’s neck while he waited for the microwave to beep, and the kiss planted on his cheek while locked in that hold.

The movies on the futon, when Garrett pulled Shane to lean against him while they watched. When he’d hook his fingers through Shane’s, lifting them to kiss the back of his hand, saying, “You’re my best fucking friend, you know that?”

Then “Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

And “Let the world fucking burn. It’s just you and me.”

Then the girls, the dating, the sex.

The frustration, the complaints, the sadness.

*Why can’t I find her, Shane? Why do none of them fucking do it for me?*

More quiet conversations late at night, now crawling into Shane’s bed. Talking about joining the gridball team together. About Shane’s schoolwork. His drinking. Over and over, until graduation. Garrett became a freshman in college, while Shane kept working at Joja. And he was officially one month sober when he made the fantastic fucking decision to throw a grenade on everything they’d built.

Except Garrett did not accept the terms and conditions that Shane had silently laid out in termination of their friendship.
“You fucking live here, man. Good luck avoiding me forever.”

He did still live with the Prevosts. Shane had not talked to his dad in three years, and what was he going to do? Have a heart-to-heart with Corey about how he’d finally cut Garrett off, because the queerbaiting motherfucker wouldn’t make Shane his boyfriend?

Shane moved his bed back to the guest bedroom. When Garrett returned home from class, he’d paused in the doorway, staring at the four grooves in the carpet where the bed frame had flattened it.

For a few weeks, nights were quiet. Garrett stayed in his room, the only signs of life the sound of music and smell of pot. Shane stayed down the hall, listening to the muffled songs, catching the faint whiffs of smoke, drinking until he was tired enough to fall asleep. In the mornings, if Garrett entered the bathroom while Shane was brushing his teeth, Shane would leave with a mouthful of toothpaste to spit in a downstairs sink. He avoided talking to him. Avoided looking at him. Avoided thinking about him whenever he could, by disappearing into that bottle.

Then one night, the bottle was empty. Taped to the outside was a note:

*I’m done with this bullshit, Shane. If you ever wanna see your booze again, get your ass to my room with a signed payment of We’re Fucking Over This.*

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**Age Nineteen**

There were boundaries now, and Shane hated them.

They were laid out that same night, when Garrett poured them each a glass of Shane’s whiskey, sat them down on his futon, and told Shane that the only way he’d get rid of him was to kill him.

“Can’t kill you,” Shane muttered.

“Then thank Christ, we’re on the same fucking page,” Garrett replied.

Shane continued to share a room with him. But there were no more late night visits to Shane’s bed. The handholding during movies stopped. And while Garrett continued to tell Shane when he was going on a date, he left out the details.

And yet, the next seven months were hell.

Dozens of wasted Shanes, stumbling home, snapping at Garretts to fuck the hell off with their judgment. Dozens of frustrated Garretts, shouting after Shanes about the depth of their denial.

Seven months before a constantly relapsing Shane found sobriety again.

Seven months before Garrett forced him to acknowledge—out loud, to his face—that he was gay.

Seven months before Shane was able to wrangle his feelings back into that Pandora’s box he’d foolishly opened all those nights ago.

He ached to have it back. The kisses and petting; the handholding and bed-sharing. He ached for it with all his heart. But it was never going to happen, and so Shane closed that box. Wrapped his belt
around it. Stuck it in a garbage bag. Shoved it into the back of his childhood closet, and this time locked the door himself.

Sobriety, well. It was fucking thrilling. Who wouldn’t want to wake each morning to stock shelves at Joja? To come home to a person he had to pretend not to love, and crawl into an empty bed of insomnia after?

Then something happened: something that consisted of three words Shane had never heard before.

“Shane,” Garrett said, effortlessly shooting Shane’s assassin with his PP7. “I met someone.”

The assassin crumpled to a heap on the bunker floor. Shane stared resolutely at the screen.


Garrett never met someone.

He watched the dead body of his player on the screen, waiting for the pixels to disintegrate into nothingness.

Samantha was not like his usual picks. She was quiet. Not a partier. The first time she met Shane, she was at least as nervous as him. And then this shy girl—she was the one with staying power.

“She’s like you, Shane,” Garrett had said after the first week. “She’s got this whole world in her head that you can’t see from the outside.”

As if telling Shane that Samantha was like him softened the blow. Deep down, the box of feelings rattled.

She became the third spoke of their relationship, in a way no previous girlfriend ever had, and Garrett announced—one month after dating—that they were getting an apartment near the university, and of course Shane would be their roomie.

Fast as this seemed, Shane reminded himself that he’d moved in with Garrett practically overnight. His best friend always went lightning fast, with everything.

Still, the box rattled. Shane waited for the day it would be a death rattle, but it never came. Not when Garrett and Sam went on dates. Not when they spent the evening in the apartment, cuddling on the couch while Shane was in the armchair. Not when Garrett held Samantha’s hand or stroked her hair; nor when the two of them closed the door to their bedroom, while Shane watched TV and tried to forget anyone else was home.

They didn’t stop when Samantha became unexpectedly pregnant at twenty-one, and decided to keep the baby.

They didn’t stop at twenty-two, when Jas was born; when Shane fell a little bit in love with her himself. When Sam went to work in the evenings, and Garrett and Shane sat on the living room floor with Jas crawling between them. Garrett scooping her up, delivering her to Shane’s arms and saying, “Bet she doesn’t even know which one of us is her real dad.”

And the feelings were still there at twenty-three, when the disillusionment began.

“We weren’t fucking ready,” mumbled Garrett, sitting on the edge of Shane’s bed, his head in his hands. “It’s too fucking much, and now Sam’s telling me I’m not pulling my weight? Like I’m sitting on my fucking ass all the time. She’s the one who told me to go for my Masters! Said she
could handle nights without me, and now she’s giving me so much shit, and I know she’s tired as hell, and I know she resents dropping out, but fuck...”

They were still there at twenty-four, when Shane noticed he never petted her hair anymore. When Sam stopped looking at Garrett with soft eyes that said she was in love, and turned them to her daughter 24/7 instead. When Shane passed by their bedroom door, and it was never closed anymore. Instead—

“Tunnelers vs. Hornets,” said Garrett, slamming two tickets into Shane’s chest. “Tonight. Drop whatever shit you’re doing and get ready to blow your load over a Hennessey starting lineup, because we’re there at seven.”

He was returning to Shane.

It started simple enough. The gridball match, followed by grabbing a booth at AJ’s Bar & Grill. Their restaurant, a tradition after the games. But then on weekends—rather than spend them as a family—Sam took Jas, and Garrett dragged Shane all over town, to the places Shane used to grumble about.

Hole-in-the-wall music shops, Garrett pouring over old vinyl and rare EPs like they were catnip, while Shane browsed the display of colorful pipes under the glass counter, wondering which one to buy him for his birthday.

Shopping at the mall, Garrett searching for a jacket in stores that blasted trendy music and smelled of cologne behind their tiki-hut entrances. Shane hanging around fountains, buying sodas and pizza slices to pass the time.

The skate park, sitting on concrete bumpers overlooking the ramps, sharing a pack of hot tamales and doing fail-commentary for all the amateur wipe-outs. Shane’s comments making Garrett snort so hard, he choked on a candy and almost threw up. Afterward, Garrett pelting him with the tamales one by one for laughing when he’d nearly died.

The annual Zuzu City Knife Show, because Garrett knew Shane liked knives. Nudging Shane with his shoulder when they stopped to watch a knife-throwing contest, asking seriously if that’s something he wanted to learn.

On weekends that Samantha had to work, Garrett and Shane watched Jas together. In good weather they took her to the park. In bad weather, they stayed inside and played video games: winner got to feed her the bottle, loser had to change her diaper. When she was sleeping, they had challenges to see who could stack the most pieces of cereal on her head without toppling them.

One afternoon, when Shane lost and was changing her diaper, Garrett leaned against the doorframe of the bedroom.

“God Shane,” he said quietly. “You’re so fucking good with her.”

At twenty-five, they all still shared the same apartment. Garrett and Sam, however, were no longer together.

He hadn’t just returned to Shane. He’d made Shane his person again.

Those previous boundaries, they’d shoved them in place so long ago. But they were older now, more mature. The barriers began to feel silly to Shane. So when Garrett walked behind him and rubbed his shoulders while he cooked, he said nothing. When Garrett hooked his arm around Shane during a movie, Shane didn’t protest. And when Garrett laid next to him in bed one night, in near-
tears from the stress of his course load, Shane didn’t stop the hand that pet his head.

It was soothing for both of them. This was just how his best friend operated. He needed to give that affection, those touches, and whoever was his person would receive them.

Shane had missed being his person so fucking bad, it almost hurt to have it back. The deep-down feelings were gathering mass. They no longer rattled, but threatened to burst out of the box entirely.

Twenty-five was feeling like a good year.

“You and Sam…you’re seriously done?” Shane took a pull off the glass pipe before handing it to Garrett. Aquamarine and black swirls; the one Shane had bought him for his birthday.

“Yes,” said Garrett, and though not often a man of few words, he left it at that.

They were in the bedroom at his old house, digging through the boxes of his music collection that he’d never had room for in the apartment. A cool, east coast beat began to play through the room and Garrett leaned back, holding in the smoke. He blew it out the side of his mouth and looked up at Shane, his usually playful eyes solemn.

“Don’t know what I’d do without you, Shane.”

Shane stared back, and Garrett didn’t look away.

There was a day at twenty-six when Shane dug for that box of feelings. He opened the closet. Took it out, and slid it from the garbage bag. He undid the belt. He sat with his hands on the edges of that box, heart hammering, both excited and afraid.

Jas and Samantha were gone for an evening, to the birthday party of another little girl from her daycare. Shane had just gotten out of the shower after his Joja shift when Garrett slammed his textbook shut, then chucked it at the wall for good measure.

He glanced over at the thud. “How’s the studying?”

“Studying,” Garrett said, “can suck my dropped nuts. No more room in my head. Everything that goes in pushes something else out.” He scooped up an invisible pile of something in his hands, and held it out to Shane. “You see this shit? That’s all the shit I’ll never fucking remember tomorrow.”

“Wanna play a game instead?” Shane asked.

A half hour later, Garrett’s bad mood had melted in the face of whooping Shane’s ass at Gridlock: Death Match. And, as usual, he stopped paying attention to gloat.

“What’s the matter? Thumbs get tired after that fifty-yard dash? Or just hard to run when you’re tripping over the body of your own starting forward? Christ, what the fuck did that poor guy ever do for you to make him a fucking speed bum—”

Shane landed a goal, cutting him off smack in the middle of his shit talk.

“Fuck you, man!” Garrett laughed, snatching his controller. “You know I can’t talk and play at the same time.”

He tried to snag it back, but Garrett was too quick for him.

“Well, you finally got the walking and talking thing down after two decades,” Shane said, making
another swipe for it. “So, you know. Hope for you yet.”

Garrett pulled it out of reach a second time. When Shane swiped for a third, Garrett threw the controller to the side and tackled him against the couch. Shane laughed and fought back, sweeping his arm around, trying to get him in a headlock. It wasn’t easy; Garrett knew more fancy wrestling moves, but after struggling against the pillows for a moment, Shane managed to hook Garrett’s neck and flip himself around. They were both breathing hard from the struggle, and still holding Garrett’s neck in the crook of his arm—a split second decision, his brain shutting down—Shane leaned in, kissing him on the lips.

The laughter, the wrestling, all movement died.

Shane wasn’t sure how long it lasted.

Maybe one second. Maybe five.

Garrett didn’t shove him off. Nor did he kiss back. But whenever those seconds were done, he slowly pulled away, his expression somber.

“Shane…” he said gently.

Shane released his neck, and it was like a damn busting open—the old shame, fear, and anger, rolling through his chest.

“No,” he said.

Garrett sank back helplessly against the cushions. “Shane, come on…you know it can’t be like that…”

Shane was shaking when he repeated, “No.”

Garrett rubbed both hands over his face, and after dragging them all the way down he looked at Shane, and in the same quiet voice: “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean,” said Shane, standing up, kicking the cord from the controller. “Stop fucking lying to yourself.”

Confusion washed over Garrett’s face. It was a pitiful sight, and Shane hated it.

“What,” Garrett said, “are you on about?”

“This fucking act!” shouted Shane, the flood bursting up from his chest, pouring out of his mouth now. “This fucking bullshit!”

Garrett closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice shook. “You know that’s not—”

“Do I? Do I know? What about you? Do you fucking know? Because I don’t think you do!”

“Shane, I’m not—”

“Wake. The fuck. Up! No fucking straight boy acts like you, Garrett!”

“Shane,” Garrett pleaded, “just stop it, man, just sto—”

“You’re fucking scared,” said Shane, shaking, his words still a downpour. “All these years, you
were fucking scared to admit you’d rather be with me than Samantha—"

“Will you just fucking liste—”

“And will you just take a look in the goddamn mirror?” Shane’s heart slammed through his whole body. “You’ve spent more time in my bed than any of your so-called girlfriend’s. Ever since you ended it with Sam, you’ve been all fucking over me again. And yeah, again! Because it’s just like before, just like you were all fucking over me before she ever came around.”

Garrett’s hands were on his face again, and this time when he pulled them down his eyes glistened.

“I’m not,” he whispered.

“No fucking straight boy,” Shane repeated, voice trembling. “And if you fucking care about me like you always say you do, you’d try fucking harder. You would. You’d try harder. And if you can’t do that—if you can’t even fucking kiss me—then don’t ever touch me again.”

Garrett began to cry.

Heart racing, head engulfed in the fire of everything that had just exploded, Shane left. It was the last time they ever spoke.

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Age Thirty-One

This closet was clean and softly-carpeted. There was an air freshener in one corner, a little white plastic container with gelled beads that smelled of wildflowers. Instead of scary masks, the box on the highest shelf contained his knife collection.

It had never occurred to Shane as a little boy, visiting Marnie for the first time, that one day he would disappear into one of her closets—or that getting drunk would happen on the inside, rather than the out. His vision swam, swirling patterns on the carpet. The whiskey was almost gone.

God, I wondered if this would happen.

Then…I’ve been wanting to do this since that first night.

What’re you thinking? Are you like, confused? Or do you know?

Look, I get it. You didn't know before. I know you’re scared, but you don’t need to be.

This doesn’t have to be a big deal.

Daniels! Jesusfuck, dude, breathe for a minute.

Don’t fucking lie to me, man! I know you.

Fine. Go. Fucking run. But you can't hide from me, Shane Daniels.

For real this time. You and me.

Hey, Shane?
No drama, just the good shit.

Do you trust me?

Nothing’s gonna change.

...

It’d only been a month. Not all that much to throw away, in the grand scheme of things.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, we appreciate it so much! If you have a moment, we’d love to hear your thoughts on Shane’s past in this chapter.

Special shout out to Xy, who we consulted on continuity! Thank you for your final beta read-through!

Follow us on tumblr, or stop by our discord server! We’ve got a lovely group of people hanging out and everyone is welcome to join. We chat about SB, writing, life in general, and every other Friday there is a live reading of a SB chapter.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is August 4th, 2-4pm PST.
Shane’s knees hurt on the fluffy blue bathmat. The cold ceramic of the toilet bowl chilled his cheeks. He hung his head over the water, watching the pathetic trail of saliva drip down, slow and swaying. It gathered in a little bubbly pool on the surface.

That was it.

His stomach still churned, but it was a fucking liar. He’d tried, unsuccessfully, to puke three times that morning. Nothing but dry heaves.

He always drank before bed. How the fuck else could he fall asleep? But last night he hadn’t just gotten drunk. He’d purposely blacked out. With zero intention of heading to work the following morning. Shane had chugged whiskey until darkness took him on the stack of cushions in front of his TV. He’d woken to his alarm beeping like a phone call from hell, still in clothes from the previous day, the bottle on the floor at his side. Only after several minutes of disorientation did he remember it was Monday.

With a deep breath, he grabbed the sides of the toilet seat and pushed himself to standing. He turned on the shower and let the hot water run, building up steam on the mirror.

Steam.

Hot water.

Spa.

God, he couldn’t go back to the farm.

Shane sank to sit cross-legged in the tub as the water beat down. The fog grew thicker. He stayed in the shower until his skin was raw and stinging; until he felt like he might pass out from the heat.

In his room, toweling off damp hair, he looked at his reflection. Sunken eyes stared back. It was time to get ready; to put on the farce of it being a normal fucking day. A dark red hoodie over his t-shirt. The pint of whiskey—refilled after taking several morning shots—slipped into the pocket of his jeans. His balisong, tucked into the opposite side.

He waited for Marnie’s door to open across the hall. Once it did, she’d be stepping out in her
bathrobe, hair frizzy and wild from sleep. She’d head to the bathroom to wash it, meaning Shane had approximately six or seven minutes to get out of the house without having to face her deathly ray of morning sunshine in the kitchen.

He hadn’t eaten, but oh well.

Staying put until he heard that signal of safety, he weighed his options. The dock was no good. If for some godforsaken reason William called Marnie, she’d tell him that was Shane’s favorite haunt. And town? Fuck town. Fuck dealing with anyone whose last memory of him was a gossipy “He got his ass kicked.”

Except…there was Joja.

Maybe that hellhole had something of value to him now. Shane had passed it once since quitting to find the front door and windows boarded. But behind the building was a heavy metal door, locking up the empty warehouse and back halls. Might be accessible. He could find a place to sit. Drink in peace. Take a fucking nap until night fell, with no one able to find him.

After hearing Marnie’s footsteps in the hall, he went to his closet and reached to the top shelf for the shoebox that held his knife collection. Amid the folded pocket and buck knives, the tactical blades, and the lonely pair of brass knuckles, he dug out a small set of lockpicks.

*It’s okay.*

Steeling himself with the new plan, he walked through the kitchen.

*It’s okay.*

He opened the front door and slipped outside, into that first soft stage of morning. Beautiful solitude, nothing in his sight except…

William?

Shane froze, the door clicking shut behind him—a caught animal under the sudden wash of light from the motion-activated sensor on the porch.

*Not okay.*

William’s black truck was parked sideways, blocking the road Shane took to leave the ranch. The engine was off, the air deadly silent, and he stood leaning against the hood with his ankles crossed. One hand was wrapped around a thermos and he took a sip, staring directly at Shane.

Shane’s heart hammered as he locked eyes with the man whose tongue had been in his mouth Friday night. For the fourth time since waking, he wanted to throw up.

In the pale dawn a bird warbled. William pushed off the truck.

Today he was in dark jeans and a denim jacket, his white undershirt a bright contrast to the tattoos creeping up his neck. He took Shane in, fingers adjusting their grip on the thermos.

“Had a feeling you were going to need some help getting to work today,” he said, nodding at the vehicle. “C’mon.”

Not giving Shane a chance to refuse, he got in.

Sweat pricked Shane’s forehead.
William. His face. That beard. Those lips speaking words at him, when the last time they were together, they’d been connected to his. But Shane understood: today, running away was not an option.

Holding his stomach tight, he followed.

The cab of the truck was tidy and clean, reminding him of William’s minimalist bedroom at the farm. It had a bench seat, the driver and passenger side divided by a center console. Several items were on top: a clipboard, an accordion folder stuffed with invoices, and a locked money box. There was also a second thermos of coffee in the cup holder, paper packets of cream and sugar tucked beside it.

Shane climbed in and stuffed his hands into his hoodie pocket. He stared at the floor mat as William exhaled.

“Allright, Daniels,” he said, his voice a rasp across silk. “It seems to me that we’ve had a blurring of boundaries on my part.”

Shane, already still as a statue, turned to marble.

Boundaries.

Cursed fucking word.

“This?” William said, drumming his fingers on the wheel. “This is about fixing that shit.”

Shane could feel the blue gaze piercing him. The same gaze that only days ago he’d seen dead on, inches from his face. And now its owner was laying down boundaries; something put into place by people who thought they knew what was best for him. People who were probably right, given that every boundary Shane had ever crossed only brought disaster.

“Today there are rules,” William continued. “I talk, you listen. And there is going to be a fucking quiz at the end, so you’d better pay attention. Nod for yes.”

Still staring at the floor mat, Shane gave the most minuscule of nods. If he didn’t open his mouth, maybe he wouldn’t end up puking all over the glove box.

William grunted in approval.

“Put on your seatbelt,” he said, starting the engine. “And that coffee? That’s for you, if you want it.”

Shane buckled, ignoring the drink.

They started down the dirt road that led east to town. William turned on the same classic rock station he always listened to while working. This time he didn’t sing along, just drove them through the sleepy village and then pulled onto the empty highway.

Shane continued to stare at the floor, though keeping him in his peripheral vision. Composed as William looked on the surface, he was clearly tense too. Picking up and putting down his thermos. Grip tight on the steering wheel. Rubbing his neck several times. He glanced over at Shane, sighed, and looked back at the road.

“I don’t like to pussyfoot around shit,” he said at last. “Never been particularly good at that. So if I’m too fucking blunt, just wave or something.” He glanced over again. “You listening?”
Shane placed an elbow on the window ledge, face in hand. Closing his eyes, he nodded against his palm.

A pause. “Have you been taking care of yourself this weekend?”

Shane didn’t respond. Of course he hadn’t been taking care of himself. When the fuck did he ever? Why would he start now, after making perhaps the second biggest mistake of his life? And why did all those big mistakes start with kissing other men?

_Because when something good is in your life, you destroy it._

William grunted. “Hate to hear that. But it makes sense.” He let the silence settle before adding, “Did you know? Before Friday. I know I’ve said some shit, but…did you know before Friday?”

Shane leaned forward, stretching his seatbelt. Elbows on his knees, he grabbed the back of his neck in both hands and tugged down.

William gave a cynical little laugh. “Well. That answers that. I was half afraid it was some fucked-up prank you were pulling on me.”

Shane’s fingers dug into his skin. He concentrated on that pressure, rather than the fact William was reading it all wrong.

Well, no. He was reading it right. Wasn’t William’s fault that Shane acted in denial. As if he hadn’t spent the last decade playing a losing game of whackamole against these feelings, fooling everyone but his father and best friend.

And now, William.

“Fuck, Daniels. Just, fuck.” He let out a breath. “Something you need to know. I didn’t plan this. I know…I know you fucking owe me ‘n shit. I know that. And I should’ve been better than what happened. Should’ve had better control over it. Shouldn’t have, like, shoved you off the deep end of the fucking sexuality pool while you were drunk.” His voice tensed. “But I’m also not sorry. Because that was the best fucking kiss I’ve had in years, and I refuse to apologize.”

Shane said nothing. His mind was going a million miles a minute. William’s words just now. That kiss, that stupid drunk kiss—but those boundaries—best kiss he’d had in years, but also _—should’ve been better than what happened_—

What the fuck did all this even _mean_?

And god, he couldn’t even open his mouth and tell William he was wrong, that he _did_ know he was gay. That he just hated it. Wanted to wake up and not want anybody, because all the worst things in his life came down to the fact he wanted men, and it was a cursed fucking existence that ended in pain and dark closets and caskets…

He sat up. Leaning once more against the window, he silently begged the thoughts to stop, dragging a hand through his hair.

“Fuck!” he hissed, knocking his head against the glass.

William looked at him, then immediately swerved the truck off the deserted highway. He jerked it into park on the gravel side and unsnapped his seatbelt. Grabbing Shane by the neck of his shirt, he loomed over him, the sun starting to rise in a glowing halo behind his head.
“None. Of that. *Bullshit.*” His voice was hard as steel, the shirt tightening around Shane’s neck as he fisted it in his hand. “You will *not* slam that head of yours on fucking anything in front of me again, do you understand?”

The whole thing had taken Shane by such shock he felt helpless against the man in front of him, until finally—breath jagged through that restricted airway—he came to his senses. He yanked the hand off his collar and threw it at William, then flopped back in the seat, tugging the neck of his hoodie to get it to normal.

William let out a slow breath as he sank to the driver’s side. He rolled his neck, clipped his seatbelt on, and waited for one lone vehicle to pass before pulling onto the road again.

“We’ll get to the Kendrick general store in about ten more minutes,” he said, voice soft. “Then swing back up and drop off on our way home. We’ve got eight deliveries to hit today.”

He flipped the radio back on.

Shane turned to look out the window, leaning against the headrest now. Rural landscapes rolled by, first rays of sunlight illuminating the dewy fields of grass. He never looked at William, but between the scenery and music—and the calm after yet another burst of violence—some of the tightness in Shane’s chest subsided.

They took an exit off the highway, leading into a quaint-looking downtown. Shops lined the street, boasting of antique furniture and eclectic art, and a few nicer houses had been renovated into luncheon hot spots. William pulled into a small parking lot at the rear of one of the restaurants.

“Get out and help me with these boxes,” he said, grabbing the clipboard.

Shane closed his eyes. With a slow, deep breath, he pushed open the door.

The truck bed was stacked full of boxes, product he’d loaded up himself Friday morning, while blissfully unaware of the fact that he was going to be kidnapped to help deliver it. Unsure of which ones he was meant to grab, Shane waited while William made nice with the lady who came out—a bunch of polite ‘yes ma’am’s and ‘sign here’s.

“Red boxes, Daniels,” he said, looking up as if reading Shane’s mind. “Mrs. Kendricks will show you where.”

Mrs. Kendricks was a tiny, cheerful bubble of a woman.

“Oh, William, you’re a lifesaver! We were almost out of the pepper jelly. It’s just so popular.” She smiled at Shane, pointing toward a door. “Right in there, young man.”

They dropped off the boxes. William smiled. Got paid. Waved good-bye.

Just like that, they were done.

Back in the truck William made a few notes on his clipboard, unsnapped a sheet, and slipped it into the folder.

“She’s shorthanded,” he said, putting the truck back in gear. “Her son just got married and he’s living in Zuzu now. She’s a sweet thing.”

Shane almost asked why the fuck that mattered, but stopped himself at recalling William’s earlier words. Something about paying attention. Something about a quiz.
They headed to the next delivery, once more silent but for the classic rock. Shane finally reached for his coffee. Ignoring the creamer and sugar, he unscrewed the lid and took a tentative sip to test the temperature. A little too hot. He sat back and stared out the window again, squinting against the bright sunrise.

The next stop was a farm stall set to receive a hundred bottles of William’s home brew. The man running it was a chatty sort who roped William into a conversation about hops farming, and after helping with the boxes Shane went back to the truck.

William was still facing away. If Shane was fast…

Watching the back of his denim jacket like a hawk, Shane stood inside the open door of the vehicle and unscrewed the thermos. Balancing it between his hip and the seat, where it’d be hidden if William did turn around, he pulled out his pint.

He paused with fingers on the cap.

Was he a fucking idiot? *Inside* a closed vehicle? A smell as pungent as whiskey?

Sighing, he shoved it back in his pocket, and moments later buckled up with the thermos of undoctored coffee in his lap.

The rest of the deliveries were just as simple. William kept his eyes on the road, only giving blips of information about the retailers between the silence. While they drove Shane stared out the window. When they stopped he stared at the pavement, waiting for instructions. As promised, he never had to speak.

They dropped off a dozen crates of cheese at an industrial farm, William informing him the place was constantly short of pickers. There was a local supermarket, a bit bigger than Pierre’s, that was opening a new location and replacing its produce manager. Closer to the valley was a restaurant needing a new bar back, and then a ranch like Marnie’s where William talked to a man about renting a bull to impregnate his cows.

Their last stop was Pierre’s. It wasn’t until they’d unloaded the final packages and were almost back at the farm before William spoke again.

“Alright, Daniels. We just saw about, eh, six to eight greener, straighter pastures for your potential employment. Any interest?”

This broke Shane’s private vow of silence. “What?”

William frowned. “You deserve to work for someone who doesn’t make you want to bash your head into a wall, Shane,” he said, staring straight at the road.

So that’s what this was about.

Fuck, was he stupid. All those fucking deliveries. All those comments about the places being shorthanded or hiring…totally over Shane’s head. He’d missed the half dozen signs as large as billboards telling him to find employment elsewhere, because William was apparently blaming himself rather than Shane’s demented circus of a brain.

Shane looked down, playing with the clasp on the thermos lid. “C’mon man,” he said quietly. “It’s not fucking like that.”

William grunted. “Don’t like seeing you too scared to come to work. That shit doesn’t feel good.”
His grip on the wheel tightened. “My fault.”

Shane snapped the clasp shut extra hard. “Yeah. How about shut the fuck up.”

His words rang over the soft radio.

“Shut the fuck up, eh?” They pulled into the farm. Once the truck was in park William leaned back, looking at Shane cautiously. “You could change your mind.”

“Not your fucking fault,” Shane insisted, voice quiet.

William grabbed the accordion folder and pull out a handful of sheets.

“You don’t have to excuse it, Daniels. I’m your boss. Bosses shouldn’t take advantage of their employees. And like…I can’t help how I feel. So here.” He handed Shane the applications, paperclipped together. “If you want to go, knowing what you know, I won’t stop you.”

William’s back was rigid, the muscles in his neck tense. The truck went silent, the stack hovering in the air between them until Shane took it. He stared at a spot on the top page without reading the words. After what felt like an eternity, he unceremoniously rolled them up and shoved them in his hoodie pocket.

He shook his head.

William gave a deeper grunt. “Well,” he said, opening the truck door, “if you’re here today, we might as well finish up. Made some fence posts over the weekend, so we’ll go down and fix the east side.”

He got out of the vehicle, slammed the door harder than usual, and started toward the shop.

Shane remained seated.

William didn’t want him to stay after all. They’d just fucked up their whole work dynamic, and this was for both of their stupid sakes.

He looked out the window, watching him walk across the property, the words from their drive echoing in his head. About did Shane know. Was he aware how much he liked dudes? About the kiss. About William liking the kiss.

Shane shifted in his seat, feeling the stiff tube of applications in his pocket. And it was that—the stupid hard roll of paper against his stomach—that made him grab his whiskey again. He waited until William had disappeared into the shop to take several long swallows.

He’d follow him in a moment. Once he’d burned away the morning.

As William stalked away, he knew he was being irrational.

He’d handed Shane the exit key but now his stomach was in knots while the asshole side-eyed the lock.

Once in the barn, he went to the back, deep into a storage closet, shutting the door. Only in the
safety of that close space did he let the mask drop.

All weekend he’d punished himself, avoiding the storm of guilt, worry, and anguish with good old-fashioned manual labor. Five hundred fence posts later and it still wasn’t enough. Thirty hours of meticulous sanding battled the spiral of thoughts on Friday night and all of Saturday. The work had been repetitive and mindless, letting him drown out the panic on Shane’s face when he’d run from him.

So nice for your attempt at intimacy to be met with screaming panic. Worked wonders on the ego.

It wasn’t until his shower that night that he’d come to the conclusion he had to fix this.

Sunday morning, in no mood to be around people, he’d ditched Ma. Instead, he made calls to his various contacts in the agriculture community, collecting job openings. Each affirmation of an employment opportunity had been an exercise of self-flagellation, reminders of places where Shane could get his work done without some shithead objectifying him in the process.

He’d gone to bed with a clear plan in mind. All he had to do was ambush Shane and make it better.

Ambush.

Crossed boundaries.

Ruin.

Those were the things he was good at. He excelled at building a beautiful house of blocks, and with one careless gesture, knocking them to the ground.

He let out a breath, refocused on the closet, and dug out two pairs of work gloves before stepping back into the barn.

They were decent jobs. One or two of them could pay more than he’d make staying here. The retail gig? As good as Shane worked, William knew the owner would promote his quiet farmhand in a matter of months. That would mean benefits for Jas, something William had barely been able to provide as a lone farmer.

It wasn’t like Shane wanted to quit yet, right? He’d said to shut up about it. He hadn’t told him that it was over. He hadn’t started filling out applications. And it didn’t mean anything for him to stare at the pages, reading them. What had he expected? Shane to crumple them up, throw them down, and declare that no, he didn’t want any other stupid job, and yeah, no worries Will, he was fine right where he was?

But. He hadn’t expected him to roll them neatly and put them in his pocket.

Safe keeping.

For when he left.

William’s hands clenched around the gloves. He had to get it together, before Shane saw him pacing like a caged bull over stupid shit that had nothing to do with mending the fence. He tucked down his thoughts and when Shane finally walked in, threw a pair of gloves at him a touch harder than necessary. He shed his denim jacket, fixing a clean mask of ‘Don’t Give A Damn’ over the swirl of fuckshit in his head.

Even if behind the mask he was hyper-aware of every damn breath, move, and micro-expression.
While they loaded wooden posts he waited for words, which was stupid because all Shane did was move like a silent worker drone. No reaction to William’s sharp movements. Not a raised brow or side-eye when he dropped the fence posts too hard on the trailer. He followed William’s lead perfectly. Just like all of last week. William figured it was only to remind him how much it was going to suck when he left.

Why didn’t he fucking say something?

Maybe he’s not even thinking about it. Maybe you’re the only one thinking about it. Maybe you need to get it together, Bauer.

They filled the trailer with posts. Once it was packed tighter than the silence between them, they rode the ATV to the broken property line. It was 1:00 pm and there was a ton of fence to do. This was the longest stretch left, and it was going to take at least a couple of weeks. When they parked Shane still didn’t speak; he just pulled his gloves on and began to unload as William walked toward the line of ruined wood.

After pulling the first broken post, rusted nails poking out of the jagged wood, he glanced at Shane. Unlike William, he seemed fucking chill as a damn ice cube. William scowled and dropped the rotten piece of wood onto their haul-away pile. He was about to ask for its replacement when there it was, waiting in Shane’s hand. An unspoken understanding.

Grunting, he took it with a nod, and Shane was already pulling up the next rotten one as he pushed it into place.

It was frustratingly easy.

Even though William thought about broaching the subject forty different times, he couldn’t bring himself to break the peace once they fell into a rhythm; an ease and comfort that was at total odds with the stress of his weekend.

Enjoy it while it lasts. Because it’s only a matter of time before he leaves.

He might not leave, William thought back to that cynical side. He might like it here.

Or he might be waiting for you to flip the script again, and run screaming sexual harassment all the way up to the next available job.

The shadows on the fence posts stretched as time passed, and it was silent save for the thump-pop of knocking wood into place.

William turned to point at a tool he needed, and his eyes froze on the bulge in Shane’s hoodie. The white tube of applications peeked out the corner of his pocket, a flag of surrender. Bile surged and he swallowed it down. He accepted the hammer from Shane and locked his eyes on the twisted nail that needed removing.

Hours later he glimpsed his watch and leaned back, counting what was left of the job. They’d barely made a dint. And fuck if it hadn’t been easy between them, despite how unsettled he felt about the entire mess.

"Damn the rain this spring," he muttered as he stretched. Behind them, old and gnarled posts were piled on the cart, a tribute to their progress. Louder he said, "Getting close to quitting time."

Shane only nodded, silent as the damn grave. It fit the mute routine he’d performed all afternoon. He gathered the last of the rotten pieces, the posts stacked precariously in his arms, and just as
William opened his mouth to warn him, he lost his grip. They scattered.

"Dammit," he muttered, bending over to pick them up.

William crossed over to help. As he neared, a pint of whiskey slipped from Shane’s jean pocket. It landed next to him, unnoticed as he restacked the wood.

Whiskey. On the job.

He narrowed his eyes and swooped forward, snagging it out of the grass. "What the fuck. You drunk?"

Shane flipped around, the words strong enough to destroy his statue-impression. He saw the half-empty bottle in William’s hand and dropped the wood, making a swipe for it.

William stepped back in a blaze of righteous anger. He held the bottle over Shane’s head.

"You got this pretty close in your pocket," he said, "and it's half gone."

"Didn't expect to be here today, if you catch my drift. Fucking relax." Refusing to jump for it, Shane turned back to picking up the wood.

Relax. Right. After being a ball of iron tension since Friday night. Relax, when he’d been torturing himself all fucking Saturday over ruining things. Relax, something that was so fucking easy when Shane just admitted that this morning he’d had no intention of addressing this. Might as well give him a goddamned massage if he wanted relaxation. What had he been thinking to come in drinking today?

The fuck if William was going to wait around for answers. At the rate they were going, waiting on Shane to open his pigheaded mouth would leave him old and grey. He shoved the bottle into his back pocket and stalked behind him, waiting until Shane had dumped the wood before clamping both hands on his shoulders.

Leaning into his ear he purred, “You know sweetheart, it occurs to me that you didn’t deny drinking on my dime.”

He held him tight. Fuckhead couldn’t just ignore it.

“Not drunk,” Shane spat, and rolled his shoulders to push William off. When that didn’t work he ducked down out of the hold, storming away to pick up the last post. “And the fuck was this about not taking advantage?” He chucked the board into the cart, then turned his head and hocked a spitwad at the ground.

William’s insides coiled.

Take advantage? More like shake the stupid out of him. Looked like it was time to throw down a jackhammer’s worth of rattling.

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you decided to stay today,” he snapped, stalking after Shane as he went for the tools. “You want me to relax? I thought I made it damn clear how I like to relax, Shane.”

Shane’s voice speared through him like an arrow.

“Didn’t burn those papers yet.”
William’s vision blurred, outrage from all his weekend stress boiling over.

So. Shane was going to leave.

He remembered his relief when he’d been willing to get in the truck with him that morning. Yet it didn’t mean shit, did it? All this calm work was just for his last day. William couldn’t gauge where one emotion started and another ended. They were a swirl of sick, bright, caustic colors in his mind, racing through him until he just wanted to lash out and hurt Shane back.

"Fuck you!" he shouted, and threw him to the ground before he could think.

Shane laid against one elbow where he fell, panting hard to suck in air.

"The FUCK?" he shouted, his voice a wheeze. After a moment to catch his breath, he pushed to his feet.

Challenge in his every line and move, William braced for that tackle, just like their first fight. But Shane kept his distance. He paced like a predator, slow and glaring, leaving an amount of space between them, and William realized he was waiting for him to do more.

His heart raced, pulse beating in his ears.

"There ain't no goddamned HR here, Daniels," he growled, stalking closer. He shot a glance at Shane’s pockets and then at his ruddy face. "You've got your tickets to something better. You want to go? Go.” He shoved him again on the last word, Shane stumbling.

A rational part of William knew he needed to back off, to not escalate this more than he had. His shirt was sweaty and clung to him, adding to the agitation, and he opened and closed his fists, trembling from holding back.

Shane raised his chin, that shadowed jaw jutting to the side. He gave a half nod.

"How bout my fucking whiskey back?" The words were tight, each syllable strained.

"You want it?" William asked, his voice hard. "It's in my back pocket, closet bitch. Reach for that ass yourself."

A dark cloud crossed Shane’s face, the anger changing. Before it’d been growing, tempered behind those strained words like a cocked arrow. At William’s insult it was released. Shane rushed forward—so fast William didn’t have time to brace—and grabbed him by the shoulders, throwing him to the ground. Pain bloomed, and William gave an outraged roar.

Shane spit again, the lob of saliva hitting him full in the chest.

"Oh that's fucking it," William snarled, rolling and tackling him by the legs, and driving a blow into his stomach. "YOU WANT TO PISS ME OFF? CONGRATULATIONS YOU ASSHOLE, I'M FUCKING ANGRY!"

They struggled, wrestling on the ground, panting and grunting in shared fury. It didn’t take William long to gain the upper hand, straddling him. An iron grip on each wrist, he spat back in Shane’s face as he writhed to escape. Red and white hot energy coursed through William and he could almost see himself, furious and aggressive, leering over Shane like a villain.

“Ready to quit now?” he roared. “Ready to run from the psychopath?”
Shane struggled, but bad back or not, William was stronger. He let Shane pant and twist; let him exhaust himself as he tried to buck William off, hips shifting and pushing.

Pushing hard enough that William could feel his growing erection.

*Just like last time.*

He had a choice. He could point out the proof of their chemistry. Make the argument that this between them *wasn’t* some fluke he’d made up in his head. But then probably, he realized, Shane knew that—and kept running from it anyway.

That shit was over. Because this wasn’t going anywhere, and he *had* to pay attention. William was going to *make* him pay attention.

Shane squirmed again, kicking his feet, trying to get purchase under the pin, unwittingly grinding his erection into William’s thigh. William released one of his arms so that he could pop his fist into Shane’s jaw. It was a glancing blow, and one that opened him up to retaliation. Not missing a beat, Shane used his newly freed hand to punch right back. That shit fucking hurt, yet he knew Shane could hit him harder. It wasn’t his dominant hand and on the ground he couldn’t get the momentum for the force he’d used the first time.

That time outside the bar.

William’s next blow was harder. Hard enough, he imagined, for Shane to have stars bloom.

Maybe bright enough to illuminate what he’d told him in the spa.

That they both liked this.

That they were both craving this release.

That no matter Shane had run from him, they were careening back into one another so hard the earth shook.

"You like this shit, Daniels?” William panted, sweat dripping down his face. “You like when I remind you that you’re nothing but a empty bag of horseshit?”

Shane’s face was red from exertion. He didn’t answer; just more frustration, more silences. All he’d given William today had been silences. Silences in the truck. Silences after the ride. Silences while working.

*Just admit what we both know!*

But Shane only stared, thoughts locked behind his eyes. William snagged him by his collar and slammed him so hard on the ground that his thick head bounced.

There was stillness, and Shane went slack.

Slowly, he brought one hand in a fist to his own face. The motion was measured, like he was telling William something. He extended his index finger. Pointing it straight at his eye, he lifted that side of his head, offering it up.

*Hit. Me.*

The moment was sharp. Like the eye of a hurricane, calm and clear, with storm clouds on either side. William locked in on that request, on that harsh, silent plea.
Did Shane need that?

Fine. Special delivery.

He rose up on his knees. Before giving Shane what he wanted, he met his eyes. “You fucking broke my heart when you ran from me, asshole.”

With the focus of pulling out a splinter, William socked him right where he pointed.

Shane accepted the blow with a gasp, not trying to block or defend. William stared down, waiting to see if it had been enough. For a moment he didn’t move, soaking in the reverberations of the punch, his eye squinted shut and leaking tears. After three of them trailed down his cheek, he shifted his jaw and winced.

“Guy bumps his head on a window,” he said, as if each syllable caused pain, “he can’t be trusted. Asks you to jack him in the eye...and it’s okay.”

William’s pulse started to slow. Underneath him, Shane went quiet, panting, eyes closed as if uttering those words had taken everything out of him.

*What the fuck did you just do, Bauer?*

In an instant William shifted, using the strength he’d held Shane down with to haul him into a sitting position.

*You gave him a concussion, asshole.*

“Hey,” William snapped, one arm around his shoulder for support. “You with me, Shane?”

Shane leaned on him, head sagging. He tried to get to his feet, clumsy, and William kept him steady.

*You hit him too hard. You fucking moron. You want a guy to stay, so why don’t you just beat the shit out of him? It’s a foolproof plan, Bauer. You absolute shitstain."

"If you can hear me, nod. If nodding hurts, say, yes or no."

An infinitesimal nod, Shane’s head dipping into, *Yes, I’m with you.*

William experimentally loosened his hold, but Shane stumbled.

"Yep. You're a tough fucker alright," he said, grasping firmly again. He walked Shane to the four-wheeler. Getting in behind him, he adjusted the handles and started back to the house.

It was a short trip down the dirt path from the fence to his porch. He wasn't sure what he was going to say once they got there, but now that the beatings were done, it was time to talk.

*Chapter End Notes*

Thank you for spending another week with us! We appreciate every one of you so much.
Shout out to the one and only Xylianna, for her extra set of beta eyes on these chapters. <3

As always, we’d love to hear from you in the comments, and check our tumblr and discord server if you want to hang with us/other readers!

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is August 18th, 2-4pm PST.
Shane sank onto the wooden porch chair as if it were a cloud.

The click of a door told him William had gone inside the house.

Pain pounded, intense and rhythmic. Unlike that night outside the bar, he didn’t have adrenaline to blind him. He’d been pinned on the ground, waiting for it. Asking for it. And the answering fist had been a kindness—even if he felt every knuckle. Right now, all the fucking garbage in his brain was gone. William had bounced it so deep into the back of his head that for a few blessed moments here on the porch, he couldn’t access it if he tried.

Stars flaked like static in his vision, but that was it: white noise.

Eventually he gathered enough energy to twist the cap off his whiskey and take a long swallow. Leaning back, he shut his eyes, resting the bottle on one knee. Time stretched until he heard the click of the door again, then the scrape of wood on wood as William dragged the other porch chair in front of his.

Something hard, metal, and icy pressed over his eye, the cold instantly releasing some of the fire.

“You floating?” William asked, voice gravelly.

Shane tried to confirm, but only a soft, airy noise came out.

The chair scooted a few inches closer and William lifted Shane’s hand, getting him to hold the compress in place. Carefully, he began to rub a cream onto the other eye, over the less-severe bruise.

Late afternoon sun beat down on the roof. Shane drifted, his head growing quieter. William’s fingers massaged away the static and replaced it with a deep pool of calm, movement keeping time with his breaths.

Breathe in, gentle rub.

Breathe out, gentle rub.

Breathe in, gentle rub.
Breathe out, gentle rub.

Shane would have sat here all evening. He didn’t want it to stop, but all too soon both William’s hand and the compress were pulled away.

William sat directly in front of him. The compress rested on his thigh, looking like a miniature iron. The tube of cream—some type of numbing agent, Shane realized, already feeling the effects—sat on the arm of the chair. William picked it up, squirting another dollop onto his fingers, and faced Shane again. He smoothed it over the more painful side.

“You want me to apologize?” he asked. His fingers were steady, his intense blue gaze focused on its work.

“No,” Shane said, closing his eyes. He sat in darkness, pliable as a statue.

“Good.” William’s thumb worked over the brow. “Because I’m not sorry.”

When done, he wiped his hand on his pant leg and picked up the compress. “Here. I got this.” Gently holding the side of Shane’s head, he pressed it over his eye again. “Just relax a minute. We’re okay.”

It was the calm after the storm. Shane remembered, like a distant echo, the empty silence of being left on the ground after their first fight. Remembered thinking the word peace; the different definitions of it.

Here with William on the porch, it was warm, and not from the sunshine.

Slowly, careful not to disturb his hold on the compress, Shane reached into the pocket of his hoodie and shoved the crumpled wad of applications at him.

William took the stack and tossed them in the empties bucket, where they landed with a feathery thump.

“How’s your eye?” he asked, pulling off the compress. “Can you blink it yet?”

Shane tried, flinching.

William sat back. He handed the iron over, the instructions clear: hold it.

“Fighting with you is an experience, Daniels,” he said, standing, and without further explanation went into the house.

Shane pressed the metal to his face and shrank into the seat.

Daniels.

It’d been Daniels all day again. But in the spa…just for a few minutes…it’d been Shane.

The door was left ajar, and from inside Shane heard the fridge open and close, then the snap of a bottle cap. William came out moments later, taking a long swallow of beer.

“Didn’t give you much fight this time,” Shane said quietly.

“There is more than one kind of fight,” William said, sitting down in front of him again. “Believe me. I have bruises you can’t see.”
Shane went quiet, his fingers adjusting on the compress, and William sighed.

“What are we going to tell your aunt about that eye?”

Good question. Marnie could be oblivious, but she wasn’t fucking dumb. Shane hadn’t gotten a black eye since moving to the valley, and now twice in such a short time? What was the common denominator there?

“I dunno,” he mumbled. “Passed out drunk and hit the table.”

Which was true once. Years ago, in a bar.

Fuck, he’d wanted it this time. And maybe a sane person would have said no to that silent request, but a sane person wouldn’t have asked for it, either. He’d only been thinking make it all shut up, and William had obliged.

William blew a raspberry. “Bad story. No excitement. What if we tell her I knocked you in the head while moving a fence post?”

Shane took a shot of his whiskey.

It was a possibility. He’d have to really sell it, but…maybe. It was only the eye, after all. Not like last time when he’d limped home, a beaten sack. And William didn’t have any marks, so if Marnie thought they’d fought again, he could just point to his bruise-free boss. Wasn’t like employers regularly went around socking their employees in the face, one-sided. The fence too; that was real, the proof on the edge of the property. They’d been working on it little by little, and there had been a few close calls.

He took another drink. William was still watching him, contemplative.

“I mean, as black eyes go, your last one was ten out of ten.” He looked Shane up and down. “This one? Maybe a four.”

Shane’s fingers twisted on the bottle.

Okay. A fence post. That was his story. The cream and compress would help, with how soon they’d been applied. Tomorrow the bruise would be colored, but probably not swollen…

William stood, draining his bottle, tossing it in the empties bucket after. It landed on the stack of applications with a dull thud as he headed back into the house. Shane heard the fridge and snap of crown tops again, and when William returned he handed over one of the fresh beers.

“What? Friday.” He looked at Shane hard.

Shane leaned forward, elbows on knees, heart pounding.

“C’mon man,” he whispered. “Don’t do this…”

He hated how fragile his voice sounded, how the words came out like a plea.

William rested on his elbows too, looking at him. Really looking at him.

“You want to drop it?” he said. “Never talk about it? Pretend it didn’t happen?”

A pause.
“It didn’t,” Shane said, the lie tasting like ash.

William flinched, unable to hide the split second of hurt. With a long swallow of beer, he stood and crossed the porch.

Shane sank lower in his chair.

He’d asked for that kiss. Clear as day—clearer than asking for that hit by the fence—he had asked William to kiss him, and William had read every fucking line in the spa correctly. He’d been so fucking good. No one had ever treated him like William in those moments under the hot water, his hands so gentle, his lips caressing…

He glanced up. William was resting his forearms on the railing, his back to Shane and his shoulders tense. In the distance a bird called.

“Maybe it didn’t happen for you,” he said.

Shane dropped his head again. Staring at the wood, he mumbled, “It can’t have happened.”

A few seconds passed, then he heard the clink of a bottle set on the railing, followed by clunking footsteps. William’s boots appeared. He squatted down and slipped a hand over Shane’s head, fingers threading the hair.

“Why?” he asked, voice as soft as his touch.

Shane blinked at the panels of the porch, vision swimming.

“It just…it fucking can’t,” he said. “I fucking can’t.”

“You already did though.” William rubbed slow circles along his neck. “And look, still breathing and everything. So whatever says you can’t? It lied. And Shane, babe. I’m not going to lie.”

Pressure built in Shane’s chest.

This wasn’t happening. William wasn’t touching him like this, massaging out some of the headache. He wasn’t using the word babe in the same line as Shane’s name. This was surreal, a swirl, more dreamlike than the spa, than the whole messy weekend…

Shane set his beer between his feet. He rubbed a hand down the less-painful cheek, over and over, mashing the skin—then buried his face into the crook of his arm and screamed.

The sound was muffled, falling like a brick between them.

William frog-marched closer. He slid his hand down and cupped the base of Shane’s neck.

“It’s not okay. I get that.” His voice was low and calm. “It’s a far-fucking-cry from okay. But I’m not scared of it, Shane. I’m not scared of what is fucking lying to you. Don’t care how much it hurt you to make you believe it. I’m bigger, and I ain’t fucking scared.”

Shane tried to breathe, face still pressed into his sleeve, pulse hammering.

No one had been this close in years. No one. Even then, it hadn’t been like this. Whatever this was, rubbing his neck and calling him babe, it was different, and it wasn’t going to blow up in his face. Not like last time. Not unless he blew it up himself, like in the spa.

He slowly lifted from the crook of his arm and opened his good eye. William was only inches
away, waiting and patient.

Shane lurched forward and kissed him.

William caught it with a groan. Pulling Shane close, he deepened the kiss. Growing it, then teasing back, just enough to feed them both breaths. His lips stayed soft no matter how desperate and greedy Shane reached for it, until—too soon—he let it naturally wind down, and rested his forehead against Shane’s.

“Lookie there,” he panted. “Seems like you can.”

*Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.*

The pressure that had built in Shane’s chest before the first explosion was building again.

“*Why* is it okay with you?” he demanded, the words coming out in a crackle of frustration. “It’s never—it’s never fucking okay, and then you—you just—”

William nipped his bottom lip to shut him up.

“It’s gotta go somewhere, Shane,” he said. “It can’t just stay inside, or it fucking chokes you. Don’t overthink it.” Tilting his head, he kissed the bruise, lips warm against the painful skin.

Shane closed his eyes. “I don’t want to go home.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Minute I leave, I’m gonna fuck this all up in my head.”

“So come back fucked-up tomorrow and I’ll kick your ass again. Seems to do the trick.”

Shane slowly eased back in the chair, retrieving the beer from between his legs. His brain…this morning…everything since…

He drank, thoughts jumbling as the liquid rushed down.

William pushed up and walked to the railing to grab his own beer. He rubbed his lower back. “You’re not going to make me come find you tomorrow, are you?”

Shane didn’t answer. He shotgunned the rest of his beer, then stood, tapping the now-empty bottle against his leg.

“I’m gonna be shit at this,” he said, pacing across the porch. “Like, *really fucking shit* at it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t—I just—”

He cut himself off. It was so *frustrating*, this build of pressure, of confusion. It was making him stupid. Then again, he was always stupid, so why would now be any different?

“Is it because I’m paying you to work the farm?” William asked.

“What?” Shane’s head jerked up. “No.”

A pause. “Is it because I’m a man?”
Shane stopped pacing and stared at him.

William, in his good jeans and white shirt that showed off his time spent under the sun. His tattoos and his beard. The strong fingers around the neck of his bottle, that had been on Shane’s neck moment’s ago. The big arms that Shane knew the feeling of being hit \textit{and} held by.

“I need another beer,” he mumbled, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“Help yourself,” said William. “Get me a freshie too.”

Without looking back Shane went into the house. To the fridge, where the rows of home brews stood in perfect lines, clanking when he grabbed two of them. He popped off a cap, then looked toward the front door. William was expecting him, but…

Right now, he just needed one moment to himself.

William waited on the porch, catching his metaphorical breath. He felt hopeful. More hopeful than he had in over three years. New relationship energy was exciting. \textit{Invigorating}. And Shane was going to take this chance...on him.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at the grain on the side of the house.

He was willing to bet his tractor that Shane had been hurt before.

Family?

An ex?

He could only guess, but with no firm data he risked jumping to conclusion. Better to wait until he learned more. After all, he was in his thirties and single. Maybe his relationship history was as shitty as William's was. Despite the mystery, William found himself sucked into the innocent energy, as though their first kiss had meant as much to Shane as it had to him.

Had Shane ever been open with anyone? Closeted guys were always so careful. Maybe that was the reason he'd run off Friday. Trauma from something awful.

But he was giving this a chance. He was scared as hell, and giving it a chance.

He was…also taking a long-ass time to get refills.

William went inside. No Shane. He rounded the corner of the hall and noticed the door to his bathroom creaked half-open. Stepping closer, he could see Shane leaning with his hips against the counter, facing away from the mirror.

The counter was clean except for a small decorative soap dish his mother had picked out to match the rodeo-esque décor of the room. Two plain brown towels hung from a ring, and the basic tan and creme color scheme seemed to emphasize how out of place and nervous Shane looked. He had one empty beer bottle at his side and was currently working his way through the second, zoning out.

Just like the first time William had noticed him at the bar: no fucking spatial awareness.
Absurd as it was, he found that look endearing. Wondered, like he always did, about the world that was swirling behind his quiet face.

Still, friends didn’t let friends drink alone. He walked in and took the bottle from Shane’s fingers, startling him.

"Head start?" William said. "That’s cheating. Can’t beat me that easy."

A flush brightened across Shane’s face while William chugged the remaining beer in one long swallow. He lowered the bottle when done, catching those green eyes with purpose—and as if burned, Shane jerked his gaze down.

He folded against the counter, his bottom lip disappearing while his leg twitched.

William placed his empty next to the first one. Together. Just like they were now. He waited, knowing that if he gave it time, Shane would give him words.

"What is this?" Shane mumbled at last, rubbing a hand down his face.

William studied his brow. The bruise was already swollen, but not purpling as bad as their first fight. Still, if he kept shoving his fingers over it, it would get worse.

"It's fucking attraction, Shane. It’s two people who are attracted. Makes them like each other and shit."

He searched for words, doing a little gold digging of his own. Too many times he'd scared guys off with wanting too much. He had to balance that line here, make sure Shane knew he was serious without letting him jump to a crazy conclusion about what he wanted.

"I know we both feel it," William said, "or you wouldn't kiss me a second time. What about this is making you shit your pants?"

"Not shitting my pants..." Shane scrubbed his hand through his hair, still trying to pace around the small bathroom. He moved two steps one way and then the other, until pausing in front of the sink.

"It's—we fucking—we kissed, and then we didn't. And then we fucking did it again. And now—me—I just..." He looked up, his face desperate. "You won't blab?"

_Is he fucking serious?_

"I ain't going to tell anyone you like my tongue in your mouth, Daniels," William said, placing a hand on either side of Shane to crowd him against the counter.

He wanted him to still and relax for a minute. To trust him. Staring at the mirror, he met Shane’s flushed face in the reflection. He liked the way they looked. Shane’s body was nearly as big as his, the broad shoulders firm and solid against his chest. They contrasted, dark hair versus golden blond. Yet despite the difference in coloring, so much was the same: men who had seen and felt too damn much in the world, about to figure it out together.

He placed his chin on Shane’s shoulder.

“You know what? If you want? This can be our little secret.” He rubbed his beard over Shane’s neck, earning him goosebumps. “We can just...figure it out, nice and easy. Because, Shane.” William nipped his ear. “I have the taste of you, and I’m going to be craving more for awhile.”
Vulnerable eyes met him in the mirror.

"A secret," Shane repeated quietly.

"Until you're ready," William promised, leaning closer, arms wrapping around his waist. He was willing to bet his house that if he slipped his hands over Shane’s hips, he’d be happy to see him.

Shane shivered, but didn’t try to pull away from the tighter hold. William couldn’t help it; he wanted more. He ran his hand up Shane’s chest, digging his fingers into the shirt, over the muscular body that was slowly losing its original softness. He could only imagine how good that would be.

_Don’t blow it, Bauer._

If he rushed this he would ruin it. Tonight, as much as their bodies said yes, common sense said put on the brakes. Still, it was nice, being close for a little while longer. That was when he noticed Shane’s watch, pointing out exactly how long he'd kept him.

It would be a shitty start to their secret if on their first night together, they caused uncomfortable questions.

"You should go home," William said. "It's getting late." He kissed Shane’s cheek, then rested his forehead against the side of his head, taking that scent in one more time. "I’ll try and manage with my loneliness until you come back tomorrow, okay?"

He stepped back.

Immediately, he regretted it. It felt wrong to pull away, like he'd just shoved a lone boat off of a ship into the ocean.

"Okay..." Shane agreed slowly. He grabbed his empty from the counter, staring at the brown glass, rolling it in his hand. William wondered if he felt the same reluctance. With a final deep breath, Shane dropped the bottle to his side. He looked lost and uncertain of his destination, the remnant of their encounter dangling from loose fingers as he stepped through the bathroom door.

William followed him out, leaning on the porch.

_Sucks you got to go_, he thought, tracking Shane's form as it faded down the path. _But damn is it fine to watch you walk away._

---

The easiest way to play off his eye as an accident, Shane decided, was by not trying to hide it. Which meant facing his family less than twenty minutes after William had pinned him against the bathroom counter.

Rubbing his beard on Shane’s neck.

Feeling up his chest.

Kissing his cheek.

He uncapped his whiskey and drained several shots while walking the dirt road home. His heart
thumped erratically, the calm evening doing nothing to dispel his nerves.

*They can’t know. It’s impossible to tell just by looking at you.*

Marnie was in the kitchen, putting a roast in the oven. When Shane opened the door she turned her head at the sound.

It took less than a second.

“Shane!” she cried, dropping the pan on the counter and rushing over. “Your eye!”

Déjà vu.

“It’s fine,” he insisted, kicking off his shoes.

Marnie opened and closed her mouth like a fish, until a few words finally squeaked out between the air bubbles.

“You—what in heaven’s na—”

“It was a fence post,” Shane said, sidestepping as she moved closer. He knew she wanted to chase down his face and get a better look at the bruise, but god, what if he *smelled* like William? Stupid fucking jerk always smelled so good, and he’d just had his arms around Shane…

Marnie froze. “A fence post?”

“Yes.”

“Shane, did you boys *fight* again?” She leaned in, as if to sniff his breath.

“Marnie!” He jerked away, pushing past her to get to the fridge.


He waited on her lecture, but this time it didn’t come, and as he dug for a soda it dawned on him why.

She was expecting an explosion.

Between the truck ride, the applications, the fighting, the kissing—everything that happened since this morning—Shane had forgotten how he’d behaved the last few days. After the fiasco of the spa, he’d holed himself up in his bedroom and spent the whole weekend getting trashed. A month of acting like a semi-decent human being, then he’d backslid, hard. And Marnie, who’d let her guard down at her nephew’s sudden good behavior, had been sprayed with all the mud.

Back to eggshells.

Shane set his soda on the counter, cracking the tab. “We were putting in posts,” he said. “William swung around with one and didn’t see me standing there.”

She remained by the coat rack, nervous to get closer. “That’s the truth?”

“You want pictures of the new fence or something?”

His brain told him to shut the fuck up, that he was protesting too much, and over-explaining would make it sound more suspicious. But he was afraid to give her space to read between the lines.
Still, the snapping had to stop.

“I’m fine,” he said, quieter. “Really. Already iced it and everything.”

Her gaze drifted over his face, taking in his black eye, his expression as a whole.

“All right,” she conceded, and returned to her roast pan. “Dinner in forty minutes. Will you be eating with us?”

The question was innocent, but made William’s words crash back into Shane’s head.

*You fucking broke my heart when you ran from me, asshole.*

Running—god, it’s what he was *good* at. Shane didn’t give himself credit for many things, but running, that was his fucking specialty.

And nobody got it.

“No,” he said. “I’m tired.”

It was the truth, and now that he’d gotten the whole uncomfortable business of showing his bruise out of the way, he needed to fucking be alone. Besides, he didn’t want to scare Jas again, right? Better to wait until tomorrow, when it didn’t look so fresh.

Marnie nodded and silently slipped the roast in the oven.

Safe in his bedroom, Shane locked the door and stood in front of the mirror he’d sworn to tear down weeks ago. Tonight, he was glad to have left it up. He viewed the bruise from all angles, tilting his head side to side and touching the sensitive skin along his cheekbone. William was right. If the first one had been a ten, this one was definitely a four. It was coloring in lovely and dark, but the eye itself hadn’t turned into a bloodshot pulp like last time.

He pulled off his dirty farm clothes. Down to his undershirt and boxers, he flopped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. It replayed like a movie. Being pinned beneath William, furious and wild. That sudden shift of expression—that wash of *control*—when Shane had pointed to his eye. The blue gaze that locked onto his, steady as a rock before delivering.

A punch to the face hurt like hell. At the time, it hadn’t even been the good kind of pain. It wasn’t the pleasant sting of a knife, or that beautiful soreness in his muscles after the fight. The black eye hurt for real, because it was supposed to; because sometimes that was the only thing to make the voices shut up.

He pressed down on the bruise, forcing sharp stars.

He thought of all the times he’d tried to silently ask Garrett for things, with looks, with moments of pause or hesitation. Those requests were never answered on the bone-deep level Shane needed. Yet somehow, William knew he’d asked for the punch. That it wasn’t a dare, but a silent plea.

How did a day begin with wanting to puke from the thought of even seeing William, and end with kissing him on the porch while Shane wore his black eye?

He yanked down the front of his boxers and tucked them under his balls. Shoving away every thought that tried to interrupt, he spit into his palm and wrapped it around his growing shaft. With the other hand he pushed into his bruise.
Stabs of pain set the rhythm. He gripped hard, heavy, thrusting his fist until existing only in that pleasure, and when the final burst hit he pressed his head back into the pillow, groaning under his breath.

He sagged against the bed, panting.

His eyes opened.

The ceiling was white. It was too bright, spinning in a boozy circle as he stared up, his cock still dripping onto his stomach.

The next morning Shane maneuvered around his efficient new set-up in Marnie’s coop. With everything confined to stations, he’d managed to shave several minutes off his normal routine. He wiped down eggs, stacked cartons, and jotted numbers, his head miraculously quiet beneath the buzz of whiskey.

Falling asleep early meant not drinking much before bed, which also meant the shots spiking his coffee were hitting hard. He felt bright and alert, ticking off chores with an unusual clarity. With the final stack of egg cartons resting against his chest, he stared around the organized coop.

William’s influence.

Perhaps the quiet in his head right now was also William’s influence.

The calm from the first fight hadn’t lingered like this. Marnie’s lectures and panic had punched a hole in it. Then there’d been the gossip of the townsfolk, and the cloud of unemployment hanging over his head. It hadn’t been allowed to linger.

This time, though? It was the lack of fuss. A secret between them, that unlike the bar fight, was going to remain a secret.

A secret.

Shane went to the bathroom. He chugged a glass of water while staring at the bruise, then reached for the mouthwash, remembering William’s warning about not drinking on his dime. Alcohol before work was bending that law and Shane knew it, but maybe by the time…

By the time what? William kissed him again?

Was he going to kiss him again? Were they going to discuss what happened, or just slip into work?

When he said they’d take it nice and easy, what exactly did that mean?

Hands in pockets, Shane walked the hushed country road to the farm, mint fresh on his breath and a heavy feeling in his stomach.

He would have to look William in the eye today. Maybe Marnie was too obtuse to realized they’d kissed. But William? It was like he could read minds. In one look, he’d know Shane had jacked off to the feeling of being underneath him. Maybe even know all the times Shane had jacked off to him over the past month—which until now, Shane hadn’t even admitted to himself.
It was always underneath him. Straddled and pinned. His face pushed into the grass their first fight. Helpless in the headlock on his porch. William’s body towering over him in the spa, while Shane sunk into the water below.

When was William going to learn that the man who’d apparently given him one of the best fights of his life wasn’t a fighter at all? That the thing which drew him to Shane was a goddamn lie, a fucking one-shot in his life?

He didn’t want to fight. He just wanted someone to make it all go away.

In the fresh morning air, Shane’s buzz was already fading. In its place the nerves crept in, steadily increasing as he got closer. By the time he stood in front of the lit barn his whole body hummed with them.

William was already hooking up cows, his back turned to Shane. Classic rock played from the radio, and two thermoses sat on an upturned crate.

Two. Just like yesterday in the truck. He never used to make coffee for him.

Shane stood in the doorway like an idiot, debating whether or not to take it, when William glanced over his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said with a half-smile. “You sleep okay?”

Shane forced himself to walk to the crate, heart thumping.

“Yeah.” He picked up the coffee. A swirl of steam rose from the black surface as he twisted it open. “Slept okay.”

William hooked the last teat-cup to the heifer and patted her hindquarters. “Good to know.”

Coming up behind Shane, he ran a hand over his shoulder, slow and familiar. “Cows would have missed you if you hadn’t been here.”

He reached for a new set of hoses, the hand sliding off. A shiver snaked through Shane.

“I’d, uh. Miss them too,” he said.

His face went to fire the second the words left his lips, but he couldn’t help it. 6:00 am, they were on the clock, and there was already touching.

William gave a bigger grin. “Good to know,” he repeated.

Shane headed for his line of cows, furious with himself.

*Pull it together.*

Most days William only got the milking started for Shane, but today he stayed until an entire line was done.

“Gotta do some harvesting,” he said, picking up his thermos and sitting down on the overturned crate. “Prepping for the grange. Lewis is coming by at some point this week to get the sign-up forms I collected.” He sipped the coffee, eyes on Shane. “Maybe after the granges are done…you and me could secretly go hang out.”

It felt like William had handed Shane a steering wheel, telling him to drive when he’d never gotten his license. He wasn’t ignoring this. He wasn’t running away, or regretting what they’d done after
seeing Shane in the sober light of day.

No, he was asking for a fucking encore.

“A-after the granges?” Shane stammered.

William stood, leaning against the big steel gate that separated them from the cows. “Too soon?”

Shane chewed his lip. “I…dunno.”

“Dunno if you want to? Dunno if it’s too soon?”

“Just, the grange?”

William nodded with a grimace. “Good call. Probably too public.” A lock of hair escaped his top knot as he looked over. “Shit. Couldn’t convince you to go clubbing over the weekend, could I?”

Shane choked, hot coffee burning his throat.

“Okay, sorry,” William said, chuckling. “That was mean. We’ll ease into a club.”

Before Shane could protest the words ease in, William leaned over, pressing a kiss against his bruised eye.

“Well, can’t let you distract me all day. Time to go get the damn wheat harvested.” He scooped up his thermos. “See you ‘round lunch. Think about the fair though. I mean it. We could at least have an after party.”

With a final squeeze of Shane’s shoulder he headed toward the door, looking cheerful.

Shane stared at the hooves of the heifer across from him, temples warm from the kiss.

The hours passed uneventfully, Shane taking care of the animals while William stuck to the fields. The main barn was low on feed, so once finished in the coops he spent the rest of the morning driving back and forth from the silo, stacking hay into the loft.

In fourteen years at JojaMart, the one thing Shane had enjoyed was unloading the truck. He’d arrive in the morning to pull pallets of groceries from the dock, then pack them into the coolers. No customers. Hardly any coworkers. Just quiet, peaceful, physical labor.

It was even better on the farm. Throwing hay was sweaty, mindless work that warmed his muscles while his mind could wander.

He paused to stretch his lower back, staring at the fields through the open window of the loft. William had been on the tractor all morning, but now the noise of the engine had cut and he was nowhere to be seen.

Shane checked his watch. Not quite lunchtime.

Don’t be an obsessive freak.

He hauled up another bale. When tossing it onto the growing pyramid of feed, he heard the low rumble of an engine, not loud enough to be the tractor. He glanced out the window again.

Angie’s little sedan, piping down the road to the farm.
Shane’s heart climbed into his throat and he ducked back, making sure he wasn’t visible. The engine slowed then cut to silence, and moments later Angie’s voice danced through the air.

“William! Look at you! Why, you’re only limping a little.”

William must have seen her coming before Shane did, because he was already there to greet her, his deep voice suddenly stiff.

“Mother. You brought a guest.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Every Other Saturday! Thank you so much for sticking with us!

Extra thanks to Xylianna for her beta prowess. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you want to chat with us/other readers, or find out any behind-the-scenes stuff. We have a lot of fun just hanging out and supporting one another.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is September 1st, 2-4pm PST.
Mother. You brought a guest.

Shane froze inside the hay loft, William’s deep voice resonating through the hot autumn air.

It sounded, he thought, like a gong ringing you to dinner.

Where someone was about to be murdered.

“Oh, you don’t mind, do you?” Angie’s tone was bright, clearly not caring whether William minded or not. “After all, I was worried. Thought Cam could take a look at you. Now where is that man you hired?”

“Busy, Ma. Because we work out here.”

Shane slowly bent to pick up a bale.

Cam?

That was the guy Angie had mentioned last time, the one going through the divorce. Was he another common guest out here?

Sliding his bale onto the stack, Shane heard a second car door shut, followed by a smooth masculine tenor.

“William! My goodness, the drive up here was beautiful.”

Shane gave the bale a final shove, heart beating with a different kind of anxiety.

“Well,” said William flatly, “looks like he finally stowed a ride out here.”

Ignoring the tone of zero fucks, or maybe not noticing it, Cam replied with the same ease as before.

“Don’t be a child, Will. I’ve been dying to see what you’ve been up to out here. And now I can see how you achieved your gorgeous tan. It’s been a long time since we’ve spent a day together.”

“Boys,” Angie snapped. “None of that now. I’ll go unload the car.”

“I’ve got it, Ma.”

“Nonsense. Go show Cam around the farm. And tell Shane that lunch will be ready in half an hour. I swear you starve that boy.”

Shane had been listening so hard, he didn’t realize he’d quit moving. At the sound of his name—accompanied by the word lunch—he snapped back to reality, right as Cam sang out again.

“Shaaaaane? Who is Shane, Will?”

“None of your business, Baker,” William snapped. “And fine, Ma. But next time, lemme know when I’m supposed to give a damn tour.”

“William. Language.”

Shane was dying to get a glimpse of this man. He spoke like he’d known William for years, yet William sounded as thrilled to see him as mastitis on one of his cows. But by the time he’d gathered the courage the voices had died down, and when he peeked out the window the men were gone. Just Angie’s prim little form, carrying boxes from her car to the house.

Maybe William would wriggle him out of lunch. He’d said so last time, hadn’t he? That Shane would owe him, and could skip out on the next visit? Anxious as he was for a look, he wasn’t desperate enough to want to join social hour.

Just hide in here. Pretend you can’t be found. They’ll eat and leave.

The next ten minutes were quiet and Shane resumed a steady pace of work, trapped in the maze of his thoughts. What was Cam’s relation to this family? Based on that uncomfortably familiar greeting, he and William had a history.

Then, maybe he didn’t want to know.

He’d just broken a sweat again when the barn doors rolled open. His heart almost stopped as William meandered in, hands in pockets and looking bored. Beside him walked a graceful black man.

Silently, Shane set down his bale and took a few steps back. It was enough to keep hidden from sight, yet still allowed him to see the ground floor.

Cam wore cream slacks and a pink button-up, a tan sweater folded over his shoulders. When he turned, a diamond earring and wristwatch reflected the sunlight streaming through the window, sparkles dancing off the wall of the barn. He walked as if afraid his loafers might find a cow patty with every step.

Probably, Shane thought, he hadn’t gotten the memo that the country was not the same thing as the the country club.

“And here is the barn,” said William in a dull voice. “We milk cows here.”

“Hmmmm.” Cam looked around. “Lucky cows.”

Shane almost choked, tucking his mouth to his shoulder at the last second to stop the noise. When he’d finally swallowed and glanced back down at the two men, a streak of hatred rushed through
Hatred for, of all things, the sweater folded over Cam’s shoulders.

Who the fuck wore sweaters like that? He looked like he’d stepped out of a preppy magazine ad. One of those men who sat on yachts, fake laughing with toothpaste-commercial smiles, just pleased to fuck with their shoulder-sweater lives.

*You’re fucking losing it. You don’t even know this guy.*

William, to his credit, was looking at the ceiling as if asking a higher power to smite him down.

“Baker, what the fuck are you doing out here?”

Another dart of irritation, this time as Cam looked William up and down, practically undressing him with his eyes.

“Well right now, I’m appreciating the view.”

“You like watching people throw up in their mouths, do you?”

Shane choked down a second cough against his shoulder, though this one from laughter rather than mortification.

Maybe they *didn’t* have a history. Maybe Cam was just incredibly dense, or without shame. Either worked for Shane, so long as it stayed well on his side of the pastel fence.

“Well, well, Sgt. Bauer! You used to be so much fun,” Cam said with a sniff—then made a face, as if regretting that inhale. “It’s simple. Angie asked that I come look you over. After your bruises the other day and your recent absences, she was worried. It’s not as if you volunteer to go to the doctor.”

William snorted. “You liar. You’re nosy. Plus, you’re stubborn and can’t take ‘still not interested’ as an answer. Some mistakes should stay in the past, Cam.” He turned, starting toward the door on the other side of the barn that would take them to the pasture.

*Mistakes.*

So Shane had been wrong. They did have a history. He pressed against the wooden beam where he was hiding, though not before stealing another glimpse of Cam. This is what William was into in the past? Well-groomed, fancy guys like that?

Shane rubbed his neck. Working on the farm meant he only shaved once or twice a week now, the old five o’clock shadow replaced with a short scruffy beard. His jeans were dusty, and his shirt had a dark streak of sweat down the chest. He looked at his rough hands, picking at a dry cuticle.

*What are you doing here?*

“You walk like you’ve been pushing yourself,” Cam said, jerking Shane from his unpleasant reverie. He’d zoned out for the last few seconds of conversation, and now William was crossing to the other side of the barn, Cam tight on his heels.

Were they leaving? He thought so, until Cam boldly placed a hand on William’s lower back. Hot jealousy seared through Shane, right as William whipped around.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” he hissed, catching Cam’s wrist.
“Oh,” Cam said, obviously unafraid of the threat. “Like you’d do anything. And your back feels swollen, William. I thought you were icing it at night and soaking it in the afternoon.”

William dropped the arm, his shoulders tight. “It’s none of your goddamn business.”

“Clearly,” Cam said, though obviously not agreeing at all.

What was with these people? Talking to him with that condescending tone, as if William were a child and they alone knew better. So maybe it was his mother. Maybe it was some old boyfriend. Didn’t give them the fucking right to waltz into his home and call the shots.

Cam crossed in front of William, blocking his exit. “Oh, come on, Will!” he cried, fists on his hips. “It’s ridiculous!”


A surge of affection rushed through Shane, knowing William silently agreed about the dumb clothes.

Cam just rolled his eyes.

“No,” he said. “This entire farm experiment. Clearly you’ve been doing well for yourself, but you’re working too hard. Angie said you’ve missed two check-ins. That’s not like you to avoid your mom, unless you’re hiding something.” He narrowed his eyes. “But I wouldn’t think you’d start using again.”

The words fell like lead.

Using again.

So this fucker knew William used to do heroin. But that holier-than-thou tone…who gave him the fucking right? And farm experiment? Like the land William had thrown his whole damn life into the last few years was a project for the 4H-Fair. As if he toiled in a flower garden each afternoon, instead of busting his ass from sunup to sundown.

Despite Shane’s silent rage, William merely crossed his arms.

“Is that what she’s worried about?” he said, like the entire conversation bored him.

“She worries about a lot of things.”

“She should be worried that her lapdog is in heat. That divorce sounded real messy. I bet you’re all eager to find a new master these days.”

Cam flinched. “You bitch.”

It was the first time he appeared truly affected by one of the barbs, but Shane couldn’t even relish in that victory, distracted by William’s words.

New master.

He wanted badly to chuck a hay bale; to get out whatever feeling was wilting in his chest like a dying flower.

“Takes one to know one, Cam,” William said. “But I’ve already got a cat. Don’t need another pet.”
Cam threw his hands up.

“Ugh! I forgot what an irritating, crude, barbaric jackass you could be.”

“Glad to give you a reminder,” William said.

Cam glared. “I’m getting tired of your same old song and dance. Here I was thinking that coming to visit you would be interesting.”

“The door is pretty damn interesting.”

“One of these days you’re going to need help, but you’ll have chased away anyone who gave a damn,” Cam snapped. “I’m not so easy to scare off, Will. Whether you like it or not. Now come on. I’m sure that Angie needs help in the kitchen.”

On that note he marched out of the barn.

Soon as he was alone, William rubbed his face and glanced around the room, looking like he’d aged several years. Then—slipping on a fixed, neutral expression—he followed Cam, closing the barn door neatly behind him in the way he liked it kept.

Shane stared at the mess of hay bales in the loft, helpless.

What had just happened?

William seemed to hate Cam. All the sarcasm and insults, and that anger shooting through the air when he’d touched him. But if he hated him, what was that look about after? Why did he get the sense that William was hurting from that whole exchange?

Because under the insults there’s feelings, dumbass.

Shane picked up a hay bale, throwing it on the stack.

He wasn’t gonna do this. Wasn’t gonna sit here and wonder what kind of history they had.

He chucked another bale.

Wasn’t gonna wonder how long they’d been together, or why they’d broken up, or what Cam meant by not easy to scare off.

Another bale.

Wasn’t gonna imagine William’s beautiful body, bent over Cam in a kiss like he’d given Shane in the spa.

Nope.

Grunting, he threw three more bales, one after another.

Wasn’t gonna imagine any of that.

William lost his shadow at the harvest sheds. One minute he was letting Cameron fuss over all the
This was, he decided, bad. Very fucking bad. Because Shane was about to get introduced to his ex. And not just any ex, but his mother’s adopted son of an ex. Which maybe, if they were on stable ground, wouldn’t have been such a big deal. Instead they were deep in a secret quagmire of ’it’s complicated’.

It wasn’t like he was hiding Cameron’s existence. But he hadn’t had time to take Shane out on a fucking date yet. How did one explain the convoluted, Jerry Springer, chosen-family bullshit going on with his mother and ex-fiancé? With a powerpoint? Some type of laser light show? Maybe with props?

*Kick that can down the road.*

How did these things keep happening to him?

“DANIELS? WHERE YOU AT?” he shouted, as soon as he was moderately sure his voice wouldn’t carry to Cameron.

No answer. He ran his hands through his hair.

This was not supposed to happen. Yesterday Shane had voluntarily kissed him. And how was he repaying him? By shoving him face-first into his opened suitcase full of issues.

He left the dairy barns, following the trail of finished farming projects until arriving at the equipment barn. When he saw Shane standing in the doorway, something inside his chest relaxed.

Shane couldn’t have been more of a fucking opposite picture of Cameron Baker if he tried. Where Cameron had a fresh fade and wore an expensive wool sweater, Shane was in a sweat-stained work shirt, mud on his boots, hair dusty and dirty with hay shavings.

*Rip it off like a band-aid,* he thought grimly, closing the space between them.

“Look.” He glanced over his shoulder to keep an eye out for Cameron. “There’s been a complication. Ma popped in. Unannounced. Again. And she brought...my ex-boyfriend with her.”

He braced for a freak-out.

Shane grabbed his wrist, absently twisting circles around it. “Er, yeah,” he said. “Heard ‘em when they pulled in…”

“Yeah.” William rubbed the back of his neck. “You want me to say I couldn’t find you?”

Shane opened his mouth to answer, but before he could speak they heard:

“Well! So this is where your farmhand was hiding!”

Cameron strolled out, a basket of apples in one hand. William’s neck tightened. Of course he’d helped himself. It seemed like Cameron did that a lot lately. Helped himself to his family. Helped himself to his personal time. What were a few apples?

Cameron’s sharp gaze scanned over Shane for all of 0.5 seconds, catching on his bruise.

“Oh my goodness,” he said, stepping closer with a look of concern. “What in the world happened to your eye, sir?”
Shane froze with a foreign expression of alarm. William stepped forward, putting himself between
them.

“Daniels took a fence post to the head yesterday,” he said. “Just a small bruise. No big deal,
Baker.”

“A head injury?” Cameron snapped, glaring at him. “And you didn’t at least take him in for an
MRI, Bauer?”

“For a bump? He’s fine. Stop being a mother hen.”

Cameron sidestepped him to look at Shane. “You know,” he said, “OSHA exists. You have a right
to a hospital if you get hurt on your job.”

Shane pulled on his arm. “It’s fine. Wasn’t hard or anything…”

“Hard enough to leave a shiner though,” Cameron said. He looked between the two of them and
gave a huff. “Unbelievable. You found a worker who is just as thickheaded as you are about
doctors. Fine, ignore the medical professional. But”—he regarded Shane—“you start feeling sick,
you make this man pay your medical bills. God knows you can afford it, Will.”

“Enough,” William said. “You pretend to have manners sometimes, so maybe use them and stop
making mom wait.” He nodded at Shane. “’C’mon, Daniels. Ma has lunch ready.”

He stalked toward the water pump.

If these were the guns his mother reached for in response to an unexpected absence, he was never
going to skip another Sunday again. He wanted to throw his hands up and shout that this type of
supervision was unfair and unwarranted, but he hadn’t forgotten what a fucking mess he’d been
four years ago.

“These are beautifully heavy...apples,” Cameron said, catching up to both Shane and William.
“You grow them?”

“Grandpa had an orchard when I moved in,” William said indifferently, turning on the pump.

Cameron made a face at the mud around the base, mincing to the side. “Well, I’ll see you at the
table, boys,” he said, and continued walking toward the porch, away from the ooze, as if he hadn’t
been knee deep in it less than six years ago.

William rolled his eyes, shaking his hands out and sidestepping so Shane could wash up too.

“He’ll behave better in front of Ma,” he muttered, unsure if he was trying to convince himself or
Shane.

Shane splashed water on his sweaty face, then patted it dry on his shirt sleeve. “He’s, uh…eager.”

William snorted. “Eager for a kick in the ass. Whatever. Fuck this shit. Forward unto dawn and all
that noise.”

Time for some clarity. He pushed away the irritation, slamming a mental door shut. As they
stepped towards the porch, William listed his goals as though laying out a battle plan. Goal one:
protect Shane from any of the petty bullshit that Cameron or his Mom cooked up. Goal two: don’t
embarrass either one of them in the process of completing goal one. Goal three: resist the urge to
kick the shit out of Cameron at the first opportunity.
Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

Once at the house, William kicked off his boots before marching inside and Shane followed suit more quietly. Cameron was sitting at the table while Ma stirred a pot over the stove, her cream-colored dress and pearls clashing with the homey task. She’d found the apron where he’d hidden it, this time in the back of the freezer. William gave her a prefatory kiss. Soft fingers patted his bearded cheek, not missing a beat as she cooked.

Opening the fridge revealed that once again, Ma had rearranged his condiments. He grabbed two beers, tossing one to a surprised Shane, then snapped his top on the opener fused into the fridge handle.

Cameron raised an eyebrow from the table. “A little early to be drinking, hmm?”

Oh, fuck you.

William leaned against the fridge, narrowing his eyes at him. Defiantly he began to swallow the beer, the line of liquid creeping down the brown bottle. Cameron huffed, looking away.

William’s gaze swapped to Shane and he winked.

We get it, don’t we, Shane?

Shane swallowed. Though, William thought, he might almost be blushing.

“Leave it alone Cam,” Ma said, exasperation at his antics. “He’s got a hard job. Besides, his dad says the micro-brew is very good.”

“Yeah, Cam,” William taunted. “Dad thinks it’s good.”

“Boys, honestly.”

Ma began carrying several covered dishes to the table, and when she saw Shane standing to the side she smiled warmly.

“It’s so good to see you, Shane!”

“Um. Same to you,” he said, stiffly taking a seat in the chair across from Cameron. He closed his eyes and took a long swallow of beer, as if it would soften Cameron’s sharp presence across from him.

“Are any of the summer bottles left from last year, William?” Ma asked. “Cameron, his wine is amazing. I keep telling him to enter it into that homebrewing contest at the club.”

William placed his beer down at the setting next to Shane’s. “Got some in the cellar. You want a glass?”

“Oh, one at lunch won’t hurt.”

Cameron sniffed. “None for me, thanks.” He ran long fingers over the table cloth, turning his attention to the food. “Angie, this looks delicious.”

Asskisser.

William fetched a bottle from the cellar. When he came back up, the food had been spread out: potatoes au gratin, roast vegetables, sliced chicken breast in white gravy, and fresh rolls. Ma and
Cameron began to fill their plates, Cameron with only chicken and veggies, ignoring the carb-heavy foods. Probably on another diet. What was it about divorces and dieting that seemed to go hand-in-hand?

William poured Ma a glass then sat down on Shane’s other side. The two of them matched. Ma and Cameron were dressed like an issue of ‘Country Club Today,’ but he and Shane looked like regular people with fucking jobs. “So, what’d I miss at your last shindig, Ma?” he asked, scooping potatoes onto his plate.

“Oh!” Cameron beamed. “William, the Hollys are getting a divorce.”

Ma shot him a reproving look. “It’s a shame.”

“I called it six months ago,” Cameron said, “and you said I was being catty.”

“You yowl like one,” said William.

“William!” Ma snapped. “Manners.”

Cameron smirked.

William saw it as the ploy for attention it was. Still, ploy or not, he'd rather him get attention through verbal sparring than from digging into a taboo subject. Every time Ma or Cameron steered towards uncomfortable and unwelcome topics such as William’s personal life, or rude questions about the farm, he distracted them. He had a range of subjects to pull from: people they knew, events that had happened over the last two years in Zuzu, or gossip about a shared social enemy.

Next to him, Shane hid like a shadow, silent as he ate. Though doing everything possible not to draw attention to himself, William couldn't help but notice him—including the regretful look on his face when he realized he'd run out of beer.

Under the guise of refilling his own, William fetched him a fresh bottle, the whole while discussing the stupidity of one of his parent’s neighbors.

“—and I said no wonder their boat had a hole, Ma. He stores it in a damn garage.” William set the new beers on the table. “Ain’t good to do that to a boat.”

Cameron scoffed. “Like you’ve ever taken care of a boat before. You were Army, not Navy.”

“Got transported on plenty of them.”

Cameron turned his focus to Shane. “Will and I met on the front lines. He was loud and hard to ignore.”

“Had to pull this one off a local who’d called him a cheap floozy,” William said, his stomach tightening at the sudden beam of interest in Shane.

“I would have won that fight,” Cameron sniffed, and when Ma giggled he added, “Angie, I would have!”

“Sure you would have, dear.”

It had been a long week, William reflected. They’d both been on leave after a big personnel switch. At least half of their platoon had been off-duty, and the bars had been crowded. He’d retreated down the road to a hole-in-the-wall local place—intending to get a drink he didn’t have to fight
four other guys for—when he’d seen him.

Back then, Cameron wasn't into this prissy bullshit. He'd been a lean man in a white sleeveless tank, eyeliner, and a BDU jacket tied around slim hips. At first sight, the openly gay fellow serviceman was intriguing. William had offered to buy him a drink just as he’d gone off like a screaming fishwife at some dumbass who’d mistaken him for a rentboy.

The fight itself hadn’t been anything to write home about; whatever training medical staff received in basic hadn’t stayed with Sgt. Baker. William had hauled him over one shoulder and spent the rest of the night babysitting his drunk and shrill ass.

They’d both been lonely, horny, and in that thrill of surviving combat. It had been repeated fun back then. No pressure. No stakes. Just getting off.

“The front lines,” Shane repeated, woodenly.

William snapped out of the memory and to the present, feeling guilty. Last night, he and Shane had shared more intimacy and realness than in the entire first six months of fooling around with Cameron.

“Yes,” said Ma, her eyes on William’s tense face. “William—”

“Is very sure no one wants to talk about that,” he interrupted smoothly.

Cameron cocked his head. “Will, haven’t you told your new employee about how you’re a hero?”

William’s entire body tightened.

What the fuck does he think he's doing?

Ma shot Cameron a warning look.

“Cameron,” she said, standing, “do be a doll and go gas up my car? Shane will help me clean, and then you and I can head home.”

Relief sizzled down William’s back. As frustrating as his mother could be, as interfering and nosy, and as loyal as she’d been to Cameron…it was nice to be reminded that he was still her son. That she wasn’t going to let old wounds get opened just so Cameron could relive the glory days.

Cameron opened his mouth to argue, but Ma cleared her throat with a steely cough.

“Yes,” he said, defeated. “Of course. Will? I don’t know where the closest gas is. Could you be a dear and help me?”

William shotgunned the rest of his beer and slapped it down. “As long as you’re driving, Lapdog.”

Cameron scowled and tossed his napkin on the table.

William weighed the risk of leaving Shane with his mother, but she wasn’t going to hurt him, even if she did get a bit nosy. He passed behind Shane, resting a hand between his shoulder and the slope of his neck, trying to give him silent courage before going to complete the last task that kept their uninvited guests here.

As the door closed behind them he felt Shane’s eyes on him, and silently promised he’d be back soon.
William stomped into his boots once on the porch, ignoring Cameron's sigh of impatience. It had been like this all day. Lectures here and there. Nosy-ass questions. Sighing instead of coming out with what he really thought. How they’d ever lived together for two whole years without killing one another, William would never know.

Silence stretched, uncomfortable and tight, like dried glue on skin. As he took his time with his laces, it was clear Cameron was ready for another round of verbal throwdown. It must have been something he didn’t feel comfortable saying in front of Ma, otherwise he wouldn’t be obviously and impatiently biding his time.

Fucker always did love an audience.

They slipped into his mother's sleek sedan, William pushing the seat all the way back and reclining the chair.

"You are too large for an average car, Will," Cameron tutted, pulling on his seatbelt. "But then, your size was always one of your strong suits."

William drummed his fingers on the car door. "Maybe if you'd accepted a beer, you wouldn't be so damn thirsty, Baker. Thought Ma was going to set you up with that lawyer she knows. Henry whatshisface."

Cameron gave the car gas, turning down the dirt road that William pointed to, his movements easy behind the wheel. "Oh we went out. He's got good taste in wine, at least. Horrendous judge of art."

"Art museum on the first date?" William asked.

Cameron smirked. "Is that jealousy?"

"Boredom," William corrected. "Go fuck whoever you want, Cam. Whatever it takes to get the taste of Roy out of your mouth."

Cameron grew silent at the mention of his ex. They drove for another few minutes.

"How far are we from the gas station, anyway?"

"It's not a gas station. It's my pumps. I keep them out here so that if there is a leak, it doesn't jeopardize the crops."

"Crops. Cows. Countryside. My my, William. For a rich city boy, you sure are getting good at this whole farming schitck. When are you going to be done with it?"

"I dunno," William said, as the pumps came up in the distance. "When are you going to be done healing all the sick people?"

"It's not the same thing. My job has hours. It has benefits and a payscale."

"And mine isn't limited by some arbitrary rules set in place by a board of directors," William said, pointing to a concrete slab.

Cameron let out a low whistle as he slowed the car. "Those tanks are huge."
“They ought to be,” William said. “I paid enough for them.”

They got out, and Cameron watched him turn on the pump and insert it into the car. The gas began to pour, slow and steady. It wasn't as quick as the commercial fill stations on roadsides. He'd gotten it from an auction and had to fix it twice before he could trust it. Still, for a rusty old machine, it did the trick.

William glanced back toward the house. He could see it in the distance, across his acres of crops and near the cluster of barns. The sun was starting to sink from its overhead noon position and he figured they still had at least six more hours of daylight.

He wondered what fresh hell his mother was starting with Shane; what she might be up to or prying about.

The gas stopped and he frowned. The car's tank wasn't full yet.

“I want to talk to you,” Cameron said, leaning on the red kill switch, his brown eyes intense. “Really talk to you.”

"You're saying words. I'm saying words. That's talking, Ba—"

"Cam," Cameron said, stepping forward. "Stop with the formalities, William. Give me some fucking credit here. You're not okay. You are saying you're okay, but I know you, and I know you're not okay."

William squinted at him.

"Fresh country air does not agree with you," he said, leaning back and punching the green button on the pump to return the flow of gas.

Frustrated, Cameron slapped the red one again.

"Stop avoiding this! Stop avoiding what I've been trying to talk to you about for weeks."

William's pulse raced.

He so did not want to do this. He'd done enough to Cameron over the years. Hurt him. Made him angry. Pushed him away. Lied to him. They were finally at a place where they didn't hate each other, but he always demanded more than William could give him.

"I'm not avoiding anything other than hurting you," William snapped, slapping the green button. When Cameron reached to hit the red button again, William snatched his wrist.

Cameron's grip twisted. He slid his own hand over, putting William's arm in a lock.

"You want to touch me? Good. I want you to touch me too," Cameron said, closing the distance. "I want you to remember how it was."

Ice ran over William’s arm where they connected. He jerked it away, breaking the hold.

"You think I don't remember?" he said, his voice rough.

"I don't think you remember the right things," Cameron said, rubbing his fingers where William had pulled them away.
The hose from the pump acted as a barrier, like a velvet rope between them. William knew, based on the desperation in Cameron's eyes, that he was going to reach too hard. Was going to stretch to move past that line, and if he did—if William let him do what he wanted—it would end terribly for both of them.

Only one solution then.

"You know what I remember, Cameron?" William said, letting his voice deepen. "I remember how we met."

Hope lit in Cameron's face. "You do?"

William watched, absorbing it.

"Yup. I remember the nights at the base. I remember the way I'd leave you before you woke up, because I hated the idea of dealing with your clinging."

Unease flickered across Cameron’s face. William continued, the words coming out from the dark place that he normally didn't let himself sink to. But he had no choice; he had to make sure this bridge stayed good and burnt.

"You clung all the time. Choked me with it. It was like sleeping with a python, always wrapping too tight. I also remember how angry I was when you'd come with me to my physical therapy sessions. How you used to talk to my therapists about me like I wasn't even there."

Cameron flinched at the words, as though William had struck him.

"That's not true, Will," he said. "I was—"

"Being an overbearing dick," William said. "Trying to control every part of my life."

"You needed an advocate," Cameron snapped. "They weren't helping you."

"I remember," William went on, "how you used to make decisions for us without asking me." He didn't let himself feel guilty; didn't let the hurt in Cameron's face sway him from what he was going to say. "I remember how pathetic it was when you tried to get me to stop using. How stupid you looked when you planned your failure of an intervention."

Cameron's hurt morphed into rage. "You idiotic man-child!" he snarled. "You ungrateful asshole."

"You see? I remember how much we suck together, and whatever fucking fairytale you've built in your mind about what is between us? It needs to die. You need to grow the fuck up Cameron, and stop trying to revisit toxic shitheads who did nothing but hurt you."

The gas pump clicked and William set it back into its cradle.

Cameron was crying now. Not the alligator tears he pulled out when he wanted his way, but genuine messy streams of heartbreak running over his face. William locked that image into his mind’s eye. Because that's what he'd wanted—to hurt him with the truth. Make him remember what a bad fucking idea it all had been.

"You are so fucking wrong," Cameron hissed, shaking his head and rubbing his thumbs under his eyes with frustration. "So fucking wrong."

William tightened his mother's gas cap and replaced the nozzle. When he turned around, Cameron
hit the locks.

"Listen to yourself! You always do this shit. Try to act like you're so damn tough, when someone just wants to care about you."

William threw his hands up. "You don't want to care about me, Cameron. You want someone to fix your life, and I cannot do that! I cannot be what you're asking. I cannot go back to what we were, because what we were is dead and fucking buried, okay?"

"We were good together," Cameron insisted. "Don't you remember?" He stepped forward, putting his hand on William's arm, who was too tired to push him off. "You used to cook for me. I'd come home after a bad day, and you were there. You'd always get my favorite wine. We watched television and riffed on the bad sitcom writing."

William swallowed back his pity. The reminder was painful because he hadn't actually cooked, he'd just reheated food he'd picked up from Gretchen and his mom on those days. Cameron would always rave over the clean kitchen. It was easy to clean a kitchen you'd never cooked in.

Between his own shitty behavior and Roy's abusive side, something had broken in this once proud man. A wave of guilt ran through him as Cameron begged.

"Just...look. One date. I'm asking you to—"

"It's over." William said, his voice soft. "It's been over, for years. It’s been buried and mourned and moved past."

"YOU MOVED PAST IT!" Cameron shouted, eyes filling again. "You destroyed it and moved on, but here I am asking you to just help me pick up these pieces—"

"Cameron. I never loved you. And I never will."

It was, he knew, a dark and dirty truth. One that Cameron wouldn't believe unless he made him face it.

Neither of them had really known what love was back then. What it meant to seek for something, or to put someone else truly first. And William didn't know what it was now, but he knew what it wasn't. And whatever he and Cam had had, it wasn't love.

"You are a fucking trash heap of a man, William Bauer," Cameron hissed, finally jerking his hand back. "A lying, selfish dick."

"That's what I've been saying," William said, turning to the driver's side.

"Where are you going?"

"To drive Ma's car back. So she can go the hell home, and so I can get on with my life."

"I'm. Not. Done."

"Doesn't matter. Because I am."

He regarded Cameron's flushed face. Didn't he realize that what he wanted had been a fantasy? It had crashed and burned because they'd never been based in reality.

"No one will ever care about you as much as I did, William," Cameron snapped. "And I'm not giving up on you. Because you need me out here. You need someone who knows you, someone
who cares about your health, even when you don't."

"You know what I need?" William asked in a tired voice. "I need you to move the hell on. You feel free to call when you've gotten over your quest to reunite, alright? You're bearable when you're not trying to get in my pants."

Cameron screamed in outrage as William shut the door. He turned the car back toward his house, and behind him in the dust Cameron threw two middle fingers up in the air.

Letting out a breath, he leaned back in his mother's too small seat.

He wasn't sure if that was going to be what it took. Fighting with Cameron was always an exercise in rubbery physics. They'd yell and shout, but after tempers had cooled, William would return to apologize. Because the facts were, back then, he'd needed Cameron. Needed someone to help him with basic hygiene. Needed someone to help him untangle the spaghetti phone lines of the VA, and to make those appointments. Needed someone who could drive and help him in and out of his wheelchair.

Needed someone with access to the good, strong, and life-affirming opiates that he'd craved.

He'd needed what Cameron could do, but he'd never needed who he was. And love wasn't like that.

He parked the car and waited a moment, collecting himself, and looked down at his scars and tattoos. Feather-light ghost fingers ran over his arm. He turned his head, almost expecting Shane to be sitting in the seat next to him.

But it was empty.

William swallowed the guilt and slipped back into his cheerful ego that would put his mother at ease. Fake as it was, he just wanted to get through this visit without losing his mind from self-loathing.

"Time to get this over with," he muttered, stepping towards the house, and to the person he really felt could understand him.

Chapter End Notes

We love you guys. Thanks so much for sticking with us every update.

Extra thanks to Xylianna for the beta! <3

As usual, links to our tumblr and discord server if you want to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is September 15th, 2-4pm PST.
A Few Lawless Minutes

Chapter Summary

In Which Whiskey Happens…Again

(Caution: actual trigger warning for graphic description of animal death)

Trigger Warnings:
- Dish washing
- Story sharing
- Schoolyard violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re a nervous sort around people, hmm?”

As Angie spoke, a knife slipped from Shane’s hand and clanged onto his plate of silverware. He flushed and adjusted it on the stack.

Of all the worries to plague his walk to the farm that morning, being trapped with William’s mother hadn’t been one of them. Yet here they were, cleaning the kitchen together on her second visit in less than three weeks.

“That’s okay, dear,” she continued, carrying her wine glass and a dish of potatoes to the counter. “I promise I don’t bite.”

Maybe not, but the last time they’d spoken she’d offered him a lawyer named Henry.

He was afraid of this woman. Angie’s motherly words were a sheath that hid sharpness. She was too observant, and had eyes that looked into people rather than through them—a Bauer specialty, apparently.

Shane wasn’t just an employee anymore, but a man who’d made out with her son. After witnessing that scene in the barn, he’d spent all morning fighting images of what Cam would do in private. And, he realized, he was possessive of privacy with William. It felt so fucking wrong for another man to have that privilege.

Could she sense those things?

Angie dug in a cupboard and pulled out a pair of floral gloves that most certainly did not belong to her son. Humming, she filled the sink with hot water.

“How have the last few weeks been?” she asked. “Will is so unpredictable at times.”

Shane stacked plates. “Um. They’ve been good.”

“Will said he met your family the other day. He didn’t go into detail. Do they live close by?”
How much do you guys talk?

“Er—yeah,” he said. “Fifteen, twenty minute walk.”

Angie dunked a glass into the sudsy water. “So who do you live with?”

“My, um. My aunt.” He carried the dishes over and set them on the counter. “And my goddaughter. She’s nine.”

“Oh! But a child is such a blessing!” She flashed him a brilliant smile, then nodded at a cloth on the counter. “Here, Shane. Please dry.”

He was grateful she’d given him a set chore, and that she’d latched onto the topic of kids. Kids were not dangerous. The tightness in his chest eased as he wiped down the first dish.

She turned back to the sink, sighing. “I always wanted a lot of kids, but the good lord just gave me William. You said she’s nine? What’s her name?”

“Jas. And yeah, she turned nine this summer.”

“Hmm! That’s a good age. They’re so smart and inquisitive. William was a bit too inquisitive at that age, unfortunately. Always getting into scrapes.” She handed him another dish. “What does she like to do?”

“Lots of things. She’s really smart.”

Shane was surprised by the surge of pride that accompanied saying this aloud. He’d never bragged about her before. There’d never been much opportunity. Encouraged, he continued.

“She loves to read and stuff, but she’s a country kid too. Likes the barn cats and chickens. Horses are her favorite.”

“Oh, I love horses,” said Angie brightly. “My sisters and I were a part of an equestrian club growing up. There is nothing like the freedom on horseback. It makes you feel like you can’t be held down by anything.”

With a pang below his ribs, Shane thought she sounded like Marnie—except after hurting her back, Marnie couldn’t ride anymore.

“What types of books does Jas like?” Angie asked.

“She’s, um, getting into chapter books. Those early reader ones? Animal stories, talking dogs, that kinda shi—”

He cut off, too late to catch the word.

“Sorry,” he said, flushing again.

Angie made an amused clicking sound. “You boys and your swears. It’s alright, dear. Will is much worse.” She unplugged the drain, letting some of the water spiral down. “Does she like coloring? Art? Or just reading?”

“All of it. Still at that age where she likes everything about school.”

“That’s wonderful.”
Shane wasn’t used to talking about Jas with anyone except Marnie. It was nice. Not only because the topic kept his nerves at bay, but because Angie’s enthusiasm felt so sincere.

“I imagine she’s very adventurous,” she said, scrubbing a pot. “Is she a little girl who likes dresses, or more of a tomboy?”

“She’s into all the princess stuff, but more of a tomboy on the ranch.” Shane frowned. “Sees things that would make most kids squeamish. Animals giving birth, dying and stuff…”

“Children have the most intriguing interests,” Angie said, sidestepping his morbid detour. She rinsed her pot under running water. “So, do you have a person in your life, Shane? Someone important to help you with this precious little girl?”

The plate Shane was wiping slipped from his hands. He snatched it—barely—before it hit the counter.

“Just my aunt,” he mumbled. “She watches her while I work.”

*And on the weekends. And the evenings. And all the nights I’m too drunk to run her bath.*

“Ah!” Angie brightened. “So you’re single?”

Shane set his plate on the stack of dry ones, face growing hot. “Um. Yes.”

A car door slammed outside.

*William.*

“How…fortunate,” she murmured.

The sound of familiar boots came up the steps, then the door burst open, William stomping inside.

“Ma, got your dog walked and your car gassed up.”

Angie sighed. “Can’t you two just be adults about this?”

“I dunno. Can we?”

Shane hadn’t realized how fucking strange the house felt without William. It was unnatural and empty without his booming voice to fill the room. Now, the world was right again.

“You’re impossible,” said Angie. She pulled a rag from the sink, squeezed out the excess water, and tossed it to her son. “Make yourself useful and wipe the table.”

William slapped the wet cloth down, aggravation in every swipe.

“Where is Cam?” Angie asked, suddenly alarmed.

“Walking,” said William.

“Walking?!”

He looked up from wiping the table. “Whoops. Did I say I was going to drive him back?”

She stomped one foot on his tile. “Where did you abandon him?”

“Relax, Ma. It’s just the other side of the farm. I keep a gas tank there for the equipment.”
Shane focused on drying the final dish. He knew exactly where that tank was kept. Not just the other side of the farm, but as far from the rest of William’s structures as possible, to protect against an accidental leak. It was immensely satisfying to picture Cam walking the fields in those expensive loafers, sweating through his pink shirt in the midday sun.

“Besides,” William continued. “He needed to like, burn calories and shit.”

“William Jo—”

“—seph Bauer,” he mocked. “Language.”

“You get this from your father’s side, you know.” She turned to Shane. “Do not let this one influence you into such terrible behavior, Shane. I swear, William, if I hadn’t given birth to you myself I’d think you were hatched.”

"Swapped at birth is still an option, Ma. I could get a DNA test.”

Angie did not find this amusing. She stalked to her purse and pulled out her phone. “This is a fine way to end Cameron’s first visit.”

“That’s what I thought too.”

She slipped the purse over her arm, offering her cheek for a kiss. “I’d better go rescue the poor thing.”

“He’s been through boot, Ma,” William said, delivering it. “He’ll live.”

“Your father and I taught you better when it came to dealing with old friends and guests. But if you’re determined to be impossible, so be it.”

As she walked out, he leaned back and hooked his fingers in his belt loops. “Bye Ma! See you at brunch next week!”

Her answer was shutting the car door. William’s shoulders relaxed.

“Jesusfuck,” he muttered, stalking across the room. “She’s going to take a year off my life with every surprise pop-in.”

“She wasn’t so bad,” Shane said, stacking dry plates in the cupboard.

The clink of ceramic was too loud in the empty kitchen. It made Shane aware of how alone they were now. Like this morning, when William had kissed his bruise in the milking barn.

William opened the fridge and cocked his head at the row of brown bottles. “It would probably be irresponsible to have another, huh?”

Shane slowly closed the cupboard door. Two at lunch, and now a third?

He licked his lips. “I’m, uh…good with irresponsible.”

William grabbed the beers and handed one to him, leaning his hip against the counter. He clinked their bottle necks together.

“To irresponsible.”

They tilted them back, and as cold liquid ran down Shane’s throat he recalled lunch, when William
had stared at Cam and chugged an entire beer. How after he was done, he’d winked at Shane like it was an inside joke between them.

Half of him desperately wanted to ask about Cam. The other half wanted to forget he existed.

“Ma didn’t try to get all in your business, did she?” William asked.

Shane shoved back the echo of Cam’s voice; his words about how he wouldn’t be scared off.

“She was okay,” he said. “Spent most of the time talking about Jas.”

“That’s a good way to keep her out of your hair. She loves kids.”

“She wanted lots of them, but just got you.”

William chuckled. “Only-child problems, right? No one else to share her crazy with.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

He slid a bit closer. “You know,” he said, toying with his bottle. “If you want to get back to work, we can. Or…we could take a minute to celebrate our mother-less survival.” He slipped an arm over Shane’s shoulder. “On the couch.”

Shane’s heart took off.

“O-oh,” he said, forcing the word from his suddenly dry lips. “Okay.”

He wanted to kick himself. His stupid ass, barely able to form a coherent fucking sentence, when William’s bubbly and charismatic ex had probably been talking his ear off.

“You know,” William mused, walking slow with him into the living room. “It’s tough being her only kid. All that attention and focus. It’s like a damn laser waiting to cook you.”

They sank onto the couch. Shane wasn’t sure if he was more relieved or bothered when the arm slid off his shoulder. He tried to focus on William’s words and not the way they sat with thighs almost touching.

*Laser.*

Angie’s laser must’ve been relentless to live under. A painting where the eyes followed, no matter which direction you stepped. Shane couldn’t relate. Corey’s laser didn’t focus like that. It ignored you, unless you were careless and bumped into one of the intricate red lines of his traps—then it zeroed in to scorch.

Somehow, that seemed preferable to William’s 24/7 version. Constant surveillance and expectation? Sounded like fucking hell.

“Dunno how you deal with it,” Shane said.

“When it’s the only thing you’ve ever known, you manage.” William shrugged. “Parties you didn’t know were happening? Suck it up and smile, Will. Play nice for the mayor. Or the school board, or the chamber, or whoever else got invited over that day.”

Shane wondered if he’d have learned to survive in William’s world, had he grown up that way. Given the choice now? He’d gladly take the closet all over again.
“What happened if you didn’t suck it up and smile?” he asked. “Ever find out?”

“Once. I was ten. Embarrassed her and dealt with the consequences.” William shook his head, swirling his beer. “After that? Yeah, I made an effort. Didn’t like the idea of Ma getting fucking dragged through the mud just because I couldn’t get in line.” He took a long drink, eyes on the wall. “Dad did it, even though I knew he didn’t care for her parties. If he could do it, so could I.”

Shane rubbed his thumb over the bottle, focused on a bubble trapped in the glass. “Your dad easier than your mom?”

“Yeah. Mom grew up where appearances mattered a lot. Dad, not so much.” William cocked his head. “What about you? You’ve said your family wasn’t great. That include your parents?”

Shane knew he should’ve anticipated this. Sitting down for a beer and family questions? Of course William would take an interest right back. It’d happened before, that time he’d asked about Marnie—and Shane had thrown a fucking temper tantrum about it.

“Yeah,” he agreed, ears burning at the memory. “Not much of a family.”

William met him with a careful look. “You okay? It’s cool if you don’t want to talk about it.”

_We could take a minute to celebrate our continued mother-less survival._

While determined not to repeat history with another freak-out, Shane didn’t think delving into Corey and Jessica was quite what William meant.

“It’s fine,” he said, hoping to sound casual. “Just not very interesting.”

William didn’t press. Instead, he reached over to gently tilt Shane’s head, running his thumb over the sensitive skin. “Swelling has gone down. Is it hurting you?”

Shane held very still. “It’s okay.”

He’d had dull headaches throbbing in and out all day, but nothing he couldn’t handle. Right now, the softness of the touch was a portal: it took him back to yesterday afternoon, when he’d sat with stars behind his vision while William massaged in the cream. It was so quiet he could hear his pulse swish.

William slowly let his hand drop. “Marnie buy the accident angle?”

“She asked if we’d been fighting again,” Shane admitted. “Told her it was a post. Said she could come look at the new fence if she wanted.”

William leaned back, rubbing the hand over his mouth. “Shouldn’t have hit you.”

William leaned back, rubbing the hand over his mouth. “Shouldn’t have hit you.”

Shane blinked. “But I asked you to.”

“No you didn’t. You dared me. It was a heated moment and I just—I lost control. I’m sorry.”

He finished his beer in one swallow, then stood and walked to the kitchen, where Shane heard him toss his empty.

“I did ask you,” he whispered, too quiet for William to hear.

He felt sick. Had William gone the whole night regretting what they’d done? Was he worried he’d hurt Shane too much? Did he not understand how _perfectly_ he’d read the situation?
The cushion sank and Shane looked up, nervous.

“I wondered, you know.” William’s lips gave a humorless twist. “If you’d come back to work. Days like today probably make you wish you’d woken up with a cold.”

Sweat dripped from an icy new bottle in his hand. Shane thought of the sweat that had run down William’s forehead yesterday while he towered over his pinned body.

“I’m really sorry,” he mumbled.

William shot him a confused look. “For what?”

“Kinda make a habit out of it, don’t I? Running off after shit…can’t fucking blame you.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

Or, maybe, the right thing.

William put down his beer. Closing the inches between them, he gripped the back of Shane’s neck. “Look at me,” he demanded.

Eyes heavy, Shane did.

William cupped his chin and kissed him, slow and careful. The pressure was light, giving him the opportunity to pull back if he wanted, and Shane’s heart hammered.

“You’re sure?” he whispered through their touching lips.

“About you? Yeah, I’m sure.” William eased back. He ran another gentle thumb over the bruise, and let out a warm, boozy breath. “Why don’t we head back to work though? The cows will need their second milking soon.”

Despite his words, his face still lingered in Shane’s space.

_Kiss him back._

But he couldn’t. Even right fucking here in front of him, _waiting_, he couldn’t. All Shane had to do was tip forward and William would catch him, but his body and brain wouldn’t connect.

“Yeah,” he finally managed. “We’re probably a little behind anyway.”

William nodded. Hooking the neck of his beer between two fingers, he stood and headed for the door.

_You fucking idiot._

Shane drained the rest of his bottle and followed him out—because just like that, work was waiting.

William was on one of the porch chairs, pulling on his boots. Shane bent over and carefully placed his empty in the recycling bucket. Usually when drinking they chucked them, but this moment felt too soft for that. Then he grabbed his own boots and sat in the opposite chair.

William jerked his laces tight. “You wanna hang out after?”

Shane paused the knot he was tying, warmth creeping up his neck. “Yes.”
He couldn’t believe he’d actually said it. It’d been in his head, but since when did his mouth cooperate with his thoughts?

He finished tying his second boot, and when he looked up William was waiting, holding out a hand.

*A secret, Shane remembered. *Just figuring things out, nice and easy.*

Feeling strangely vulnerable—more than when he’d been pinned beneath him and punched—Shane took his hand. William pulled him up and in one swift motion they were eye to eye.

Before Shane could think, he was being kissed.

“Work fast then,” William said, voice husky as he let go.

With that he slipped his fingers in his pockets and headed toward the outer fields. Shane watched him grow smaller and smaller, still dizzy in his wake.

William finished sketching out, measuring, and prepping his grange display at five. Half an hour later he went to the porch and kicked off his muddy boots, plans of the festival dominating his thoughts. Every year the Stardew Valley Fair held a contest for best grange display. He’d never heard of the artistic competitions before, and on the first year had displayed his best fruits and vegetables, assuming they would carry him. His grange had been high quality, but simple.

After setting it up he’d wandered over to Pierre’s box, and stared in awe at the geometrical masterwork that had won the year’s gold metal.

Spurned by the failure, William focused hard for his next attempt and managed to squeak into second place. If the offerings from the other farmers hadn’t been so lackluster, he probably wouldn’t have made it that far. This year? He did research. He’d gone to more fairs, seen different winning granges, and had worked on the design for months. His display wasn’t just a feast for the stomach, but for the eyes as well. He’d saved wheat that still had seed on the stalk. While canning, he’d focused on lining the beans and vegetables up perfectly. Making jams and jellies, he’d used symmetrical jars that would create the ideal field of product. Every item had been produced on his farm, chosen from the harvests to showcase the most beautiful examples.

Add in Shane’s help over the last few weeks? The gold medal was his for sure.

His thoughts of the fair slowed when he saw Shane coming out of the barns, arms empty of the hoses he’d dropped off for cleaning. William snagged a bottle of whiskey from inside, taking a self-medicating swig as he waited for him to approach.

Friday had been confirmation they were electric. Monday, Shane’s desperate mouth proved how *good* it could be. For the hundredth time, William replayed the way he’d melted into the shared embrace. If he could angle for more today he’d go for it, no hesitation.

When Shane stepped up, he held the whiskey in mute invitation.

Instead of his normal wooden guardedness, Shane appeared shy accepting the bottle. He swallowed well, and William leaned into his chair, mind playing wicked fantasies about what else he could
convince him to wrap his lips around.

"So," he said, after they were seated. "Did Ma tell embarrassing stories about me when you were trapped with her?"

Shane paused over the bottle.

"Just...said you got into lots of scrapes as a kid." He glanced up, black eye prominent. "Don't believe it."

William chuckled and snapped for the whiskey.

"Babe, I stayed suspended. I was in detention so often they practically had my name spray painted to a chair. Me and my big mouth were always getting into trouble." He raised an eyebrow. "You?"

"Just suspended once."

William waited for him to elaborate.

Crickets.

"For what?" he probed. "Not answering a question when someone asked you?"

Shane picked at dirty fingernails. "Believe me if I said it was because of my own big mouth?"

"Okay, now this I got to hear."

"Not much to tell. Showed up drunk to a lab. Broke a bunch of glass tubes and shit. Told the teacher 'fuck chemistry'. The end."

William tried to picture it. Drunk, he could believe. William had been drunk all the time in high school, especially if there was a party the night before. Telling the teacher to fuck off? Ballsy. He let out a low whistle.

"Don't you know you never tell the teachers to fuck off to their face? I always just got into it with classmates." He tossed him the whiskey back, then stretched out his legs and rested socked feet on Shane’s chair. "I'm impressed."

Shane met his gaze as he caught the bottle. "Bet you won every fight."

William shivered. Had anyone ever looked at him the way Shane did right now? With admiration?

"Not by a long shot. Got my arm broke in the 10th grade for being stupid. Bit off more than I could chew." He focused on the shadows stretching across the porch. They reminded him of pillars, long and straight. "Still. Managed a pretty baller cast out of it, so win/win, right?"

"Never had a cast," Shane said, the whiskey passing between them. "What's the broken arm story?"

William groaned, the remembered stupidity burning through his face. He debated sharing. It was a point of pride with some gay guys to have never dated women. And William hadn’t been with girls exactly, but he hadn’t been technically single either. Still, Shane hadn’t judged him yet.

"So, before I came out—before I'd figured out I didn't like women—I was dating this girl. It was innocent shit. School dances, driving her around with our friends. Making sure no one bothered her at parties, nothing serious."
It hadn’t been sexual. Lenore Brown. A sweet faced girl who had never pressured him. They’d gotten along well, his self-proclaimed fag-hag in high school.

"Long drama short, she was being messed with by some guys from her neighborhood. And since I was fifteen and tough shit, I thought, 'Sure, four guys at once? What's the worst that could happen?'

The entire event had been a bad deal. If either one of them had possessed the brain God gave a rock, they would have called the police about the excessive bullying, or at least told their parents. But no. William had felt it his fucking duty.

"It was a shit show,” he said. “Dumb odds. Dumb choices. Story of my fucking life."

This was the part where most guys laughed. Shane didn’t.

"Four guys at once on some girl?" he said, rolling the whiskey bottle between his fingers. "Would've been harder to live with if you ignored it. You had a good reason."

It was odd for William to hear someone defend his hotheaded actions. And in all fairness, no one should. He’d hurt plenty of people with his dumbass mouth and knee-jerk temper. He frowned, studying the bruise Shane wore.

Because he’d hurt him too, hadn’t he?

"This might sound shocking, but I don't always have good reasons for losing my temper," William muttered.

Shane shook his head. "You were gonna let it go, that first night. I'm the one who followed you outside."

William stared at him, heart rate increasing. The bar? Yeah…he’d been doused with water. He’d backed off, hadn’t he? It'd been Shane who had torn out of The Stardrop, all sexy fury and anger.

"This?" Shane said, pointing at his eye. "I asked for, and you fucking know it. Not your fault I'm fucked up too."

*Best one I ever had...which probably sounds weirder, since I was the one eating dirt.*

It was more than William had hoped, the words opening up paths and possibilities he’d not let himself consider out of pure self-preservation. But despite the reassurance, he knew in his gut this wasn’t how it was supposed to work. It was too dangerous to just give a guy blanket permission, wasn’t it?

"Most of the time when someone wants you to hurt him, there is a safe word," William said. "I've never given you a way to make me stop."

"You stopped when it went far enough.” Shane took a drink. “Been on the other side of that before. Big difference."

William was unsure how to take that; it was foreign for someone to trust his control and assume he had restraint. He plucked the bottle from Shane’s lap and let his chair slide closer. "Did the other side of that break your nose?"

"Yup."
William nudged him with his toe and raised an eyebrow.

"What?" Shane asked.

"Spill the story, you close-mouthed shithead. You don't get to hear all about my four-on-one beatdown and only give me a yup when I ask about your busted snozz."

Shane snagged the whiskey back, and if William hadn’t known better he’d risk calling it playful. However, once it was in his hands, Shane’s face dropped into solemn lines as he stared down at the bottle.

"It’s a fucked up story."

"Not your fault I’m fucked up too," William said, resting his chin on his palm. He mentally traced the set of Shane’s shoulders, the way his hair fell in an unruly shag over his eyes. He wanted to remember this, to burn the image into his mind so he could return to it later.

"Grew up in a bad part of Zuzu,” Shane said at last. “My neighborhood wasn’t the worst of it, but lots of gangs close by. Hood parties in the middle of the street. Meth was a problem…”

William had been to rough areas of Zuzu before. He’d practically lived there when homeless and using. Dirty streets that the sweeper had ignored. Abandoned houses where he’d squatted. Those dark zones were no place for a child.

Shane pulled out a knife from his jeans. It was nothing like the pocketknife on William’s utilitool. If knives were people, William’s blades were uniform every-men. Shane’s looked like art. Closed, it made a rectangular package of silver with a subdued design etched into the halves of the hilt.

“I dunno,” he said, running his fingers over the flat surface like a worry stone. “I was a dumbass kid. Didn’t like staying home so I walked around a lot. Streets were bad, but if you kept your head screwed on you didn’t usually pick up trouble. But one time…there’s this fucking dog, right?”

He glanced up, as if asking whether or not to continue. William knew with an animal involved this would not have a pretty ending, but he drank, giving him silent consent to go on.

Shane leaned forward, shoulders like dry rubber bands. He rolled the handle in his palm.

"Stray. No tags. Matted as shit. Hit by a car or something, and couldn't move any of his legs." A blend of sorrow and disgust crossed his face. "He's on the side of the road, and no one is around. I can't just fucking leave him there. Some homeless dog ain't gonna come back from that shit."

It was easy to visualize. Shane was preternaturally aware of the animals on the farm. He had a sixth sense with the heifers, reading their body language as clearly as if they were talking to him. He spoke softly to the chickens, like they were people. And Ingrid, recalcitrant feline though she was, never failed to show him true affection.

With a flick of his wrist Shane opened the knife. Early evening sun glinted off the sharp blade, a deadly little jewel capable of drawing pain as much as admiration.

"Was fifteen,” he said, studying it. “Always carried some kind of pocketknife around. Not this one. Just, basic utility knife…”

William’s chest hurt as he predicted what was coming.

People like Shane were never meant to be in those dilemmas. They needed people like William,
who had sanded off their soft parts and replaced them with steel. People who knew how to make decisions about taking life without losing sleep after.

"He was just fucking laying there," Shane continued, voice gruff. "So one quick, clean mercy stab, you know?"

William did know. He pictured the impossible decision. Imagined the way the knife would slip in a sweaty palm.

"But then after...I can't just leave him there, so I go to move him to this wooded area behind the row of houses. Here comes this kid, outta fucking nowhere. Had to be on drugs. Snaps and starts screaming how I'm a sick fuck and killed his dog, and he's gonna fucking kill me."

He lifted his head, meeting William's eyes. "Wasn't his dog. That dog hadn't seen the inside of a home in at least five years."

William tensed. He’d been around plenty of fucking junkies. You could always tell the look. Dirty and torn clothes. Eyes hollow from too many missed meals. Hair matted with grime and sweat. When you were that far gone, you and reality were ex-lovers who had each other blocked. The fucker had likely been tripping hard; had seen Shane take the mercy kill and interpreted something else. He discarded the urge to touch Shane, to comfort. It was too soon for that.

"That's when he broke your nose?" he asked.

Shane nodded. "Sucker-punched. I mean, if you can still call it that when they come up raving at you. I end up on the ground, and the guy starts trying to throw these big fucking rocks at me. But his aim was shit, and I still had the knife on me...course I pull it out on instinct..."

He opened and closed the blade several times, the movement as captivating as his quiet, resonate voice.

"Then this gunshot goes off in the distance. The kid freaks out harder. Starts backing up, still going on about how I'm fucking dead. But it spooked him. He runs, and I hear someone else calling me from a few houses down. Older guy. Seen him around loads of times, always just chilling on his porch. Fired a blank to scare the fucker off."

Shane flicked the knife again. The movement was faster and more intricate this time, handle and blade in three twirling spokes. It danced between his fingers like a deadly little bird. William’s eyes followed the blur until it flipped closed, the handle acting as a sheath.

"Name was Jerry," Shane said, staring at it, as though it was giving him the rest of the story. "Told me he'd seen me around. Said I did a good job keeping to myself, then scolded the fucking shit out of me for pulling my knife. Said if I'd done it to the wrong guy, I'd be laying out there with the dog."

He did another trick, this one twice as long. The spokes crossed, like a quarter rolling between his knuckles instead of a blade. It reminded William of the first time Shane had caught his bottle opener, when he’d marveled at the reflexes.

He’d been holding back.

“Guess this old fucker was like, gang vet,” he continued. “Gave me the rest of his bottle of vodka, and an old t-shirt to mop up my nose. Talked to me while I was sitting through the worst of it. Liked me, for some reason..."
He trailed off, letting the knife dangle back and forth on the hinge.

"I'm glad he was there for you," William said.

The heat of the whiskey flowed through him, and along with it the burden of Shane’s story. It was humbling to be trusted with something so painful. Nothing he could say would make it better. Shit like that happened, and no amount of post-event comfort changed it.

"When they hand you your gun, it's drilled through your head to be prepared to use it if you pull it out. Knife ain't different. But the dog? Shane, you did the right thing. Trust me." His jaw clenched. "If you were the one laying out there with a broken back covered in filth, you'd probably want someone to do you in too. It was a fucking kindness."

"Thanks," Shane said, the word barely a whisper. "Fucking hated doing it. Didn't even have a good life first, you know? Just…one piece of shit to another."

William pulled his feet down from Shane’s chair and put the bottle to the side. Words couldn’t make this better, but there was something to be said for physical comfort in the wake of trauma.

He leaned forward, cradling Shane’s face.

"Life sucks. Sometimes it sucks more for other people. That dog? He had two choices. Die slow or die fast. You made the right call, but it's okay to not be okay with that."

Shane’s eyes were dry, but William wondered if when he was younger, he’d let it out for that poor dog. His thumb ran down Shane’s cheek, tracing the ghost of old tears, and he kissed his forehead.

The atmosphere reminded him of the spa—the woody scent of whiskey thick in the humid air. William knew he ought to take it slow, let them sink into comfort for this secret tryst. However, logic was rarely his friend, and he was starving to open up. He wanted them to crawl inside each other, sharing painful burdens.

He kissed Shane’s mouth, fingers wrapping around the back of his neck to lock him close.

They melted together, swimming in sensation. He heard the ‘click’ of the knife, Shane squeezing it shut as he pressed into the touch, opening to William’s attention. He ached for validation, and Shane accepting this made his heart race.

It had never been like this with his multiple partners of the week.

During even their best months, it hadn't been like this with Cameron.

It wasn't like this with anyone else.

Shane was like him. Someone who'd been given his own version of a shit hand and yet, when William had delivered war, Shane delivered mercy.

They tasted, delving into one another, lips moving and breaths mingling. William’s logical mind gave way to his instincts, and those urges demanded closeness. Connection. Completion.

Touch led to movement and they were on their feet, swaying with a fluid grace only the inebriated could manage. Steps liquid, Shane followed his lead, stumbling and correcting backwards as they kissed. William reeled with the electricity running through each caress and hungry gasp. He knew they were going fast, but he couldn’t stop. It was like they’d plugged into a lightning bolt and he was being towed along, unable to see anything but Shane.
Damn the consequences. He wanted this. When Shane looked at him, he wasn’t blinded by his failures, and he craved sinking into a person who didn't call him a garbage pile.

They made out like teenagers, all messy tongues, searching fingers, and grinding bodies. It was a dance of need, a rhythm they followed seamlessly, and behind them the door banged open. Shane never missed a beat, his mouth obeying William's silent demands as they staggered into his bedroom.

It was a dark, cool cave of comfort, his sanctuary on the worst days, and now he was sharing it. He wanted to offer Shane that same security; to give him the relief that came from hiding in bed behind a closed door. He kissed him as if each touch could build a wall against the awful things they’d both seen and experienced.

When they hit the mattress, William laughed, delighted. They rolled and he straddled Shane, digging his fingers into unruly dark hair, kissing him again before pulling back, panting.

Shane gave a nervous laugh, his face flushed.

William was entranced. Had he ever heard him laugh before? It reminded him of being young and falling off a merry-go-round after it had spun too fast. His heart surged and he leaned on his elbows, caging Shane's head.

"Hmmmm..." William said, leaning in, trailing kisses down his neck. "I want to do things to you. The only question is, are you going to let me?"

His thumb chased after shivers his lips created, at the pulse fluttering against ruddy skin. Shane's neck tasted like salty nirvana. William rolled his erection along his length; it was bigger than he'd anticipated, growing by the second.

*God, he's thick.*

"You feel that?" he whispered in Shane’s ear, nipping the fleshy lobe, addicted to the way he squirmed.

Shane turned his head at the words, and William saw it—the slight hesitation, the search for reassurance in his eyes.

Just like at the fence. When Shane asked, he had to give.

William pressed his lips against his open mouth, swallowing whatever noises that tried to escape. He slid his hand over his head, fingers digging possessive circles against his scalp until Shane softened again.

Slapping his other hand against the nightstand, he jerked open a drawer, found his lube, and dropped it next to Shane's head. His gut said Shane wasn’t as experienced, so he wasn’t going to ruin this with a dry and lazy prep.

He made space between them, seeking buttons and zippers, looking for a gate to their pleasure.

“Let me help you feel good, Shane...I want you to feel so good,” he panted, kissing his neck as he arched his hips. His spine protested the move, but he was drunk off whiskey and passion; back pain was negligible.

Shane tilted his throat into the kiss. William took the racing pulse against his lips as a plea for more. He squeezed a coin of lube into his palm, then freed their cocks from the confines of their
clothes, exploring the soft velvet over pulsing hardness.

Comparisons couldn't be helped. Shane was longer than he'd appeared through his pants. William was shorter but thick, and it was a good contrast as they throbbed together, his hand working them simultaneously. He went easy at first to find the right level of pressure, taking Shane's tongue in his mouth and treating it with the same care as the dick in his fist.

Shane's eyes closed as they kissed. With each thrust William drove them faster and faster, until Shane had lost himself, bucking into the grip with delicious heat. Their shared friction was becoming too much.

"Yeah," William groaned. "Oh god, yeah Shane, like that."

He shoved his forehead into Shane's shoulder, knees bracing so he could piston his hips, matching his tempo.

"Touch me," he said, body bowing. "Put your hand over my fist. I want to feel it too."

William held tighter, almost to the point of pain, and Shane clasped his hand over top. His palm bumped into the heads of their cocks, letting William set the pace. When a sudden moan escaped his mouth, Shane turned his head and bit his lip, as though swallowing back any more sounds that threatened to come out.

Encouraged, unable to hold back, William pushed faster. Shane's hand brushing the head was driving him near the edge. He felt his balls tighten and shuddered harder, harder, harder and with a shout he came on his own chest. A coil of seed burned across his skin. With renewed motivation he pumped their hands in a frenzy, determined to drag Shane over the edge with him.

Shane tucked his head into the cradle of William's shoulder, stubble rough against his chest. Where William had given up one thick burst, Shane shot four thin stripes, legs jerking with each one as he trembled out his own completion. As the last drips oozed he dropped against the bed, mouth open, ragged breaths escaping.

Their hands were still overlapping. Slowly they released, and their cocks fell free of the grip.

The room spun as William heaved in air, floating. With a herculean effort he stripped his shirt and wiped them off, then mindful of buttons and zippers, tucked them to rights.

He flopped next to Shane, boneless. His walls were moving, swirling over his head in a kaleidoscope of weary exhilaration. Had it ever felt so good before?

_I'll just...close my eyes...for a minute_, he decided, mind fuzzy from the hard release. One of the best orgasms he'd had since...when? He couldn't remember.

He drifted off, fingers locked into Shane's shirt, one leg curled over as he sank into the boozy pool of exhaustion.

At first it'd been white noise chaos: panting and kisses, whispers and shivers, walls breathing, drunken spinning, and his heartbeat rushing through his ears.
Now, it was quiet.

Shane stared at the dark ceiling, listening to the tiny ticks of his watch. Soft little clicks, like those odd moments in life when he could hear himself blink. Each pause between seconds was more ominous than the last. An odd, hollow feeling dripped into his body, and ever so slowly he turned his head.

William, shirtless, passed the fuck out at his side.

He swallowed and turned back to the ceiling.

It grew worse. The longer he stared, the more the pit in his stomach expanded, until it was a great empty cavern in his chest.

*It’s the whiskey. You drank too much.*

Except Shane had been sick off booze enough fucking times in his life to know that was a lie.

He’d felt this emptiness before; the drop after masturbating. Totally normal. Why should he expect any different just because someone else’s fist had been around his cock? It was just…they’d kissed so short a time. Shane couldn’t wrap his head around how fast everything had gone down. Making out on the porch one moment, then a small hurricane later and William was wiping come off his stomach; the stomach that now twisted around a void.

It was like a giant ball of depression had sunk into one concentrated spot in his body.

*He’s right there. He’s still touching you. You’re fine.*

But Shane wasn’t fine. William’s leg was over his, but he was asleep and might as well have been a hundred miles away, because he wasn’t *here.* Not where Shane was, staring at a rippling ceiling.

He closed his eyes.

Was it supposed to be like this?

A few days ago he’d just had his first real kiss, deep and responsive. Then today that kiss led him into its bedroom, pulled down Shane’s pants, and for a few lawless minutes thrust him so hard into his body that he couldn’t overthink it.

But now here he was, laying on these sheets…what did it mean? What did it mean when you kissed a guy three separate times in one day, and called him babe, and brought him back to your bedroom? William said they were a secret, but a secret what? Secret exploration? Secret boyfriends?

Secret fuckbuddies?

The last thought made Shane want to hurl.

*You just had sex. Your stupid virgin ass finally hooked up with someone. Any other guy would be fucking happy. They’d enjoy it and pass out, and not sit here on the edge of tears like a fucking baby.*

He pushed the heel of his hand into his eyes.

Most men got accused of thinking with the wrong head, but Shane didn’t relate to that. He never dreamed of being fucked by some attractive guy on the street. Growing up, he’d always jerked to
abstract fantasies, faceless men. Eventually those fantasies turned more specific, but were always with the same person—Shane preferring the familiarity of Garrett’s imagined arms over the primal excitement of a random hot body. Then after his death, he’d gone back to the faceless men.

Until he met William.

Shane wanted so badly to wake him. To have him do his William-thing, where he made whatever Shane was going through better. Like on his porch, when he let Shane scream and didn’t leave his side. He needed him present, and not even for a scream. A whisper would be enough. One or two words of reassurance. Because Shane wasn’t fucking ready for this, or at least not this version of events, where he didn’t get to find out what it meant.

After what they just did, he should be able to curl into William’s side. That was allowed, right?

But he didn’t. He couldn’t. That’s what clingy teenagers did. One intimate moment shared, and suddenly slapping labels on shit, planning their weddings. He’d been one of those idiot teens once.

He felt so young and stupid.

It was still preternaturally silent in that dim, cool bedroom. Shane closed his eyes, listening to the ticking of his watch for far too long, until William’s breathing grew loud enough to join it. Between the two noises, his restless brain finally passed out.

Chapter End Notes

We hope you’re still enjoying the story as much as we enjoying writing it. If you have a moment to drop a comment, it’s much appreciated! We love to hear what you’re thinking.

Thank you Xylianna for the beta. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you’d like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is September 29th, 2-4pm PST.
Chapter Summary

In Which Cancer Ruins Everything

Trigger Warnings:
- Uncooperative shoelaces
- Graphic depiction of cranberries
- Paranoia, vomiting, and cancer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He thought he was swimming, which was weird because he didn't have a pool. Was he at his parents'? Ma and Dad had one in the new house.

It had been awesome, until he'd gotten assigned cleaning and upkeep. Every summer had been a lesson in practical chemistry. Testing the pH, remixing and balancing the chlorine levels, clearing out leaves or debris. Then for winter they drained it, and he'd spend a weekend scrubbing the liner with a special vacuum and brush. Too much work, swimming pools. And for what? Parties?

Was he at a party? He felt drunk. Too drunk.

Had he done a keg stand?

Did he have a deployment tomorrow?

Had he left home after swimming to drink with people?

Where was he going?

Gotoro?

No...that didn't sound right.

New cadre of training recruits?

God, he was a mess. Max was going to kill him.

Only Max couldn’t kill him, could he? He’d died.

Then the truth resonated in William’s mind like a bell: he was sick from drinking. His mouth tasted like rotten meat, his tongue chalky and his lips cracked. His stomach lurched and he opened his eyes.

He blinked. Like beads falling onto a string, his memories clicked into place, and he reoriented to the who, what, when, where, and why of the last two hours. Someone else was in his bed. A solid
and warm someone, who smelled like masculine shampoo. Shane. They’d hooked up after
drinking. So much whiskey...

Vertigo hit like a train. His stomach rolled again and he realized he was going to lose it. Stumbling
out of bed, he made it the three yards to the bathroom and managed to get the lid up before puking
with a wet gush. After the first purge, he sank to his knees and ralphed again, coughing out the
acidic sick.

He’d had way too fucking much.

*What are you doing, Bauer? You got to eat when you drink a whole bottle of whiskey. Basic
dumbass 101.*

He leaned forward, letting another gush of ‘That’s What You Fucking Get’ drop into the bowl, his
stomach cramping from the consequences of his past decisions.

Mixed memories tugged him from the present, back to places he no longer lived. His youth,
blending with deployments: in both cases he’d been hugging some random hole, losing his lunch.
In high school he’d been hiding for his reputation. In the military he’d been praying to live.

Odd to pray, when you were pretty sure God hated you.

He spit over and over before reaching for a wad of toilet paper to wipe down the splatters of sick
from the white porcelain. Flushing, he pushed to unsteady feet, swaying with the horrible shaky
feeling that always seemed to come after vomiting.

When he’d drifted off, he’d had Shane’s sighs in his mouth, his muffled cries in his ears. What a
way to sour that sweetness.

He ran water in the sink. Gargled mouthwash. Splashed his face and beard, scrubbing any sign of
weakness, anchoring back to the here and now. He had company tonight. Sexy, affectionate,
attractive company. He wanted back in that bubble they’d made.

Shane was still in bed and William fell next to him, covering his eyes with a forearm, head
throbbing. He debated rolling over and spooning against him, but Shane hadn’t stirred, and what
was he going to say if he woke? His brain was a foggy swirl. Besides, as soon as he tried to move,
the queases ran through him again. Checking in was going to have to wait.

*You are not fucking cleared to evacuate,* he told his stomach, with the same severity he’d use to
hold off an order for air support.

Then the bedsheets pulled, and William lifted his arm.

Shane was awake. He sat up, his shirt bunching around his hips, exposing a stretch of lower back
that was red with the impression of fabric wrinkles. He rubbed his eyes.

The familiar silhouette of his rounded shoulders added to William’s anchor of reality. He reached
over and traced the strip of skin, hot under his fingers.

Shane went rigid.

"Hey," William said, pulling his hand back. "You okay?"
“It’s late.”

The reply was as mechanical as his body. Shane stood, and with robotic arms straightened the blankets and pillow he’d laid on. It was as though he was trying to erase what had happened. The thought shot ice through William: that old familiarity of a regretful lover.

He sat up and clicked on the light, wincing at the sharp, bright razor of illumination cutting his corneas. Spots blurred his vision, but as it cleared he realized that Shane was now searching the floor, pulling his boots out from under the bed.

*Keep it casual. Don't add more pressure, you shithead.*

"So." He got up, keeping his back to Shane as he pulled on a shirt. "You want some water or something for the road? Coffee?"

"It's late," Shane repeated with an edge of panic.

*You already said that.*

"Yeah, okay," William said, the syllables dropping like rocks. "I won't keep you if you have to go, Daniels."

The last name felt wrong, but so did the way Shane was acting. He’d not pegged him to run from a little cuddling, yet here he was, hurrying to get out.

Resignation settled next to the rejection. Wasn’t this what he’d promised? A secret? He’d said they’d figure it out. Hard to carry on a tryst if your partner was going to get you caught because he wanted to be a clingy asshole.

"You want me to, uh, call your aunt?" William asked. “Tell her we got caught up late?”

"No!" snapped Shane.

The word was a whip cracking through the air.

He bent over, tying the first boot with clumsy fingers. “That’s—she’ll think…”

William’s stomach gave another roil and he swayed, the whiskey—which had been such a brilliant fucking idea hours ago—now making him question what they were doing. Did Shane regret it? Was this going to be a new song, ‘Gay Until Sober?’

Shane tried to shove the other boot on. The tongue stuck when he put his foot in, and on his second try, the lace got caught up in his sock. He fished it out, cussing under his breath as he forced it into submission.


Despite the calm he projected, a wave of stupidity mingled with the whiskey-induced nausea. He dug his fingers into his palms while Shane battled with the shoes. Part of him wanted to go over, slap the fumbling hands to one side, and fix it for him, but based on Shane’s imitation of a porcupine he was pretty sure it would result with a kick to the head. The other part was seeing a
ghostly image of dozens of men who’d come before him, checking their watches or phones as they babbled excuses—anything to get out of William’s bed.

His eyes swam. He was pretty sure that was the vertigo.

"So..." He let the word stretch. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

*Lame,* he thought, as soon as the pitiful fucking question escaped his mouth.

Shane stood. His boots were finally on, and now he tugged at his t-shirt to iron out the wrinkles of where they’d slept.

“Yeah. Um. Six?” he said, fidgeting with the hem of a sleeve. Then he shook his head. “I mean. ‘Course it’s six. It’s work…”

He was definitely ready to bolt.

William slid on a mask of indifference, packing all his hurt, disappointment, and frustration behind the familiar expression. It wasn't like they'd planned to get intimate, but if Shane regretted this it was on his end alone.

Still, pressing would just make it worse. It had happened, so he needed to be a damn grown-up and let him go.

"See you then," he said, slipping his hands in his pockets. "Careful getting home and all that."

"Yeah. Okay," Shane said.

Then he was gone.

William heard the front door open and close. He sank onto the bed, falling all the way onto his back.

Mistake.

He could smell them in the sheets. Shane's shampoo, their mingled sweat, and...

He pushed up and ripped the blankets and pillowcases off the bed with brutal efficiency. The whole mess—along with his dirty shirt—was shoveled in the hamper and then hauled to the washer. Returning to the room with a bottle of vinegar and water in his fist, he misted the mattress and pillows before remaking his bed, tightening the fresh sheets as though expecting a bunk inspection.

Escaping the reminders of how he’d spent the last few hours, he fed Ingrid. Unlike some people, his cat was grateful, and ate like she'd never seen food before. He ate too, reheating leftovers and scarfing them over the sink, then poured a glass of water and went outside.

Another mistake.

The porch was further proof of their fooling around. The chairs were slid in an awkward set of angles, the whiskey bottle on its side. William replayed it, how they’d pulled closer and closer like a pair of magnets…then let the loud scraping of wood against wood erase the memory as he shoved the chairs back into place. He sat down on his side of the deck to clean his boots, drinking water
intermittently, and at nine called it a night and went back to his room.

Only to stand there and stare at the tightly made bed.


He snapped off the lights and headed to his generic guest suite.

If he slept in his own bed he’d only relive every moment, the same way he had on the porch. Those touches and kisses should have been blurred by the haze of drunken lust, but instead they were as sharp as a picture.

How unfair that for Shane it had been something to flee, while William felt trapped in the memory.

Frantic shoes scuffled through dirt on the empty country road. It was otherwise silent, a peaceful sunset glowing over the trees, but that backdrop of calm did nothing to quell Shane’s panic. It’d been hard enough coming home after the spa, and then yesterday with the black eye. How could he walk in this late—after so much more than a kiss or fight—and act like nothing had happened? Sure, farming was sweaty business, but that was damn different than sweating in William’s *bed*, rolling in his scent. Marnie was going to take one look at his crinkled t-shirt and know.

He stared at the lights of the ranch, wanting to puke.

Waiting until they were asleep wasn’t an option. That might’ve worked in his Joja days, when he’d spent most nights at the dock or saloon, but lately his family was used to him returning before dark. It was one thing to hole up in his room like some drunk feral creature, another to make them worry when he didn’t come home.

Fighting a dozen warning voices, he pushed into the house.

“Uncle Shane!”

Jas was doing an art project in the living room, and at seeing him dropped her glue stick and rushed over, ready to attack.

Shane lurched back.

He’d been with William. Under his shirt, he was still fucking there, and holy shit, she couldn’t *touch* him.

“S-sorry,” he stammered. “You don’t wanna hug me, kid. Got manure on my pants.”

Jas wrinkled her nose. “Groooosssss.”

The kitchen smelled of rosemary chicken and fresh bread. The table was set, the food untouched and steaming under plastic covers. Shane’s stomach sank at realizing they hadn’t eaten yet.

“We waited for you,” Marnie said, retrieving the main course from the oven, where it’d been keeping warm. Her normally cheerful eyes were heavy, as if she’d not slept well, but she smiled at Shane while setting the dish on a hot pad. “You boys work overtime today?”
Shane rubbed his chin, certain she knew William’s beard had been scratching all over it. “I just… need to shower.”

“Because we’re so afraid of you smelling like a barn at the table, Shane. Quite a shock for humble ranch folk like us.” She rolled her eyes, carrying a glass of milk to the table for Jas. “I know you love my rosemary chicken. Take a seat.”

Defeated, he dropped into a chair. He’d eat enough to satisfy her and then get the hell out.

Marnie carved into the chicken, dropping slices onto each of their plates. Jas plucked the tiny sprigs of rosemary off hers, complaining they ‘tasted like pine trees,’ while Shane stared at a spot on his napkin.

“Shane?”

Marnie’s voice startled him and he jerked up. “Huh?”

“I asked if you boys worked late because I’m stealing you this week.”

“Stealing me…?”

“The grange. Is it a problem for William, you cutting hours to help me?”

The grange. That was right. The annual Stardew Valley Fair was coming up. Tomorrow was a full work day, but Thursday and Friday he’d be leaving the farm as soon as the morning chores were done. Marnie had a display and animals to prep, and, as the mayor’s girlfriend, was also helping Lewis with the business end of things. She needed Shane’s help to keep on top of the ranch. They’d discussed it weeks ago, but he’d been a little preoccupied.

“It’s fine.” He scooped mashed potatoes, not meeting her eyes.

And it was fine. He and William barely saw each other in those first hours of morning. They wouldn’t even eat lunch together, let alone have to dance around the whole drinking-after-work thing. The only downside was having to deal with him all day tomorrow, which—even before talk of the festival—his brain had conveniently blocked out.

“Well,” continued Marnie, “with all the work you’re doing for the fair, did you manage to get any more progress on that fence?”

Shane stared at his plate. Poking the chicken with his fork, he muttered, “Fence is fine too.”

Marnie shook her head. “You see, Jas? You see the wonderful conversation we’d miss out on if Uncle Shane always worked so late?”

If Uncle Shane always stayed to get wasted and have sex with his stupidly magnetic boss. Who still calls him Daniels, even after getting off together.
“It’s farm work, Marnie,” he shot. “It’s a lot of damn stuff to do in not enough daylight hours.”

She put her hands up. “All right, all right. I was only teasing.”

Shane went silent again and she let the subject drop.

The rest of the meal passed in a haze. He crammed down chicken and vegetables while Marnie and Jas discussed a school project on recycling, and how Miss Penny might get them a class pet. Their voices slipped into white noise, and they were almost done eating before Marnie spoke to him again.

“Shane.” She speared her last piece of asparagus. “Go shower if you like. I’ll clean up and get Jas ready for bed. But please don’t run and hide after, there’s something I need to discuss with you.”

He froze mid-chew.

She knew. She didn’t want to call out his depravity in front of Jas, but she knew, and was going to corner him after, disgusted and disappointed, slapping down some law about how if he wanted to remain under her roof, he’d never fucking do it again.

His final bite of food felt like swallowing a fishhook.

In the bathroom, Shane turned the showerhead to its hardest setting, only one step down from ‘power wash the deck.’ He closed his eyes. The water pounded hot enough to strip skin, and he furiously washed his body over and over, concentrating most on his stomach. Finally, slowly, he moved lower.

It wasn’t his own fingers he felt wrapping around his cock, but William’s: thick, warm, and rough.

Then something smoother slipped into the memory.

Silkier.

Scalding as the shower was, Shane shuddered and began to scrub. Hard. Like a man possessed, he scrubbed until the washcloth turned abrasive; until it burned, hot water stinging against raw skin.

He dropped the cloth, sagging against the wall.

William had turned into so many firsts. The first person to kiss him back. To touch him under his clothes. To see him fucking cum. And Shane was too goddamn stunted at thirty-one years old to enjoy how good it had felt—because it was too much, and it wasn’t enough. Too much to walk among people knowing what he’d done, unable to run from it. Not enough to just be a convenient option for William in this dick-dry town.

How did this make sense? How could he feel so fucking awful for what they’d done, yet close his eyes and wish it was more?

He dried off and gingerly pulled a sleep shirt over his red, sensitive skin.

Marnie, he remembered, in the middle of stepping into his pajama pants. They still had to talk.

Walking down the hall, he regretted his extreme shower. He was too clean and exposed now, like he’d scrubbed a hole through his skin where his aunt could see everything he was trying to hide. But it was too late for hiding, wasn’t it? She knew, and was about to sit him down for the worst conversation he’d had in over five years.
He collapsed onto the sofa. Dropping his head back, he stared at the ceiling and wished he’d shoved his fingers down his throat in the bathroom; forced himself to puke it all out, so it wouldn’t come up on the carpet the moment she started talking.

A door clicked and Marnie emerged from Jas’s bedroom.

“Jas is settled in with her books,” she said, walking over.

Shane grunted in acknowledgment, afraid to open his mouth. The cushions gave a sigh as she sat next to him, and the clock ticked several seconds into the silence.

“My mother is sick,” she announced.

Shane blinked and turned to face her. She might as well have said, ‘Congrats, Jas is a grandpa!’

“Your mother,” he repeated stupidly.

“Is sick, yes.”

This new information fought against the waves of ‘you slept with William’ still rolling through his brain; it was like trying to juggle water.

His grandma. Marnie and Corey’s mother. How old had he been the last time he’d seen her? Thirteen? Maybe fourteen? He hadn’t fucking missed her. Trudy Daniels was a nasty woman, the embodiment of every awful, entitled customer Shane had ever dealt with in retail, all balled into one bitter old lady. Someone who believed people were born to personally inconvenience her, and ought to be punished for it. Like a harpy version of his dad.

Still jarred from the fact that she hadn’t sat him down to discuss William, Shane mumbled a hollow, “Sorry.”

“She’s got cancer. It started in her lungs, and is moving to her liver now. That’s on top of the COPD, high blood pressure, and arthritis she’s had for years.”

Bitch had it coming.

“Sorry,” he repeated, the sentiment still empty.

Marnie hesitated.

“The cancer is terminal, and we’re not sure how long she’s got left,” she said. “I just found out this weekend. Phone calls.” Another hesitation. “From your dad.”

She knew she’d dropped a bomb and stayed quiet, waiting for his reaction. What she didn’t know was the bomb came in two parts, and Shane felt so sick he immediately latched onto the one less likely to make him vomit.

“Phone calls.”

“Yes,” Marnie said. “He first called on Saturday, but it didn’t seem a good time to tell you.”

Saturday. Which came after Friday, the day of their kiss in the spa. His lips brushing William’s—the flap of butterfly wings to cause a landslide. Because that’s how it worked, right? Shane had desires, and acted on them, and then the world crashed down to punish him and whomever was unlucky enough to be in his circle. He had no love lost for Trudy, but this was on him. In some web of karmic retribution, it was his fault, his actions that had summoned not just his father, but her
death.

Someone always had to die.

“Shane,” Marnie said, “I need to go see them. There are…things, to be resolved. With Mom. And Corey.”

Her words were delicate, clearly interpreting his silence as discomfort—or perhaps anger—about his father.

Which, fuck it. He could run with that.

“Money?” he shot. “Big fucking surprise.”

“What? No! Not like that. Just…he doesn’t want to leave things as they are.”

“Yeah, because he won’t get any money.”

“Because we all left on terrible terms!”

But Shane wasn’t about to let this go. The anger was a point of sharp focus amid the feelings trying to smother him, and it was easier to channel hatred toward his dad than let himself dwell on the dark swirl in his gut.

“And he wants to make things better now,” Shane said, his voice a taut wire, “so that he gets more fucking money.”

Marnie threw up her hands.

“Why are you talking about money, Shane? My mother is sick, in the hospital, and wants her children there. Corey’s been trying to get me to visit for days, but Mom’s health is so fragile. Every time we make plans the doctors change the script, saying no visitors allowed…”

Shane stared at her in disbelief. She wanted to know why he was asking about money? Oh, maybe because his dad didn’t give a flying shit about anyone in their family. Not him, not Marnie, and certainly not his dying fucking mother.

Shane hadn’t told her about the phone call two years ago. It was the only time he’d spoken to his dad since moving to the ranch. A single call: Corey trying to guilt Shane out of half his paychecks, saying he was about to lose the house. Cussing him out for ‘leaving his old man high and dry,’ as if Shane were making bank, rather than jack-fucking-minimum-wage shit.

What was this rose-tint Marnie was looking through? She’d grown up with the narcissism and abuse, too. She knew as well as Shane that Corey Daniels only cared about Corey Daniels.

The air in the room had turned ice cold.

“He wants you to visit,” Shane said, the words stretching slow over his roiling anger, “so he can benefit.”

“Yes,” Marnie shot back. “He’s trying to arrange a visit. So we can sort things out, and bring about some closure with our mother before she’s gone.”

Despite Marnie growing up as squeaky clean as a Daniels possibly could, Shane knew her home life had been rocky growing up. Just like his. In their family, it was a given that love flowed in complicated, conditional ways. He also knew the word ‘closure’ meant something very different to
her brother, and that Corey wasn’t above using it to pull on her heartstrings.

“How many times has he called?” Shane demanded.

“I don’t know. Several? She’s in terrible shape!” Marnie’s face grew ruddy from her fluster. “The doctors are being difficult, and I imagine Mom isn’t making their life a picnic either. So if she has any good days coming up, I’m going to see her.”

And him. The unspoken truth, dangling at the end of that sentence.

If his dad was hanging around a hospital every day, doing the social bidding of a dying woman, there was something in it for him. Shane would’ve wagered the rest of the ranch’s meager savings on it.

“And what would you have me do?” Marnie asked scathingly. “Ignore them both?”

“Honestly, yeah, can’t see a fucking downside to that.”

She shot up, stalking to a box of tissues across the room, snatching one to rub under her nose.

“Excuse. You.” The word was punctuated by the balled up tissue being chucked in the trash. “My mother is dying, and you of all people ought to know I am not doing this for Corey’s sake. If money does come up, then we will discuss it, end of story.”

Shane knew he was locking way too hard on this topic, but god—in all this mess, Corey’s greed was the one certainty, and he couldn’t help a cynical laugh.

“Yeah, right. Discuss it. Like adults. Bet he’s gonna be real reasonable.”

Marnie scowled. “I should not have told you.”

“No,” Shane said, standing. “You should have hung up the second you heard his stupid voice.”

He walked out, leaving her with a dozen unspoken protests on her lips.

In his bedroom Shane grabbed the bottle from his drawer. Standing over his dresser he took several long swallows, drinking as if he hadn’t drank in weeks.

Like he hadn’t just gotten piss-drunk with William that afternoon.

He flopped on his bed, open whiskey still in hand, heart racing as it all came flooding back.

They’d slept together. He’d rubbed his dick against another man’s, and fallen asleep on his sheets. And because the universe fucking knew and had to punish him, his grandmother was dying and his dad was sniffing around. Two years of radio silence and now he’d returned, on the one day his faggot son had ever seen a ray of gay sunshine. That’s what happened when Shane stupidly let himself believe he’d be allowed a bit of happiness.

His clothes rubbed against skin he’d scrubbed raw to get William off his body. It hurt.

He drank until it didn’t.
At 5:00 am, William woke up feeling like the world's biggest idiot.

The cloud of stupidity lingered as he left his guest room. Like a specter, it followed him down the hall. It hovered over his shoulder in the kitchen while feeding Ingrid. It settled against his skin, making him ache for a shower.

He drank water to combat the heavy fog in his brain, and tried to make sense of the last twenty-four hours. Nothing about his current behavior made any damn logical sense. In high school, he’d chased so much tail his friends had dubbed him the whore of Zuzu. In the army, he’d followed the trend. Coming back alive from the front lines wasn’t the miracle—it was not bringing home a string of STIs along with his war injuries. William wasn’t a stranger to momentary lust. One night stands? Check. Weekend hook-ups with guys who forgot his name later? Double check. He didn’t even remember the sea of strangers he’d partied and gotten high with during the height of his heroin usage, and tried not to think about the other bullshit decisions he’d made during that disaster spiral of his life.

But there was nothing momentary about Shane.

He turned his water temperature to two shades shy of boiling and stepped under the spray. The pounding shower burned through his hangover and morning aches. He scrubbed and examined the truths that lay stark against his clearing mind.

One, it had been more than a fucking hook-up, whatever had gone down. They’d shared things. Important things. Putting a sick dog out of his misery might seem like a one-off anecdote, yet William had felt hot blood coating his hands in a Gotoro jungle. He remembered the taste of fear as someone came at you for doing the right thing. That story brought a solidarity between them that William had not had with anyone outside the forces.

Two, the frotting? Yeah, okay, maybe last night the whiskey had made it feel like a wonderful idea. But maybe it’d been a wonderful idea for weeks. Maybe they needed the alcohol as a push; a way to break through the barriers of whatever the fuck scared Shane, and William’s own boss-employee hangups.

Three, there’d been plenty of chances to stop. Instead, Shane had returned his kisses. No matter how quickly he’d hurried home, William was positive it had been mutual. If Shane hadn’t wanted it, he could have done what he’d done in the spa: run the fuck away. Kissing back, pulling close? Exact fucking opposite of running away.

William gave an unamused glare down at his upright dick, which was remembering exactly how good they’d felt rubbed together. He turned off the water and ignored the hungry bastard. It wasn’t like listening to the head in his pants had ever led him in a good direction.

He stepped out of the shower and wiped the fog away from the mirror. The face looking back was an illusion. On the surface, his beard was a mask of wholeness. Underneath, he had deep scars from old shrapnel injuries. It was why he kept it so long. Cropping it short would reveal the furrows of white, puckered flesh. Breathing in the steam-laden air, he ran his thumb over his neck, finding the welts with long practice. Then he poured oil onto his fingers and massaged the coarse whiskers into silk.

Hiding who he was? Well, it wasn’t like Shane could judge him.
After dressing, he went to the kitchen and stared pensively at the double batch of coffee he’d brewed.

_Coffee after sex. Trying a little too hard there, Bauer._

Still, if he could rekindle even a fraction of the warmth between them last night, it might make up for the fact there’d been no time to check in. And maybe it was overkill, but what did he lose by trying? They’d had a true connection. The sex had been dynamic and intense, Shane a silent but expressive partner. It was as though his very breaths had painted a road map of what he’d wanted. William could still remember the shudders and gasps. He could, if he let himself, relive the way they’d melted into one another.

He chewed his lip, tightening the lids on the travel mugs. He’d bring it up. Allay his fear that Shane was regretting it. Which was silly; what did he have to regret?

Yesterday’s muggy oppression had turned into a chilly, damp morning. When he got to the barn he placed the coffee on an overturned crate, snapped on the radio, and got to work.

Shane arrived a little before six, and William immediately felt relieved he’d brought caffeine. He looked as though he’d slept on a bed of rocks. The bags below his eyes were darker than usual, and if he’d run a brush through his hair it didn’t show. He wore the same hoodie as yesterday, streaks of hay dust and evidence of a hard day's work on its front. With a small, non-committal noise that could have been hello, he hopped onto the line to hook up cows to the milker.

William brushed his hands off on his jeans.

Sleep deprived. Silent. Straight to business?

Was this his new M.O.? Rock a guy’s brains out, and saunter in the next morning like it was no big deal? Running home to stay under the radar was one thing, but acting as though it hadn’t been more than a handshake…

_He wants casual? Follow his lead then, asshole. Don’t tip this boat more than you already have._

William snagged the coffee mug and leaned against the last stall. In the background a woman crooned about lost love on the country radio station, her hopeless notes of longing winding around the silence. He watched Shane make his way down the end of the line, and once he was within arm’s reach William held out the mug.

"Morning," he said.

Shane glanced over his shoulder. “Uh. Morning.”

Though he accepted the offering, his face was a blank wall. He opened the thermos but didn’t drink, staring at the steam swirling out.

Unease coiled in William’s stomach.

Did Shane think if he avoided meeting his gaze, he was somehow invisible? Could he smell the desperation of ‘please still like me’ the coffee had probably been brewed with, or did he think it was just a friendly morning gesture? Or worse, was this yet another misread experience—a doomed, one-off experiment ending in ‘No thanks, not for me’?
He knew he was procrastinating. Shane was all set here and didn’t need him around. William lingered anyway, the disconnected expression pulling at him. The bruise on his cheek was vanishing fast, turning yellow, as though the impact they’d made on each other was fading.

"So," he said, slipping a hand in his pocket. "You, uh...feeling okay?"

*Because last night we had a really fucking good time, and I want to do it again.*

“Um. Yeah.” Shane stared at the mouth of his cup, tracing it with a finger. “The usual, then? Work. Just...want me to do the usual stuff?”

William squinted at him. It was an odd question. Did he think yesterday was going to mess with his job?

*This is what you get for mixing business with pleasure.*

"Yeah. Animals, then come finish up the milk processing." He fiddled with the latch on the cow enclosure. "You still going to be leaving early tomorrow to help Marnie with her grange?"

Not what he wanted to ask. Not at all. He wanted to find out if Shane was really fine. If he’d hurt him somehow. If he had a headache this morning, or regretted what they’d done. He wanted to touch him, but every word of his body language was a neon-colored 'not interested.'

Shane continued to focus on the thermos. “Yeah. Get my morning shit done, then go back at ten or eleven.”

The stiffness between them chafed William’s nerves like sandpaper. He rubbed a hand over his neck.

"Shane," he said, serious. "You don't seem okay."

Shane shook his head, putting the lid back on his mug. “Just...weird night,” he muttered, struggling to line up the grooves. "I'll start on the coops."

He walked past, still fiddling with it.

William closed his eyes.

*A weird night. What could have possibly been weird about it? It’s not like we were just, you know, together or anything.*

"Right,” he said, the word sharp against his tongue. "Well. See you after you get done, I guess."

Shane left the barn, letting his silence answer for him.

Thoughts swirling with sick disappointment, William headed for the tractor.

How many times was he going to do this? How many times was he going to think someone he got intimate with was willing to care about him beyond the initial hook-up? How many times was he going to put himself out there, let himself be used, and then be discarded?
He climbed up the seat and turned on the big machine, driving it towards the misty fields.

He'd been doing this his whole dating life. Meeting guys. Falling hard and messing it up. Not being enough.

Last night ran across his mind like a worn record, rewinding, replaying, as he tried to pinpoint when he'd ruined things.

Was it the sex? Was it after?

He bit his lip and scowled at the rows of cranberries running up the harvester, red beads sliding through the shoot. Each one was a bubble of memory, a tiny drop in a bucket destined to be jam. Just like his judgment. Smashed into a red paste. Bloody and thick, like the consequences of his choices. It would stain and leave marks. He'd scar them both when this was said and done, all because he'd tried to predict a goddamned relationship.

Too close. Too tight. Too attached.

_Cool it_, he decided. _Let him know just because you two got off, it doesn't have to be like, marriage or something._

He gripped the wheel tighter.

Yeah. Good plan. Back off. Let it settle. Prove he could give him space. Maybe it wasn't too late to salvage whatever fuck-up he'd made.

Because losing Shane wouldn't be something he'd bounce back from. Not by a longshot.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! It means so much to us to have you keep coming back. We'd love to hear your thoughts if you have time.

As always, thanks to Xylianna for her beta of this chapter.

Links to our [tumblr](#) and [discord server](#) if you'd like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is October 13th, 2-4pm PST.
Bossman

Chapter Summary

In Which There Are. Um. Attempts at Communication

Trigger Warnings:
- Cat shaming
- Lewis
- Crimes against chickens

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane had slept like shit.

He’d awoken to his alarm screaming red noise. The uncapped whiskey sat on his bedside table, its line of liquid far lower than he remembered. His t-shirt had been gross and clammy from sweating through the night, only one thought beating through his hungover head: you have to face William. And though a dozen clean shirts hung in his closet, he’d plucked his dirty work hoodie off the floor and struggled into its wadded sleeves.

Now here he was on the farm, looking like yesterday’s garbage.

It’d always worked when he was younger, dressing this way. Keeping his head down. Making himself invisible, like a piece of litter on the sidewalk; if anyone did see him it was only to wrinkle their nose and move on. William was too kind to look at him in disgust, but imitating a dumpster had still done its job—he hadn’t tried to touch Shane today.

“BACAAAW!”

Shane’s bucket of water splashed to the ground as a flurry of feathers shot out from under his boot. Soaked, he stood with his heart slamming.

He’d stepped on a chicken.

He’d fucking stepped on one of William’s chickens.

The scandalized bird had taken off, head bobbing, parting the sea of her sisters. Shane shook himself from the shock, and despite the beady look of loathing—which most of the birds reserved for William—he chased her down, scooping her up to check her feet. All chicken toes intact. More scared than injured, it seemed.

He released her and sank to the freshly swept floor, elbows on knees. Closing his eyes, he dug fingers through his grimy hair. It could’ve used another wash this morning, but just like with the dirty clothes he’d said fuck it.

He’d known the danger of thinking of William as a friend. Not acquaintance, or coworker, or a family member he’d been dumped on whether through birth or circumstance. Nope. A friend: someone who had no obligation to put up with his ass, and chose to anyway. And Shane was the
worst type of person, because he couldn’t have just friends. Friends showed him attention and treated him kindly, and then he fell in love with them for it.

Not that this was love. Shane knew love, every hill and valley of that soul-sucking solo journey, and he and William weren’t in love. They barely fucking knew each other. They’d been working together what, a month? Probably the only reason they’d even hooked up was the size of this town, William starved for companionship and taking his kicks where he could find them. So no, this wasn’t love. But it was attention, and kindness, and Shane had seen all the warning signs and gone ahead with it anyway. This was on him. Any disaster that came from it, on him. And now it was on him to keep William safe—far fucking away from Shane’s minefield of an existence, especially with Corey nosing around.

He caged his head between his elbows, blocking out the cheerful sounds of the coop, staring into blackness until the worst of the wave had passed.

It took until noon to finish with the animals, far longer than most days, though at least he didn’t step on any more. The sun was directly overhead and Shane glanced at the farmhouse, half-blinded and feeling sick. Did he really need lunch? Food sounded as appetizing as tar, but he knew if he didn’t show William would come find him anyway.

Somehow his feet carried him out of the barn and up to the porch. He stood in the doorway to the kitchen, watching with dread as William pulled leftovers from the fridge.

He shifted his weight, creaking one of the floorboards, and William turned at the noise. He acknowledged Shane with a nod then headed to the microwave where he popped in the container and programmed the time.

“Everything good on the animal front?” he asked, leaning against the counter and slipping his hands in his pockets.

Shane took a seat at the table. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “The usual.”

The plate rotated and hummed in the microwave. William didn’t try to make any more small talk as it cooked, and after a few tense minutes the appliance beeped. He sat beside Shane and separated the brick of pasta into two portions, stabbing his own so that red tomato sauce oozed out.

“Look,” William said, watching it steam. “About last night…"

Don’t do this. Don’t do this. Don’t do this.

Shane twirled a bite of pasta. “Yeah. Sorry.”

William frowned, poking at his brick again. “Why do you keep saying sorry? You keep apologizing, but…you didn’t do anything wrong.” He looked up. “I get it. You aren’t ready to be out yet.”

Shane felt like his eyes were made of lead, weighted to the plate in front of him. He was glad it was pasta today. Something to fidget with.

“Look,” he said, moving a noodle from one side to the other. “I’m not gonna let it fuck up my work.”

“Shane, I didn’t mean that. I never said you would.” In his peripheral vision, Shane could see William tugging on the knot in his hair. “I’m not going to push, okay? Yesterday was amazing. But it doesn’t have to be like that all the time.”
But it will be some of the time.

William didn’t understand. For Shane, it didn’t work that way. He couldn’t do these things and expect everything to be fine. And sure, let him tell his dad he was only gay some of the time—see how well that fucking panned out.

His heart pounded, swishing through his ears like the static inside a seashell, but William didn’t press any more. The rest of the meal passed in silence, nothing between them but the lowing of cows drifting in through an open window. By the time he finished eating Shane had started to hope they might drop the subject for the rest of the day, but as he was carrying his dirty plate to the sink William snagged his wrist.

“Hey,” he said, squeezing. “It was good, right? That’s not in my head?”

Blue eyes bored into him. Like a clap of thunder, Shane felt everything at once: from the first wrist grab all those weeks ago, to the drunken stumbling last night that had led to lying in William’s bed, gazing up at his swimming face. This parade of moments stampeded through the blockades he’d spent all morning propping up, revealing them for the flimsy fucking things they were, and he didn’t want to feel hopeful, but oh god—in that moment he was, hope was there, battering him with its stupid wings of ‘maybe’—

Rat tatta-tat tat, tat TAT!

Shane yanked his hand from William’s grip, heart beating a blistering rhythm as both their gazes shot to the door.

He knew that knock. That extravagant, fancy, signature fucking knock.

“William!” called a muffled voice. “Lewis here! Ready to discuss the fair!”

Everyone always wanted to be a damn hero. As though it'd fix their lives. As though the prestige and glory of hero-ing would improve any shitstain existence. As though it was something worth striving for. William had some bad fucking news: all it did was make things more complicated.

When he was twenty-four, the military had given him awards for hero-ing. A few months ago, Pelican Town had gifted a damn trophy for the same thing. He’d stowed the fucking eyesore in a shed, and if he’d known what was coming he would have turned it down. Instead, he'd gotten pulled into every major event their little village elected to hold. No one ever told you that when you became the Town Hero, you were as much of a figurehead as any pageant princess.

Which was why Mayor Lewis was at his farm in the middle of a Wednesday, tapping “Shave and a Haircut” on the door and interrupting the most important conversation he'd had all day.

William let go of Shane at the same time he pulled away, the jerk of his hand burning like ripped duct tape.

This. Fucking. Sucked.

But what could be done? He’d promised discretion, hadn’t he?
Fuck his big fucking mouth and shitty-ass promises.

Mayor Lewis was a rotund senior citizen with a bushy gray beard. Jovial and full of stories about Pops, he’d been a friendly presence ever since William had moved to the little hamlet. Other than a raised eyebrow over foul language here and there, and one unfortunate incident with Morris, the mayor had always been cordial. William appreciated his genuine and cheerful nature.

Even though he was a nosy little gossip.

"Hey Lewis," he greeted, opening the door. "Me and Shane were finishing our lunch break. Come on in."

Lewis beamed, stepping inside. He carried a clipboard in one hand, his other hooked into brown suspenders that matched the newsboy cap he always wore on official 'business.' If grandfather benevolence were distilled into an essence, Lewis would be on the label of the bottle.

"Shane! Guess I should've expected you," he said. "Still not used to you working outside of Joja. Blame the senior citizen brain. Can never keep up with you young folk."

Shane nodded at Lewis without speaking, his expression flat as a pancake. He turned his back, shoveling in his final three bites of food while walking to the sink.

Lewis peered around the dining area and living room, his tongue giving an appreciative click. “You’ve certainly dossed this place up since Joseph lived here!” He faced William, squeezing the clipboard flush to his chest. “Didn’t mean to interrupt your lunch, son. But perhaps when you’re done here, we can get down to some business about the festival.”

Behind them water ran in the sink, Shane a stormy shadow ploughing through the chore. His farmhand ignored Lewis with the studied purposefulness Ingrid used when angry at him for coming home late. William’s eyes ping-ponged between them.

"That is some bad fucking blood on his end."

He’d ask later.

He hooked his thumb toward the back of the house. "Got the list of farmers who gave me their confirmations in my office. C'mon. I'm done here." He put a hand on Lewis’s shoulder—all the better to keep him out of areas he didn’t belong. "Daniels, once you get that handled, go out and finish unloading the bins from the tractor. When I’m done with the mayor I'll meet you in the barn for afternoon milking."

“Got him doing dishes, eh?” Lewis chuckled. “Should get me a farmhand! Didn't know they came with those kinda benefits."

William gave a tight smile.

Don’t help me Lewis. I can dig my own damn grave here.

“Shall we?” he asked.

Lewis tapped a cheerful pattern on the clipboard with his pen. "Righteo, Farmer Bill. Onward."

William’s eyebrow twitched at the moniker, but he let it pass.

The office had not been touched by his mother. The desk in the corner was an antique he’d restored
last winter. The walls were paneled with dark-stained wood. Despite them, he’d chosen light-colored furniture. Squashy chairs and a bookshelf of curated agricultural texts rounded out the decor. It faced west, and in the evenings when he was totaling out his final harvest counts, fire-orange sunsets soaked the room in warmth.

William sat down behind his desk, gesturing to one of the two leather arm chairs. It felt weird to have company in here; normally only his accountant, lawyer, or the tax man came to visit.

He retrieved the forms he’d collected from his Monday deliveries.

"Alright," he said, fanning them out, then stacking them tight before handing them over. "Forty confirmed registrations. Their checks are clipped to the top of the paperwork."

Lewis ruffled through the sheets. "Good, good, good," he murmured, white head bobbing like a dashboard accessory. He looked up after the last form. "What did we ever do before you came around? Why, that's at least a dozen more than last year!"

If William couldn't win the grange competition, he'd at least won connections within the local farming district. Selling out of his truck at the different farmer’s markets had made it possible to spread the word about Stardew Valley’s most lucrative event, and in the last two years they’d doubled the turn-out and participation. Small communities like Pelican Town didn’t have very high taxes, and depended on the boost in tourism during those annual festivals. That increase helped pay for the maintenance of the community center William had rebuilt—no point in fixing up the damn place if they couldn't keep it in good repair. He didn't appreciate being called the Town Hero, but it did make him proud to see how a little organization had improved what was around him.

Lewis was still shaking his head in disbelief. "At this rate, we'll have to redo the set-up to make room for an extra row. I suppose that'll be a job for your farmhand! He's helping Marnie and me with the preparations Sunday." He looked up. "Working out well for you boys down here? Can't say I've ever met an employee quite like that, but looks like this arrangement is turning out fine."

Internally, William’s hackles raised. Shane had issues with communication, but in terms of work he was as good as any soldier he’d ever been stationed with. Better than others. He closed up the accordion folder, eyebrow climbing.

**What fresh hell is this old lady about to spew?**

"Employee like what, Lewis?" he asked mildly.

“O-oh!” Lewis stammered, backpedaling. "I just meant your meeting—down at the saloon. Never saw the likes of it, an employer finding their worker in a bar fight." He waved his hand, as though he could erase any negative connotations from the air.

So that was it. Did nothing in this town get forgotten? No, of course not, and William would probably be reminded of that fistfight from now until he died.

Despite the inevitability of the rumor mill, he wasn’t about to take it lying down. He held Lewis’s eyes.

"Lemme set you straight. I mean, you'll understand, being that a guy like you has lived and seen the world, right? It's like this. Two guys have a disagreement. They work it out. The end."

He let the silence stretch, his face hard before leaning forward with a crooked grin, all tension melting out of him.
"What's more impressive, is how much you've grown this town. Pops would have been impressed. I made the contacts, but it was Pelican Town's sterling reputation that sealed the deal. Add on the good review the Governor gave us last summer for the Luau you planned? Piece of cake."

Lewis inhaled with pride as he spoke, because at the heart of it, men like Lewis always wanted to be praised. William had seen it dozens of times growing up. The way to make someone forget about unpleasantness wasn’t to harp on it, but to redirect.

"Awfully kind of you to say so, William," Lewis said, chuffed. "But you know as well as I how it feels, seeing this little town grow. The strides you've made, the people you've helped. Were I a younger man, I'd have to keep a sharp eye on my job around you! And who knows, maybe old Joe's grandson might have some political blood after all. I won't be around forever."

_I would rather be dipped in boiling oil_, William thought, keeping his relaxed pose at the desk.

He’d have to be careful his mother never got near Mayor Lewis. While his parents supported his endeavors, having their son be a politician—even a politician in a podunk, nowhere-community like Pelican Town—would be the jewel in their crown.

Lewis flipped through a few of the papers again, skimming them over. "Let's hope some of these folks have an artistic eye. Would love for the Fair to make as big a splash in the papers as the Luau." He looked up. "Any idea what your display'll be?"

Back on safer ground.

"Now, that could be telling." William knocked his fist once on the desk. "I finished up my first Oktoberfest blend. Pierre and Gus won’t be serving it until after the fair, but you want to take a case home on your way out?"

Lewis stood, grinning with an unspoken, _you sly old dog_. He offered a hand for William to shake.

"I might just have to take you up on that! So long as it stays between you and me, lad." He winked. "I've got judging to do at this fair—can't be seen accepting bribes."

"Oh Lewis," William said, shaking the proffered hand, "have I ever been one to tell a man's secret?"

When they emerged from the office, Shane was gone. He’d left a clean kitchen in his wake, the dishes stacked on the counter. William pulled out a cardboard sleeve filled with beer, the ‘Bowery Brews’ logo on the side.

"Here you are," he said, setting it down. "One six-pack for a family friend."

"Much appreciated. I'd be the envy of the boys, if I could tell them." Lewis picked up the beer, drawing his thumb and index finger across his mouth in an invisible zipper.

William was reminded of his own secrets. If Lewis knew for one minute what was going on, it’d be in the ears and mouths of everyone in their tiny town. Too many people knew each other’s dirty laundry out here.

"Now don't forget, set-up starts bright and early Monday, 6:00 am. And thanks again." Lewis lifted his arm with the clipboard, stepping onto the threshold. "Don't see Shane around anymore. Say goodbye to him for me, will ya? And if you don't mind, maybe let him know I'll be there for dinner at the ranch tonight." He tilted his chin down, lowering his voice. "Between you and me, that one isn't much for surprises."
William kept his face smooth and nodded, walking him to his truck and waving him off down the dirt road. He sighed, rubbing his neck, looking back out at the barns. As the dust behind Lewis's truck settled, his anxiety rose.

"Sure, Lewis," he muttered, "Shane is clearly your biggest fan. I'll get right on that."

Feeding rye into the thresher was the best job for Shane’s current mood. It was noisy. It was distracting. And unlike milking cows or counting eggs, it was violent. All Shane had to do was put in stalks and lean back, old-fashioned levers chugging, the heavy machine rattling grain from the chute like it was shaking down lunch money.

He stared at the mess of loose bits that had flown to the ground. That stupid arm grab. One touch, and Shane had almost lost sight of what a bad fucking idea it was to let William near him.

_It was good yesterday, right? That's not in my head?_

How was he supposed to answer that?

_Yes William, it was good. Until after, when it fucking sucked and made me feel like an empty, homesick void._

William hadn’t fucking signed up for this. Shane hadn’t given him any warning of what a self-loathing leech he’d become after being shown the tiniest scraps of affection. There wasn’t a sane person in the world who got into a drunken hook-up looking for thirty-one years of baggage to rifle through, and William being horny and kind wasn’t permission for Shane to throw his entire grotesque existence on him.

And god, they’d been so close to getting caught, hadn’t they? Lewis knew William was gay. They’d discussed it over dinner, a few days before Shane started work at The Bowery. It felt so long ago. Yet if Lewis—mayor of Pelican Town and a bigger gossip than the tabloids—found out, wouldn’t it be Shane’s sexuality they were discussing at family meals? Or maybe it’d be a hot topic at the next Community Center meeting. Perhaps an announcement in the paper, alongside the births and engagements: _Local Farmhand Finds Solace in Farmer Boss._ Then, a few weeks later in the obituaries: _Relationship Dies When Farmhand is Outed as Asshole Drunk Who Can Barely Tie His Gay Shoelaces._

The more space they kept, the fucking better. The less people knew about them, the fucking better. The sooner they forgot about all this shit, and went back to just working on the farm like William was paying him for? The fucking better.

Lewis’s arrival was a blessing. Nip that shit in the bud, hard and fast.

The thresher rumbled at Shane’s side, the noise growing metallic and hollow as it ate the bulk of the last load. He swapped the full bag for an empty one, then tossed another armful of rye onto the belt.

He tried to focus on the work, but of course, that was another crash-and-burn endeavor.

He’d hated Lewis. What he lacked in discretion for others’ business, he kept for himself in spades. He’d dated Marnie in secret for over a year before having the balls to be open, all because he was a
man of position, and wanted his business away from the gossip-stained spotlight until ‘sure’ the relationship would stick. Yet how was Shane any different? A few days ago William had asked if he wanted to hang out after the granges were done. Secretly, because he knew Shane was ashamed. And he couldn’t even do that. If anything, he was worse than Lewis: ashamed not just in public but in private as well.

Leaning back with his hand on the lever, he stared at the grains waterfalling into the new sack. When it was half full, he heard the barn door roll open.

William stepped inside.

“Safe now,” he said. “Lewis is gone.”

As if resuming a normal workday he got right to business, picking up one of the feed bags, sealing it, and hauling it to a pallet set up for transport.

Shane grunted in affirmation, looking back at the chute.

William lifted the next bag. “You don’t seem to like Lewis that much.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, staring at the machine as if his focus was the only thing keeping it running. “I don’t.”

“Welp, that’s a fucking shame.”

“Like my opinion matters.”

“I was just thinking that since he was going to be eating dinner at your place tonight, hating his guts might make digestion difficult.”

At this Shane jerked his head up.

Mistake.

William had finished dropping off his second bag to the pallet, and now stood with his beautiful, colorful arms crossed over his chest. He stared at Shane through a lock of blond hair, escaped from his topknot.

“Great,” Shane muttered, turning back to the machine as his stomach twisted.

Having Lewis for dinner was not a noteworthy occurrence anymore. He ate at the ranch at least once a week. Still, when everything else was so slippery, it was a safe and familiar irritation to cling to.

“I didn’t tell him, if that’s what you’re worried about,” William said, voice tight as he headed for another bag. “He didn’t see anything. God, Lewis is so obsessed with what’s going on for his prestige, it’s not like he’d notice if you waved a pride flag under his nose.”

Despite the mess in his brain—or perhaps because of it—Shane almost laughed. Because that’s what they always called it, didn’t they? Pride. Maybe in his next fucking lifetime.

He reached for another armful of stalks. “Yeah well, he’s like a goddamn male Marnie, so excuse me for not wanting shit to go around.”

William glared.
“Jeez, Shane. No fucking trust.” He shoved him on the shoulder before grabbing the next bag.

“Didn’t say you were gonna spill,” Shane said, frustration burning through him at the touch. “Said I didn’t want him seeing it. Fuck.”

William tied the threads tight and chucked the sealed feed onto the pallet.

“What is your fucking problem today?” he snapped. “God. What did I fucking do to piss you off so bad that you have to be a goddamned storm cloud all over the place?”

Shane yanked the handle of the machine to a hard stop.

“Did I say you pissed me off?” he spat into sudden silence. “No. Maybe I’m fucking pissed off at myself. Maybe I’m pissed off at Lewis. Maybe I had a bad fucking night. So just let me do my job, and then I won’t bother you again, bossman.”

William’s eyes narrowed. As they did, any warmth was sucked from the barn.

“Alright, Daniels,” he said, slapping the side of the machine. “You wanna play like that? Fine. Finish stacking that damn pallet, and when you’re done, I want you to clean every single fucking one of the vehicles in the equipment barn. And if that shit doesn’t wear out your anger issues, you can report to the dairy barn and clean the hoses.”

With that he turned, flipping Shane off and stalking out.

Shane stared after him.

His heart was slamming, ramping up with the same red-hot, combustive energy that formed every time things got heated between them. They couldn’t go more than a few days without hitting the worst of each other’s buttons, could they? When things were crap, they pushed those buttons. When things were going well, same story. He couldn’t fucking stop himself from starting shit with William.

And it was easier. Easier than looking in his stupid face and saying, “I have feelings for you, and I don’t fucking want to.” Easier than thinking about the touches they’d shared in that dim, cool bedroom, or the inevitable end to this. Through rejection, death, or anything between, Shane knew he would never be allowed to keep something as good as William in his life. That was what the universe had reminded him of last night. Dad’s phone call, his grandmother’s death sentence, those empty fucking feelings after sex: all smacks on the wrist by nature’s wooden ruler.

Well, if it wanted to punish him, at least it had William’s help this time.

He booted the thresher back into gear, drowning his thoughts in the noise.

When the grain was done he went straight to the equipment barn. William wanted to make him pay for being a shit? Good. Let him focus on the only thing he was capable of—being alone, and doing mindless fucking work.

He dug into the grooves of the tractor, loosening mud and farm debris that had caked into compost between them. He scrubbed every surface, every corner and cranny, right down to the treads of the tires that would fill up with dirt again the first time they left the barn. The brush soothed him with each stroke until the anger began to subside, until the washing was more meditative than cathartic.

Three hours later and he’d finished. Exhausted, he tossed his polishing rag to a side table, then leaned against it and stared at the sparkling vehicles. There was no energy left to keep carrying the
storm cloud William had accused him of.

He’d lost track of time when a meow pierced the air. It was a thin, delicate sound, one that matched the clearer air on this side of the argument. Moments later, William’s cat slunk out from under some crates in the back, body swaying.

Swaying a lot.

Shane hadn’t seen much of Ingrid lately, other than a glimpse now and then across the fields. It was the first time he’d seen her up close in weeks, and now she rolled her body against his ankles in greeting.

Her ridiculously fat, pregnant body.

William finished the afternoon milking alone. He inspected each heifer as he did, losing himself in the lowing of fifteen hundred-pound bovines. It became a pattern for every cow: take out a checklist, scan her ear, scratch down the column of health points, move onto the next. As soon as the checklists were complete, he heaved feed into the bins. It was soothing to punch open the chutes, letting the girls in and out, only to repeat the process with the next batch. Solo, the job took a little over two hours.

When he got to the processing barn he scrubbed up, meticulous as he pulled on the rubber gloves and apron that were a health requirement to handling raw dairy product. He hung the used hoses to the side for Shane to handle whenever he marched his rude ass into the barn.


Boss. Man.

Not William. Because he’d mucked this up, hadn’t he? Just fucking slammed a hammer down onto something beautiful and delicate, all because of an in-the-moment impulse that he’d thought was mutual.

Bad fucking night.

What did Shane want? What was he doing here? On the one hand, at least he’d shown up this morning. On the other hand, he’d shown up looking like shit. Same clothes from yesterday. Sullen glares. One word responses.

After he’d raced out like his ass was on fire, William had focused on the logical comfort that Shane had a family to hide his secrets from. Let he who had never rushed out the door after sex cast the first stone. But how the hell could he keep justifying that last night had been good, when here they were, morning after, and Shane couldn’t fucking look at him?

Because he regrets the whole damn thing.

The pasteurizer made a protesting groan when William smashed the kill-switch harder than necessary. He dragged the stainless steel canisters to the side, letting them screech their resistance against the wooden floor, and began to scrub.
Facts were, they were circling a drain of hopelessness. Whatever had happened after last night, Shane had some of that fuckshit he’d warned him about swirling around in his brain like a goddamned tornado. The only question was, what could he do to salvage anything between them?

He had no idea.

Halfway through sanitizing the metallic jars, Ingrid came waddling into the barn. She purred as she ran up against his legs, then flopped underneath the sink, rolling against the warm pipes. Behind them, the door creaked.

Shane hovered at the entrance like a guilty spectre.

He was filthy, grease stains on his clothing. Fifty dollars said if William went to check, his equipment would be sparkling. Once again he’d done what he was told; at least if he was going to be an asshole after sex, he wasn’t going to quit giving it one hundred percent on the job.

Yippee.

He returned to scrubbing, waiting for him to say something, keeping an eye glued to the mirrored finish of the canister.

Shane cleared his throat.

William glanced over his shoulder. When that got him no response he looked back to the milk pail, hanging it up on one of the long hooks for drying. Irritation rolled through his fingers as he jerked the next canister into the scrub sink.

"Speak," he ordered, shoving the rough sponge harder against the stainless steel.

"Um. Congratulations."

“Congratulations?”

“Your cat…”

“What about her?”

Shane shifted his feet. “You know she’s pregnant, right?”

He dropped the canister on the hook with a clang.

"Wait," he said, the words slamming through his build-up of frustration like a bulldozer. "What?"

That first night at the bar, Shane had thumped him between his eyes. Here he was doing it again, derailing one train of thought and setting it up on an entirely new set of tracks.

"Your cat," Shane said, "is fucking huge. She seen a vet or anything yet?"

His cat. They’d been together last night, and Shane was worried about the cat.

He frowned and dried his hands, eyeing the tabby butterball as she idly flipped her paws over a beetle.

"Don't fat-shame my cat. She eats a lot is all."

That earned him a look of disbelief.
“Like what? Another litter of kittens?” Shane asked.

William squinted at Ingrid, who was now on her back, stretching, belly bulging.

“Are you sure? Because...she's the only cat around here.” He scratched his head then squatted down. “Ingrid, you little ho. Did you get knocked up?”

He held a hand out and she nuzzled his fingers.

“Yeah, news flash. They're never the 'only cat' when you keep 'em outside." Shane shoved his hands deeper in his pockets, staying back near the entrance.

William kept petting her, and sure enough, her belly wasn’t the soft fatty chub of obesity: there was a firmness to her midsection that warned of impending furry babies. His mind raced over his schedule and when he could take her in. Was there a small animal vet close by? Maybe in Victory? No, wait—Poplarville was closer. They had a clinic. He’d call his cattle doc for a recommendation.

“Well fuck, Ingrid,” he muttered. "How long until your hooker ass pops, huh?"

As if she understood him, Ingrid flattened her ears.

William looked at Shane, mystified. "How long do you think—"

He sucked back a curse when sharp teeth bit his fingers. As he pulled the wounded hand away, Ingrid darted off. The traitorous little shit curled around Shane’s feet, a lofty look of superiority on her striped face.

Shane leaned down, offering her his hand to smell. She shoved her shoulder and head against it, rubbing his wrist as if he were the only one who understood her.

"She's pretty close,” he said. “You only got a few weeks."

William stood and crossed over. Shane wasn’t looking at him, all his focus on Ingrid and her affectionate dance for attention. She’d never taken to William that way.

"You're really good with them” he said. “The animals."

Shane shrugged. "Easier than people."

*Easier than me.*

William squatted again. "She going to be okay like, giving birth all over the place? She going to know what to do and shit?"

During his first dairy cow birthing season, he’d lost a young heifer who had no idea what to do. He’d been just as panicked as she was, and a knot of fear went through him at the thought of losing Ingrid the same way.

"She ever been knocked up before?” Shane asked, standing.

William shook his head. "Nah, never."

"Just, get a vet visit. See how many you're in for. And you should lock her up if you wanna actually see the kittens once they're born. She'll hate you for it, but..." He glanced at the bit finger. "Doesn't seem to care for you anyway."
Looking up at him through a lock of hair, William said, “She’s not the only one.”

Shane rubbed his neck. "Come on…"

"Yeah? C'mon and do what? Accept my fuzzy, street-walking daughter and unexpected grand-kittens? Or c'mon and forget it because you're done being an asshole?"

"Wouldn't hold my breath," Shane muttered.

Well, wasn’t that just a kick in the nuts. Expected. But it still made his dick curl up and retreat.

He blew out a breath, focusing on Ingrid’s sleepy face. “The equipment is finished?”

Leaning back against the sink, Shane crossed his arms. "Yeah."

Frustration, previously shot down by Ingrid’s condition, welled up all over again. He didn’t understand why every time things started to go well between them, somehow he found a way to gum up the works.

First, Shane had lost his shit at the spa. Fucker hadn’t even accepted his own sexuality, and there William was pushing the issue. Second, they’d had that fight at the fence. Being an in-control and seductive genius, he’d responded maturely by smashing Shane’s face. No matter how right those earthquake explosions felt at the time, it was clear from the after-shakes that they couldn’t keep losing control. It wasn’t fixing what was between them. Third, and finally, there’d been last night. No matter how orgasmic it was on his side, drunk, mutual masturbation had been a disaster for Shane, setting off some unknown mental landmine.

He could not keep pushing if he didn’t want to shove Shane out of his reach forever.

“Thanks,” William said, scrubbing a hand through his sweaty hair. “Look. Call me stupid, but I’m getting the feeling you’re not ready to talk to me about yesterday.”

If Shane registered what he’d said, he gave no indication, his green eyes locked to the floor. William wondered if there were some answers there. If so, it’d be fucking nice if he’d share them out. Any warmth he’d had from Ingrid was gone the moment William pointed at the pink, gay elephant in the room.

“Nothing to talk about,” Shane said at last. “We…did a thing. And now we’re working. This is about her.” He jerked his head toward Ingrid, though his eyes remained on the wooden planks and bits of straw that thatched across them.

A thing.

Not a land mine. Not even a mistake. Just an object of no consequence.

It wasn’t the first time William had been someone’s thing. A fling they’d woken up from and left without a second look; hurried buckles and brief thanks before going about life. It wasn’t as though they needed to be more, but it stung hearing the words drip from Shane’s mouth. He’d been convinced after everything that happened that he was different.

When he’d been young, defensive vitriol would have poured out of his lips faster than a thought could form. He’d curbed some of that in boot camp, but fuck if Shane hadn’t been able to pull out the worst of his temper these last few weeks.

Not today.
“Right,” William said, fingers running through Ingrid’s fur. “There is some shit I want to talk about, but…” He raised his head. “It can wait, at least until after the fair. Tomorrow and Friday you’ll be working half days. Won’t even have to look at my face. Should suit you fine.”

He got to his feet, scooping up Ingrid, who liked that about as well as getting a bath.

Shane lingered by the sink a few more seconds. Finally he rubbed a hand over his nose and pushed off the back.

“Yeah, well. I’m done here tonight anyway,” he said, and without another look at William walked out of the barn, staring at the ground the whole way.

William wasn’t going to watch him go. Nope. Not to-fucking-day. Because it felt like that’s all he did lately: stood there with his thumb up his ass while Shane shambled off, full of loathing towards him.

Not that he hadn’t done everything in the world to deserve it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for another week! We appreciate you all so, so much. We’d love to hear anything, big or small, that you liked about the chapter.

Xylianna is the best Xylianna for her betaing. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you’d like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is October 27th, 2-4pm PST.
Chapter Summary

In Which William Was So Freaking Out Of Bounds

Trigger Warnings:
- Hot tubs
- Undisclosed intel
- Graphic coughing

Real trigger warnings: continued mentions of cancer

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane’s life had been a broken record for years. It played a bleak song that popped and crackled, the melody distorted, the needle sticking. It grated on the nerves of anyone unfortunate enough to listen. Yet it was familiar; he could stumble through its exhausting and repetitive dance blindfolded.

William had changed the tune, and Shane had lost the beat. His legs were twisting. Every other step had him on the ground.

For so long, his heart had belonged solely to a dead man. It’d been locked safe inside a vault, unchanged, stuck in time. The pain? The pain he understood. The pain made fucking sense, unlike whatever the hell this was with William.

In over a month of working for him, Shane had never left the farm sober. Whether one beer or half a dozen shots of whiskey, they drank at quitting time. Sometimes in peace. Sometimes hovering on the edge of a blow-up. Occasionally like old friends, but more and more often like new lovers. Today, for the first time, they hadn’t: William had carried his pregnant cat inside, and then Shane had walked home, thoughts tangled with a bitter new refrain.

Tomorrow and Friday you’ll be working half days. Won’t even have to look at my face. Should suit you fine.

He couldn’t wait to go to his room, sit back with his whiskey, and drink until he had blessed silence. Because boozing on his own—that was something else that made fucking sense.

Except instead of blessed silence, he was ambushed when he entered the ranch.

“Mr. Daniels!” Jas cried, springing out from behind a tall potted plant. “Mr. Daniels, tell us about your new movie!”

She held a chunky, lime-green camera to her eye and began to spam the shutter, one tiny finger clicking rapid-fire while hunkering down in front of him to get better angles.

Shane froze as if she’d shot bullets.
“Jas,” Marnie chided, “let him through the door.”

She took a few steps back, still snapping away like a pint-size paparazzi.

Shane managed to unfreeze enough to pull off his shoes. In a soft voice, he asked, “Where’d you get that, kid?”

“It’s Vincent’s! It takes real pictures.” She stopped shooting long enough to show him the digital display on the back. “See?”

Shane stared down at the blurry man in the most recent photo, swallowing a lump of déjà vu. “Nice.”

With a smirk she pulled the camera away, blinding him once more with the flash before darting into the living room. He closed his eyes, spots like glowing saucers stuck behind his lids.

Garrett used to torture him like this, too.

Shane had told Jas lots of things about her dad. His obsession with music, and the collection that once filled his bedroom floor to ceiling. That he’d loved to play team sports, especially gridball and hockey. How, just like Jas, his curiosity had him flitting from interest to interest, dabbling in everything from rock climbing to metal detecting. Yet the hobby Garrett gave a real damn about, the only one to stick beyond the moment of ‘shiny and new,’ Shane had never mentioned.

For years, Garrett played it off as a joke. One his short-attention-spanned ass had kept for an uncharacteristically long time, but a joke nonetheless. Day after day, he’d pop out from behind furniture and doors to take horrible candid photos: Shane glaring, Shane blinking, Shane shoving food into his mouth.

Then one day, he’d stumbled upon a hidden folder in Garrett’s computer, simply labeled, “Shane.” Hundreds of beautifully composed shots. Not grabbed while goofing off, or trying to get a rise out of how much Shane hated having his picture taken. Just pure fucking artwork, images so lovely that even with his face in the frame, Shane couldn’t hate them. It was like the obnoxious behavior had been a decoy; like he knew Shane would never let him appreciate a serious photo if he was the subject, and so had to steal them.

Then Garrett’s dad—the man who’d introduced him to his DSLR—had died.

Then the photography died.

Then Garrett.

Like always when Shane finally put him out of his head, Jas had resurrected his ghost.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Shane blinked.

He was still on the welcome mat. Marnie had been staring at him like she wanted to speak, but at the buzzing swiveled her head toward the laundry room.

“My dryer,” she said, and bustled out.

It was like a record scratch from Garrett’s song to William’s: back to present madness. Everything returned. The kitchen and its walls. The tension of his and Marnie’s fight the night before. The
click of the camera as Jas shot porcelain horses on the living room shelf. Strongest of all, the ball of regret and confusion in his stomach.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Shane went to his bedroom. When he caught sight of his clear reflection in the mirror—rather than the fuzzy silhouette of a poorly-timed photograph—he realized why Marnie had stared. Covered in grease, sweat, dirt, and stains, he looked like he’d worked for days without a proper shower. His eyes were so worn and red they were practically begging for a drink.

Which wasn’t a bad idea.

He grabbed pajama pants and fresh boxers, then slid over a cluster of socks to reveal the collection at the bottom of his drawer. The pint bottle was full so he tucked it atop his stack of clothes before heading to the bathroom. Whiskey shot warmth down his throat as he ran hot water; steam filled the room as he undressed.

He stared at his naked body in the mirror.

*I see you.*

Turning from the loathed image, Shane stepped into the shower. Heat rose in clouds around him and he closed his eyes, rinsing the layer of dried sweat.

Did things always begin with steamy water?

He remembered it like it was last week. A brand new hot tub, installed when Claudia Prevost had been about to embark on a month-long business trip and wanted to assuage the guilt of leaving her son—as if remaining home implied she was somehow more present. It was bullshit. Shane’s parents might’ve been garbage, but Garrett’s had been ghosts. The only difference between an “at home” workaholic parent and “on location” one was the elaborate gifts that sprang up. If Shane recalled correctly, the several thousand dollar camera had been one of those gifts, too.

It’d been just before Spirit’s Eve, the air cold enough for snow.

“*We’re trying out the hot tub tonight,*” Garrett had said.

When Shane resisted, saying he didn’t *do* hot tubs, Garrett had hit him back with, “EVERYBODY DOES HOT TUBS, SHANE!” as he darted from the room to fill it up.

And that had been that. Shane found himself in that rolling, bubbling water in only his swim trunks on a freezing autumn night. It was pitch dark, just the whirlpool lights glowing on the balcony. Except for Garrett’s music drifting from inside, it was silent: an empty house, the yard so big even the neighbors felt distant. Garrett’s tight, athletic body sat next to Shane’s softness as they passed a joint back and forth.

At sixteen, it was Shane’s first experience with pot. Years down the road, smoking would give him some of the most intense anxiety of his life, but that first time had been magic. The gradual, giddy come-up. The body waves in time with the music, and the way it made talking so fucking easy.

He’d been nervous climbing into that water, but after twenty minutes, deep in the haze of the high, it was just...*Garrett.* His best friend. They’d talked non-stop, smiling until their faces hurt, more connected and in tune than ever.

Garrett told Shane he’d never felt closer to someone in his life.

Shane told Garrett he didn’t care about anyone except him.
His heart had raced to say it, but that night, Shane believed to his bones Garrett had wondered if they could be more than friends. After they’d confessed, Garrett’s arm had reached behind him, pulling his head closer, resting it against his shoulder in the dark—a moment that stretched deep fingers into the realm of what could be.

Shane fell in love that evening, and Garrett asked out a girl the next day.

He opened his eyes. It was too bright, the bathroom lights harsh. The powder blue shower curtain was like artificial daylight, droplets pinging off its plastic liner and rolling to the tub.

Being seen by someone didn’t guarantee a damn thing.

Saturday afternoon, William stood outside of the Clarks’ house with a cooler. Jodi had called him early in the morning hoping he’d had extra fish in his ice box, and since it’d been a few weeks since his last visit, invited him over for dinner. Her timing was excellent. After a week of being glared at and ignored, an evening around friendly people was welcome.

There was a floral wreath on the door, bouncing against the wood when Jodi swung it open.


He held out the small hand cooler. “Brought some bass, ma’am.”

“Oh, these will be perfect.” She took it from him, opening the white box.

He looked around the room and nodded at Kent, who’d pushed to his feet when he arrived.

“Hey, you’re a sight for sore eyes, Bauer,” he said, giving him a hard handshake.

William returned the grip, stepping around the tornado of toys scattered over the carpet. He noticed whenever children were present, a house’s cleanliness flowed in waves like a tide. Some days, Jodi’s living room was the setting for a magazine photoshoot. Other days, like this one, it was a field of Lego land mines.

Jodi closed the door, taking the fish with her into the kitchen. Childish giggles floated from the back of the house, specifically out of Vincent’s room.

“Jas is over,” Kent explained, going to the fridge and cracking open a can of beer for William.

He accepted it and leaned against the counter. “You need any help, Jodi? The fillets are de-boned but—”

“I can handle fish,” she said. “You two get out of my way and dinner will be ready soon.”

William and Kent exchanged a relieved glance and stepped out the back door.

“Sam home?” William asked as they settled underneath the tree in the yard.

“Nope. Off on another gig for that band. Just Jodi and the kids today.”

William drank his beer. A quiet day in with your spouse, enjoying the home you’d made together?
Sounded like a slice of heaven to him.

He’d always been busy when he was Vincent’s age. Not with friends, but activities. An ill-fated attempt at baseball before he was deemed unacceptable. Some martial arts classes that wound up conflicting with his mother’s obligations. Not to mention the flood of fundraisers, bake sales, and event-planning that wound up eating evenings and weekends. Home had felt like an open civic center for half the city to come through and do wheeling and dealing—not the quiet, zen bubble of domesticity Jodi and Kent nurtured.

The single story building was lovely in its simplicity. He’d grown up in a house like this once. Before his dad had made CEO of his firm, they’d lived in a small slice of suburbia, and he still could remember the way the basketball hoop had hummed when he’d missed.

“How’s business out in the middle of nowhere?” Kent asked.

“Great. Going to finally take Pierre’s gold medal at the fair Monday. How’s it going with you guys?”

“Other than Sam never being home and worrying his mother half to death with his band adventures, it’s fine.” Kent drank, eyes on the stretches of shadows creeping over the house. He pulled out a package of cigarettes and offered one to William.

He accepted. It was a vice he’d picked up in the army. Guys who smoked got extra breaks, and it was something to focus on when bored. After rehab he’d mostly quit, save for the rare social cigarette with his dad—much to his mother’s chagrin.

He lit the stick and exhaled, tapping it on the side of the chair. “Thanks.”

They leaned back together and something twinged in William’s chest.

Hanging out with a friend. Like what he’d been doing with Shane. But different.

Friendship with Kent had never gone beyond the level of cards, a few shared smokes, and a meal, William a spectator on his life. Kent was always surrounded by kids, making any deep talks too easily interrupted, and while he might’ve had PTSD his family had given him a peace that William envied. The contrast of his deep solidarity with Shane and this shallow companionship was troubling. It wasn’t just the lack of attraction to Kent. When he was with Shane, there was a fission that electrified their words. Until the disaster last week, William thought Shane was like him: still searching for a home base. Was Kent comforting? Sure. Exciting? Not the way he’d begun to crave. Instead of growing close, they just existed together: two dudes being bros.

He puffed the cigarette.

“How’s Daniels been working out?” Kent asked.

William had thought about how to approach Shane Questions. He wasn't going to tell him about all the time they spent together, nor the tension that came because he'd stuck his hand in the cookie jar. Kent was not cleared for that intel. Gossip would travel like a grass fire. No matter that William kept Kent's confidences, he wasn't stupid enough to think Kent kept what he heard from Jodi. Who told Caroline. Who told Pierre. Who told Gus. Who told everyone.


“Huh,” Kent said, blowing smoke into the branches over their heads. “Seems like a real grim character.”
You forgot surly, rude, secretive, and frustrating.

William fiddled with the filter, knocking ash into the grass. All his fault anyway. Why had he thought taking things to the next level was such a swell fucking idea? They’d been peaceful before he’d reached and made Shane hate him.

He couldn’t help but replay—again—Wednesday’s conversation. It was the last time they’d spoken. Figured that the only nice thing Shane had said was about his cat.

“He’s good with animals,” William said.

“That’s got to be handy.”

“Yup.”

He drank the beer, but it wasn’t the rich blends he and Shane indulged in on the porch. It tasted watery and weak; strong enough if he drank a lot, but not the heady hit of relaxation he’d gotten used to. He’d have to add Kent to his beer-of-the-month club.

The back door burst open and Jas ran out, laughing as Vincent followed her.

“PAPARAZZI! PAPARAZZI! PAPARAZZI!” Vincent chanted, a lime-green camera between his hands as he followed Shane’s little girl.

William froze, cigarette halfway to his mouth.

Jas stopped in her tracks and spun around, pigtailed braids flipping theatrically, striking a pose as Vincent bent down to snap the photo. After the click, she lifted her chin to the sky, aloof. Another click. She faced Vincent, crossing both eyes and blowing out her cheeks like a pufferfish; it lasted long enough for him to snap the third photo before the puffed cheeks sputtered and deflated into laughter.

William ashed the cigarette and side-eyed Kent, who was grinning at their reenactment of celebrity.

“Sam brought that home for him a few weeks ago,” he said as the children made outrageous poses. “He barely played with it until Jas found it in his toy box. For the last week it’s been, ‘pappo’ this and ‘I’m a movie star’ that.”

“Seems like they’re having fun,” said William.

“Hate to say it since it’s about my own kid and all, but if Jas dreams up the game, she can get Vincent to play. That boy’s not careful, she’ll lead him off a cliff one day.”

"I," Jas announced, pulling his attention back to their little drama, "am Jasmeen Yolanda Applesmith, world famous supermodel. I am about to take the world by storm."

She flicked her braids once more to the side, and her eyes caught on William. Immediately she collapsed into giggles, as though an audience had crashed through the fourth wall of being a pop idol on a world-conquering adventure.

William dared anyone to be able to look at her freckled face, all scrunched up with laughter, and hold back a smile. She was so enthusiastic, like someone had bottled sunshine and given it pigtails and a dress. She flopped on her back into the grass, holding her sides, little-girl shrieks like silver trumpets.
Vincent ran over and climbed into Kent’s lap, flipping the green box around so his dad could see the pictures.

“See, look! I made Jas a model,” he said.

William stubbed out his cigarette, flicking it into the flower pot Kent kept as an ashtray.

“Hey, Missy,” he greeted Jas. “It comfy on the ground there?”

She tucked her chin, half coy, half suspicious. "You know Vincent too?"

“Yes, I know Vincent. Me and his daddy are friends.”

William glanced at Kent, who was sitting through a detailed explanation of different photos, showing fascination in the square of fuzzy images.

Jas sat up and leaned back on her elbows. She gave him an appraising stare for a nine-year-old, wheels turning behind it.

"I heard Uncle Shane say your cat was gonna have babies."

William took a long sip of his beer, turning the statement over in his mind. He had? Did that mean Shane was open enough to talk about work at home?

“That’s true,” he said. “Why? You want one?"

"You're giving them away?!" She popped up from her elbows. "He didn't say that part. I would be such a great cat mom. I would love it forever and play with it all the time. Aunt Marnie says I’m really good with animals!"

He shook his head in amusement.

“Ask your aunt and uncle,” he advised. “If they say it’s okay, then you can come over after they’re weaned and pick one out.”

When he looked up, Kent was skewering him with a glare.

“You’re going to have kittens, Mr. Bauer?” Vincent asked, finally clued in on the topic at hand.

William nodded as an expression promising revenge flashed over Kent’s face.

Jas sat up straighter. "Yup! And he just said I could have one!"

Enthused by her example, Vincent turned big eyes up to his father. “Aw, Dad! I want a kitten too!” he said, clutching his camera to his chest, vibrating with the potential of being a pet owner.

Skewering and revenge morphed into more silent promises as Kent cleared his throat and set Vincent down.

“Ask your mother,” he said in an even tone, then gave a pointed look at Jas. “And Will said you could ask your aunt and uncle, Jas. Don’t tell stories.”

Jas smirked. "If I ask Uncle Shane first, he'll say yes."

William drained the last of the beer. Shane might yell at him too. Only that would require him being able to look William in the face, something he’d not been good at these last few days. Or
maybe, he was just good at avoiding things—like avoiding how good kissing each other had been. He was also good at being an asshole the minute he remembered it was William he was spending time with.

Jas pulled him from his brooding as she flipped her attention toward Vincent.

"When we get kittens, we can dress them up and do photo shoots!" She reached for the camera, clicking through the last few pictures. With a wicked grin, she snapped a shot of William drinking his beer.

"Gotcha," she said, giggling again, then grabbed Vincent's arm. "Let's go get some of your mom!"

"And ask her about kittens!" he agreed, racing her back towards the house.

Kent sat down as they burst into the kitchen. The door slammed shut behind them, echoing across the yard.

"Bauer," he said in a conversational voice, "I'mma nail you to this tree and kill your gimpy ass."

"Aw, c'mon, Clark. I can't keep all those kittens. Might as well spread the love."

"Point of order? Don't ever tell a kid you got a baby animal. Turns the parents into villains when they have to say no."

"Eh. They're kids. I'm sure she'll forget before she gets home. Flash something shiny, and boom. Forgotten."

"This is how I know you're single, you dumbass," Kent said as he ashed his cigarette. "Kids don't forget anything. They're little sponges. They pick up things you never think about. And that Jas? She's as sharp as a knife. Trust me, Marnie is going to be calling you tomorrow wondering why in the world you promised her a kitten."

"Not if her uncle doesn't get to me first," William mused.

Though that would require talking. Way too much effort for Shane to ever spend on him. He chugged the rest of his drink.

"You sure did finish that beer fast," Kent observed as William set the empty can down.

"Felt thirsty," he admitted. "Lost my help for half of yesterday and today. Marnie needed him to get ready for the festival. Did good getting everything wrapped up in time to come eat with you guys."

Kent let it go, but William felt a prickle of annoyance. Even when things were shit between them, Shane never criticized his drinking.

They sat out for another half hour, changing the subject to sports and the weather. Kent knew how to rile him up, making a few sly comments about the new Doppler systems the local weather station had adopted. He was laughing at William when Vincent stuck his head out of the door and shouted, "DINNER!" at the top of his lungs.

"—and half the time they can't give you any type of accurate prediction for more than four days!" William continued. "The old system gave us a seven-day window. Do you know what sort of hell you've got wrapped in if you have to pull wheat and those fools have given you two days of sun when, you know, oops, it's going to monsoon? I lost nearly four acres of harvest after that mess."
"It's grass, Bauer. Not like anyone died."

Kent pushed to his feet, wiping his eyes, shoulders still shaking.

"Tell that to my bottom line," William groused, following him inside.

Jas and Vincent had TV trays and were engrossed in an animated movie with talking animals and sparkly clouds.

Kent planted a kiss on Jodi’s lips as he passed. "Smells good, baby," he said, turning on the water in the sink.

Dutifully, William got behind him to wash up.

On the table Jodi had a three bean salad, a huge bowl of steamed broccoli, and a fish casserole.

"Vincent tells me you're giving Jas a kitten, William," she said, steel under her voice. William winced.

"Ahh..."

She pursed her lips. Kent squinted at her, then his face shifted to slack horror.

"Oh, Jodi, you didn't tell him—"

"Well if Jas is getting one," she said, passing the plates as the two men sat, "how are we supposed to say no?"

"It's two letters, Jodi. We do it quickly and let him deal with it."

"Maybe it would be nice to have a pet. He's old enough to help take care of it. It could teach him responsibility."

William took his servings, watching them ping-pong this debate back and forth. While Jodi and Kent continued to bicker over the pros and cons of letting their son get a kitten, he glanced at the children. Vincent quietly stacked broccoli onto Jas’s plate, as if he expected her to eat it for him.

He ate, letting the atmosphere sink in.

Despite the small bit of conflict he'd introduced, he preferred the warmth of the Clarks’ residence over the solitariness of his own home. There were sounds here beyond the wind chimes on the porch, or the hum of his fridge. All the movements and heartbeats in the household made him feel anchored down; he could exist here and not float away where no one would miss him.

As he scraped his plate clean, Kent dropped his shoulders.

"Well," he said, resigned, "I guess we're getting a cat."

Jodi grinned, and William rubbed the back of his neck as Kent arched an eyebrow at him.

"Maybe next time, you fix your animals before you let them roam?"

"Eh," William said, "that's the plan. Didn't mean for Ingrid to get in the family way."

"It's going to be a good thing, Kent," Jodi said, standing, but before she could clear the table Kent pushed up.
"No," he crooned, "you sit, baby. You worked so hard. Bauer will do the dishes."

William rolled his eyes, but didn’t mind being ‘voluntold.’

"Wouldn't be the first time," he said. "Least I can do after you two agreed to take one of the little things."

He washed pots and pans while the kids finished their movie. It wasn’t long before Jas and Vincent marched their dishes into the kitchen, and as the little girl stacked her empty plate on the counter he asked, "Hey, Jas. How are you getting home?"

"Oh, I'm staying the night," she said matter-of-factly.

Jodi’s head bobbed up. "Funny, Jas, I don't remember your Aunt Marnie telling me you could spend the night."

Kent opened the fridge, retrieving a soda. "And," he added, "I didn't see you bring your pajamas."

Vincent pouted. "Aww c'mon, Dad, can't she?"

"Aunt Marnie told me before I left the house it was okay,” Jas insisted. “I don't mind sleeping in my clothes!"

Jodi squinted. "Well, I'm sorry Jas, but your Aunt Marnie didn't call and tell me. So unfortunately, we're going to have to reschedule."

It had, William reflected, been a believable lie. Hell, if he’d been the one in charge he’d have probably fallen for it.

Jas gave Vincent a look plainly saying: Well, what can you do?

She turned to William. "Mrs. Clark walks me home. Sometimes Aunt Marnie comes to get me, but she's on a date with Lewis."

William wiped his hands and glanced at Jodi and Kent. It was about a twenty minute walk there and back. They both looked so content together. Plus maybe if he took on another task, they’d forgive him for KittenGate.

"Well, kiddo, you're on my way home. Why don't I walk you today?"

Jas brightened. "Can he, Mrs. Clark? It's safe! He works with Uncle Shane."

Jodi chuckled. "If you want to, William, it's fine with me. I'm sure Marnie wouldn't mind."

William snagged his cooler. “Well, that's settled. Why don't you get your things?"

"Keep the camera here tonight, kids," Jodi said. "I'll take your pictures to Pierre's tomorrow."

Jas had packed light, only retrieving a purple backpack and sweater. She said goodbye to Vincent, then hopped to the door.

"After you, Mr. Tattoo."

William winked at her and held it open. "Oh no," he said, "ladies first."

She paused, face morphing into her Jasmeen Yolanda Applesmith personality from earlier. She
stuck her nose in the air and swung the backpack dramatically over one shoulder. "Bye, darlings!" she called to the Clarks, sauntering through the door.

William waved and followed, letting her get some distance on him.

She was a bright little purple-clad ball of energy as she bounced forward, and it brought a strange feeling to his stomach. Kids should be like this, he decided. Carefree and innocent. Despite anything Shane said about being a bad guardian, she looked like she was doing okay under his care.

It got darker as they left the streetlamps of Pelican Town and he pulled a flashlight out. The small LED cut through the dimness of the encroaching woods.

"Did you have fun with Vincent today?"

"Yup." She skipped, as though the act of walking was too restrained. "He used to be my boyfriend in first grade. We were gonna get married, but now we're just friends."

"I had a guy I liked in the first grade. But sometimes friends are better," William agreed. "You playing any sports?"

Jas stopped skipping and cocked her head. "You liked boys too?"

Warning bells went off. Shane was in the closet, and he’d likely not appreciate Jas asking nosy questions about gay people today. Yet, the words had slipped out—honesty for honesty. He regarded her curious face and plunged ahead.

"Yup. Always liked boys. And you didn't tell me if you played any sports," he reminded.

Jas pondered this. William waited for the fall out and invasive questions, but they didn’t come. She shrugged and kept moving; he noticed as they got deeper into the trail, she drew closer to him.

"I like to ride horses at home, and at school I'm really good at dodgeball and tag. I don't have a team, though. Did you know Uncle Shane played gridball? He played with my dad." She bent, picking up a pine cone. "I don't think he likes anyone. He doesn't go out on dates like me 'n Aunt Marnie."

The last thing William expected when he offered to bring Jas home was for her to spill information about Shane. He rolled over her words.

You and me agree on one thing, kid. Shane definitely doesn’t like anyone right now.

"Marnie has some nice horses," he said, addressing the first part of her statement. "And I did know Shane played gridball. He mentioned it once."

At the spa. Right before we made out.

He steered her clear of a puddle he was pretty sure she was going to stomp, then tried to change the subject.

"What was your dad like?"

"I was really little when he died, only four years old. But I've got pictures. He's got freckles like me, and brown hair. Aunt Marnie said he's really handsome." She swapped shoulders for her backpack. "He used to sing to me when I was a baby. Uncle Shane said he loved music. He says I
act like him a lot."

The words rang in William’s ears.

Died.

He’d not known for sure.

Well, he’d had an idea. Her mom must be gone too. Shane had to have been more than just friends; you didn’t leave your children to anyone less than family. He tried to remember the last time he’d heard of a godparent being more than symbolic. They were someone your parents liked, but rarely was the position a legitimate backup plan in the case of death. If he’d had kids, he’d have his parents care for them. He didn’t have a single friendship close enough to entrust a child to. But Jas must not have had grandparents available, either.

"C’mon and hold my hand here,” William said. “We need to watch out for snakes that might come onto the trail."

Jas slipped her hand in his. "Do you know any good songs? I like to sing, too."

"I know a few, but I only remember them when I’ve got the radio on," he said, keeping an eye on the underbrush. "But if you wanna sing me your favorite, I’d love to hear it."

"Hmm…I have lots of favorites."

He waited as she thought. He wondered who she resembled more, mother or father? When Shane looked at her, did he see his friends, or a responsibility? He remembered that first day, his strained expression.

“*I shouldn’t be raising a kid either. Those fucking lunatics that handed her over to me should be shot.*"

Yet there he was, busting his back at The Bowery and putting up with a shithead like William. Time and money to care for this little girl.

Just as he figured she’d given up on picking a song, she sang. It was an old classic from the radio; something his mother and father had probably played in their cars when they were teens. Her voice was high and breathy, the sweetness of a child’s soprano. She messed up several of the words, fudging through parts she couldn’t remember, then belting out the chorus. It was like the ring of a glass bell over a lake.

A surge of protectiveness built in William at the sound of her voice. He squeezed her hand in encouragement. When she got to the last lines she trailed off, then looked down.

"All I remember."

"It was enough," William said. "You have a very good voice."

She looked down at their hands, and turned his knuckles to examine the barbed wires that crossed the tops of his fingers.

"Your tattoos are *so* cool. I think Uncle Shane should get some. He dresses really boring. I'm going to get tattoos when I'm older, though."

William shook his head in amusement at her scattershot conversation. He was quite sure Uncle
Shane was not going to encourage this kid to be anything like him. They approached the ranch, lights a warm, hospitable bubble of safety against the dark forest.

"Thanks," he said as their feet moved off the trail to the gravel of the parking lot. "I like my tattoos. Maybe I'll tell you about them sometime."

Marnie's truck was gone from the yard. He slowed. Shane was...not expecting him. He had a feeling he was going to be an unwelcome and unpleasant surprise if he showed up on his door.

"Well," he said, "you think you can make it from here?"

"I could make the whole walk," said Jas sagely. "But Aunt Marnie says I'm not allowed yet." She let go of his hand. "You don't want to come in? Vincent's mom didn't have dessert, and we’ve got brownies."

_That's a negative, Ghost Rider._

He had promised Shane space and he'd meant it. Walking Jas home was a favor to Jodi, not some tactic to get close to him. It sat wrong with him to take advantage of circumstances, no matter how tempting it was to see his face.

"Nah," he said, smiling down at her. "I need to go home and check on Ingrid. But go on inside. I'll wait until you're in safe before I go."

Jas paused, squinting at him.

"Okay. But you have to wait here. I'll be right back!"

The kitchen was lit. William saw a big moth fly inside after she'd darted into the house, and seconds later heard:

"JUST A SEC! I'M GETTING WILLIAM A BROWNIE!"

Quicker than he was expecting, she darted back out, a homemade brownie clutched on a napkin. She grinned and handed it to him, out of breath. "For your walk home!"

William squatted down and gave a half-smile, accepting it.

"Well, thank you," he said. "Now go on inside, hear? Be good for your uncle. Maybe I'll see you at the fair Monday."

"Yeah! You can see our animals." She waved. "See you later. Don't let the snakes getcha."

She went back inside, the door slamming shut behind her.

William stood and slipped the brownie in his jacket; a warm pocket of sweetness to combat the lonely trip to a quiet house.

Everything was ready. A game menu glowed across the TV, theme music playing softly. Cushions were plumped into a small mountain on the floor, and a red bowl of chips sat on the dresser. Shane had tossed one of his blue t-shirts over a lamp to create the cinema-like ambiance Jas loved. Yet
here he sat, fingers frozen on the controller.

William. William had walked her home.

Had Marnie…?

No. There was no reason for her to ask William goddamn Bauer to bring Jas back to the ranch. Shane was available all night. He could’ve—and would’ve—gone to get her, except like always, Jodi had insisted she didn’t mind.

Where did he get off?

What gave him the fucking right?

Certainly if Marnie had asked William, she’d have mentioned it. And then Shane could’ve told her to fuck right off with that suggestion, because William had no business casually walking into their home lives like…like…

Like a stupid overstepping dickhead.

They hadn’t spoken since the Ingrid incident, and the last two days Shane had fucked off from work mid-morning to help Marnie. Just as William had taken on networking farmers for the fair, Marnie had done the same with the region’s ranchers. That was on top of preparing her own showcase, and swimming in clerical work with Lewis. Being the mayor’s girlfriend brought extra responsibilities, so she’d been grateful for Shane’s help—and Shane had been grateful not to deal with what-the-fuck-ever was going on with William.

Except here he sat, unable to escape him even on the weekend.

Jas bounded into his room, a dramatic sweep of her arm flinging her backpack. She sank onto the pile of cushions and sighed happily.

“William,” she said, the word punchy, “is so freaking cool.”

More like so freaking out of bounds.

Shane clicked into the menu. “Don’t let Aunt Marnie hear you talking like that.”

“It’s not the bad word.”

“She doesn’t like it.”

“You use it, and the bad one,” Jas said, reaching for a controller.

Shane let her scroll through the various options, picking the battle arena, music settings, and weapon type. He stared at the one dead pixel in the corner of his TV, a little red dot.

“Uncle Shane, you didn’t pick anyone.”

Jas had selected her character, while his controller blinked a white box around the avatars. He toggled through them one at a time, and in a measured voice said, “Why did William walk you home?”

She shrugged. “Mrs. Clark said it was okay.”

Shane continued to flip frame by frame. Rolling her eyes, Jas reached over and held the toggle so it
sped through them, stopping on a military commander in the third row. It was the player he’d always chosen in the past: a muscular guy with a blonde buzz cut and tattoos.

He quickly swapped to the next character, a busty spy in a secretary’s outfit, and hit enter.

Jas gave him a skeptical look: *Really?*

The level loaded, a tiny white circle buffering on the screen, and Shane forced his voice to remain casual.

“He was at the Clarks’ already?”

“He’s friends with Vincent’s dad.” Jas had chosen the Arctic Assassin, a man in a thick fur coat with a semi-automatic. She clicked into the view that showed his weapon’s stats and ammo. “He was eating dinner there too.”

So William hadn’t just walked her home, but had sat down for a cozy fucking family meal with her. Jas. *His* kid.

Each of her answers felt like another rock dropping to the rubble pile in his gut.

He forced his player forward. “Did, um. Did you ask him to do it?”

“Nope! He asked me.”

*Thunk.* Another rock.

For awhile the game progressed in silence. Jas made her character dart around, jumping and dodging like always when she was hyper at the start. They collected ammunition and supplies, shooting down the occasional NPC enemy. Shane’s fingers went through the motions but his thoughts drifted.

William was friends with Kent. Why wouldn’t he be? Probably had a lot in common, both being vets. And that’s what people did, as a whole—they had friends and engaged in social activities. Just because Shane orbited one person and lived his life around them, didn’t mean William worked that way.

Still, he’d never thought of him spending his free time with others. At least, not like this. Hanging around the saloon, sure, but one-on-one?

Did they drink together?

Had he and Kent ever…?

Shane power-slammed his trigger, sending a spray of bullets toward a civilian in merciless overkill.

Kent was married, with kids of his own. What a dumb thing to think.

He entered a building, pressed a lever on the wall to deactivate a spike trap, and was clearing the now-safe hallway when Jas said, “Did you know that William likes boys?”

Shane choked.

“Yup,” she continued, her bulky assassin skipping down a street. “I told him I used to date Vincent, and he told me *he* liked a boy in first grade too.”
His heart hammered a hard and erratic pattern, as if attempting to bang nails and missing every other one. But before he could add anything to that observation—and what the fuck would he say?—Jas switched topics.

“Oh, and he said I could have a kitten!” She smacked her forehead, like it was so silly to forget. Shane’s jealous thoughts came to a crashing halt.

“He what now?”

“Oh yes,” Jas went on. “His cat is going to have kittens, and he told me I could have one.”

“Jas…you can’t have a kitten.”

“William said!”

And is William your fucking dad now?

No, but Jas probably wished he was, what with William being so freaking cool, while Shane was just the dull, crappy, knock-off dad she came home to at the end of each day. The one who told her things like “Not now,” and “I can’t tonight,” and “No kittens.”

She must’ve overheard him talking about it yesterday. Marnie had been trying to fix the tension between them by making small talk, and Shane had thrown her an Ingrid-shaped bone. But of course—stupid of him to think he could open his mouth without it coming back to bite him in the ass.

“You’re in school. I work. Aunt Marnie is busy with a hundred other animals. Not right now, kid.”

Jas slumped in the cushions. “I thought you’d say yes.”

“You thought wrong.”

“My dad would’ve said yes,” she grumbled, slumping lower.

“Well he’s not here now, is he?”

The moment Shane snapped the words, he felt the blood drain from his face. It sank, pooling around those rocks in his gut.

“Why are you so grumpy?” she cried.

In answer, he opened the options and exited from their game, taking them back to the main menu with its jaunty music.

“Hey!”

“You can keep playing,” he said, standing up.

“But where are you going? We were supposed to play together!”

“Jas,” he said, “just do a solo game.”

She huffed and squared her shoulders to the TV. “When Aunt Marnie comes home, I’m asking her if I can get a kitten.”
“Knock yourself out.”

Shane exited to the hall but didn’t go far, leaning his back against the wall and staring at a picture frame on the opposite side. He and Jas, two years ago, the morning of the Flower Dance. She was a beaming sunflower in her bright yellow dress, while he stared from the matte finish with tired, dead eyes.

She’d turned up the game volume; from his bedroom a loud, robotic female voice announced: “The Command Center has been breached! All personnel to Level 4!”

He couldn’t do this. It was a familiar thought, one he’d battled for years. Sometimes it was a mere knock on the door, but other times was a solid hit to the jugular. He’d rarely questioned Garrett’s judgment while alive, yet what had he been thinking, to leave one of the sweetest kids in the world in Shane’s incapable hands?

The only person who could answer that was six feet deep.

An explosion rattled from the room, the Wilhelm screams of NPCs punctuating animated thunder. Shane closed his eyes. He waited for the end of the carnage, debating whether to head back and apologize, when the phone rang.

Normally he hated taking calls, but it was probably only Marnie telling him her date was running late. He slipped into her bedroom to answer, and was about to say hello when there was another click on the line. Someone else in the house had picked up, too.

“Hello?” said Marnie’s voice, out of breath.

She must’ve walked in during the explosion. He was ready to hang up when a reply crackled into the receiver—his grandmother’s unmistakable rasp.

“Hello? Marn?”

“Mom, how are you today?”

Shane slowly sat on the bed, keeping the receiver to his ear.

“Feel like dogshit,” said Trudy, “so what else is new. Listen. Dunno if that good-for-nothing, piece-of-shit brother of yours called or not, but I need you to come down someti—”

A series of hard coughs overtook her sentence. Before she could wheeze to recovery, Shane heard beeping, then a stranger’s voice:

“Mrs. Daniels, you took out your cannula—”

“Damn it, did I hit the red button?” There was rustling on Trudy’s end, and a rattly inhale as she returned to the call. “Anyway, need to know when you’re coming to town. I gotta settle some business with you.”

“Yes,” Marnie said, taking on a polite, formal tone; a clear tell she was nervous. “Corey did mention that. We’ve been trying to set something up, but the doctors keep telling us no visitors as soon as we’ve made plans. When is a good time for you?”

“Well, I never have any good times, Marn,” Trudy snapped.

“Perhaps…tomorrow, then?”
“Fine, fine.” His grandmother coughed again, a horrible hacking sound. “Your brother said you were being difficult. That doesn’t sound like my sweet Marn.”

Marnie didn’t reply to that. “You’re sure it’ll be okay with the doctors?”

“If they don’t let my daughter in, why, I’ll wheel down that hallway and give ‘em an earful. ‘Sides, I’m dying. Ain’t got no damn time to wait around to handle business.”

Shane listened for another minute as they settled out the details, waiting until they’d hung up with a chorus of “See you tomorrows” before returning the phone to its cradle.

His pulse was going a hundred miles a minute.

Growing up, he’d heard the way Corey spoke about his mother. The names he’d used. His furious rants, slamming cupboards after their phone calls. The way he’d wondered aloud how her crotchety, stubborn old ass was still kicking. And as far as Shane knew, Trudy—who used to babysit him with open disdain—had been just as toxic. They were awful together, even now, and this whole bonding-over-dying situation wasn’t adding up.

On top of that, it was here, wasn’t it? Not some nebulous “soon.” Marnie was going to re-involve herself with the family she’d escaped, and Shane couldn’t stop picturing her in that room with Corey: on one side a sheep, on the other a wolf in half-assed disguise. If there was money, Corey would try to weasel Marnie’s share of it, no matter how meager…and the ranch was struggling, and Marnie folded like a card table under pressure…

He stepped into the hall and could hear Jas’s semi-automatic peppering an unknown enemy in the other room. He’d momentarily forgotten her, and knew he ought to go apologize for being short, but instead headed straight for the kitchen. He couldn’t give Marnie an opportunity to hide this. After his reaction to the last call, there was plenty of reason to—but if she was going to that hospital, so was he.

He met her at the edge of the kitchen. She looked tired, her hair frizzy in front as if she’d been worrying the bangs. Yet from the first glance, it was evident he wouldn’t have to pry it out.

“Tomorrow,” she said with a sigh. “I’m visiting Mom tomorrow.”

“I’m going,” Shane replied.

“Shane, this is not your problem. You deserved to know, but I didn’t tell you to ask for favors.”

“I’m going,” he repeated.

They stood in stalemate, Shane awaiting the next step of this dance: the one where he’d rephrase the same thing seven times because she struggled to take no for an answer. But tonight, she didn’t argue.

“We’d have to take Jas with us,” she whispered, and his chest tightened.

Jas had been frightened of Corey. As far as he knew, Corey had never laid a finger on her, but she’d still been around his temper and screaming plenty. At the age of five and six she’d called him “mean grandpa” and clung to Shane or Jessica like a barnacle whenever he was home.

“No,” he said. “No way. She doesn’t even know we’re seeing him.”

Marnie didn’t argue this either. Though they’d never discussed the details of his and Jas’s life
before Pelican Town, she knew the conditions they’d fled. Picking them up in the middle of the night from a payphone might’ve had something to do with it.

“You’re right, of course.” She bit her bottom lip. “It’s so short to find a sitter, though. It’d be too late to ask the Clarks again.”

Shane rubbed his neck. “Lewis?” he asked, desperation pushing him toward the one name he usually tried to avoid.

Marnie softened. “That…might not be a bad idea. He was just saying how much he’d like to teach her about his flower gardens. Yes, I could call him back tonight…”

She set her coat and purse on the table, then picked up the phone and met his eyes.

“I appreciate it, Shane.”

He nodded.

Hands in pockets, he went back down the hall, pausing when he reached his bedroom. Behind him Marnie’s voice carried from her call; in front of him, more explosions from Jas’s game.

The hospital, he realized numbly. He was going to a damn hospital. Not Harvey’s little clinic with its one lone exam room. A real hospital, with overnight beds and bustling staff, and blue scrubs, and white gowns, and beeping monitors…

…and his dad.

Before he’d moved to Stardew, those final months at home had been a blur. A haze of booze and blackouts, the toxicity that had been buried in Shane’s childhood now electric between two drunken adult men. One night, near the very end, Shane had been so drunk he couldn’t stand on two feet, and he’d woken the next day locked inside the closet. Twenty-eight years old, revisiting the same dusty, dingy place that had tormented him as a boy: a power play by Corey when Shane had been too wasted to fight back.

Not that he could pull any shit like that tomorrow, Shane thought. They’d be surrounded by too many people.

Because they’d be in a fucking hospital.

Headed to hell to drop Satan a line.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all. We're so happy you're still with us. Thank you for reading, and comments are really appreciated!

Thank you Beta Xylianna. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you’d like to chat with us/other readers.
Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is November 10th, 2-4pm PST.
Chapter Summary

In Which Fatherly Advice Is Not Well Received

Trigger Warnings:
- Bad touch
- Gross coughing
- Bullshit paperwork

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

William stood underneath a polished ladder in his dad's study and squinted up.

"Dad, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"For the third time in as many minutes," his father said, sliding a large box down, "yes."

"Ma has, like, forty different services to handle these things," William said, fingers secure on the rigid supports. "You could just go play golf and have one of them prep this for you."

David Bauer raised an eyebrow, his clean-shaven jaw tight at the idea. The dark blond hair characteristic to all Bauer men had silver stripes at his temples.

"Son," he said, setting the box on top of the pail shelf, "if your mother offered to hire a service to help you go through your office, would you let her?"

*Point made.*

William grunted and held his hands up to take the box.

"I got it," David said, coming down the rungs on wobbly knees.

"You want my help, but all you're letting me do is hold the ladder."

"You don't need to be straining your back."

"Hate to break it to you," said William, "but I've lifted and hauled a hell lot more weight than that before 7:00 am."

"Then think of today as light duty," said his dad serenely as he stacked the box on top of the four others he'd retrieved.

William looked around his father's office. When he'd been growing up, all David had was a little wooden desk in the middle of the guest room, which he'd slid to the side when there was company. His current office could eat that old suite and still have space for William's childhood bedroom, part of their old hallways, and more. Bay windows gave a view of the golf course connected to his parents' neighborhood. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined the dark-paneled walls, full of art,
ledgers, and other curiosities he'd acquired in his work as a financial adviser. William leaned against one of the monster shelves with crossed arms.

"So why are you cleaning out your office today?"

"It's usually a step one takes when one begins to think about retirement."

William felt something in his stomach drop. "What?"

"I said—"

"Are you sick?" he demanded.

David's shoulders shook in silent laughter as he started up the ladder again. "No, I'm healthy as a horse."

William glared at his back, and returned to holding it still. "Speaking from an agricultural background, horses will turn on you as soon as you blink, so forgive me for not finding that comforting."

"I'm not sick," Dad said, pulling another box down.

William's mind reeled.

His father had been working as long as William'd been alive. Hours of his childhood were spent with the glow from his office acting as his nightlight. His first memories of outings had been combination business and pleasure, his dad showing him new things while also trying to seal accounting contracts. Secretaries had come and gone, each one a pseudo-babysitter on the days he'd been stuck at the firm after school. He'd run down hallways and been chided by men and women in three-piece suits, all tolerating childhood brattiness because he was their boss's kid.

He stared at his dad's black loafers, shiny from a recent polishing. When he'd been small, he'd shoved his feet into them and tried to walk around, one of his dad's ties around his neck as he pretended to 'work.' They'd slipped and he'd fallen down, too big to fit.

"When?" he asked into the silence.

"End of the year," his dad said.

William stepped back for the final box. Dates were written on the sides in his father's neat and type-writeresque print. He pulled a lid off the top and looked down into a tightly packed bin of tabbed manila folders, each one labeled in that same blocky text.

"So, what's all this?"

"Well," David said, pulling his handkerchief out and mopping it over his forehead, "I am getting old files to be scanned into the computer system that my successor can access, if she ever has the need."

"She?"

"Yes!" David said, enthused. "Bright girl. Just a little older than you, actually. Came into the firm under your mother's scholarship program. I have every faith that she'll run it well."

"So," William said, trying to puzzle out how this was going to change things. "Why? I thought you'd be working at that place until Ma was forced to shoot you."
"I'm turning sixty in a few months. It would be nice to join your mother on vacation."

"You're going to hand the reins over?" William snapped his fingers. "Boom, just like that?"

"It will be a bit of an adjustment. Your mother is thrilled. I thought you would be too."

"Dad, you're not old. Old people retire."

"Tired people retire," his father said, sitting down and pulling a box over. "Here, now you can help. Start sorting these by year and surname."

William frowned at the folders. "What'd you do, just throw them in without a system?"

"Those files have been with me for longer than you've been alive, son. My system's changed."

"Is the company okay?" he asked.

David stared at him over his reading glasses, amusement painted on his normally stern and austere face.

"William, I'm not dying. The company is fine. No one is blackmailing me. People retire."

"You're a workaholic," William said stubbornly. "I do not have a single memory of my childhood that didn't involve you working six days a week, and half days on Sundays."

"I took half Saturdays too," his dad said, unphased by the accusation. "And I've been taking Sundays off for the last five years."

"Not the point." William stacked folders to one side. "You do that because of Ma."

"I do a great many things because of your mother," his father agreed. "But it is time."

They sank into comfortable silence, the only sound the flip of paper and the slide of manila folders.

His dad, taking time off? It wasn't like it had never happened. As workaholics went, Dad had tried his hardest. William's birthday? Never missed. When he'd played baseball as a child? Dad had been at every game, even if he was half working in the bleachers. High School events that involved fathers? Done. He'd dropped William off at the station for boot camp, and been in the stands for graduation, too. During his stints of active duty, they'd coordinated vacation time—taking trips to the gridball stadium, going to his old batting cages, and once visiting Pops together down at his farm, camping out in the country where the trees were big and the stars bright.

After his incident, Dad was at his side every day, fingers clutched white against Ma's. He'd taken months off during William's recovery. Had been one third of the support team that helped him go from side of hamburger to a person pretending to be whole once more.

And now he was retiring.

"How is the farm?" Dad asked, breaking through the memories.

"Running. Got morning milking done today, and got to go and do evening milking before bed. The retail side is chugging fine. My branding guy you reccecd is a genius."

"Marketing usually pays for itself," his dad agreed. "Are you enjoying it?"

William raised his head. "Huh?"
"The work, son. Are you enjoying it?" His dad focused on flipping through some contracts and payment slips. William swallowed, looking back down at his own folders.

"Some days." Like the days he wasn't at odds with the person he had the hots for. "Some days it's good. Some days your irrigation system explodes, and you wind up with over a thousand dollar repair bill."

"How's your employee working out for you?"

Fuck. That was what he wanted to know.

It'd been nearly four days since he and Shane had said a word to one another. It bothered him how easy Shane found it to come in, do his job, and leave. Did he miss hanging out, or was he relieved? After all, it was William who'd shoved them out of a comfortable working relationship and straight into the 'it's complicated' deep end.

He shuffled the files in his hand, slipping a 'Stuart' after a 'Smith.' "Fine."

He felt his dad's eyes on him and the hairs on the back of his neck rose up. Even if he hadn't said anything, Dad had a way of knowing when shit was going down.

"Your mother said he was a very polite man. Didn't say if he was smart."

"He's smart," William said, defensive. "Knows the work. Practically a savant in terms of experience. I'll tell you what, you can definitely tell the difference between an urban moron teaching himself agriculture and someone raised on a ranch."

"So. Smart. Polite. Works. He single?"

"Dad," William said, flushing under the question. But then again, what was he supposed to think with William singing his praises like that?

"It's a fair question, Will. Something your mom said..."

"Said?" William's head snapped up.

David looked at him with easy brown eyes. They were eyes that comforted and accepted, even as they reflected your idiocy back at you. "Said he seemed to be playing on your side of the field."

William's palms began to sweat. "She can't know that."

"Is it true?"

He coughed.

Was it true? Well fuck. He'd thought so. From the first time they'd glared at each other against that tree and Shane's body responded to his, to the time Shane had touched his scars and given him soft eyes. He remembered how it felt to find his shirt folded on the steps, and how Shane hadn't pulled away at his depression-fueled grab later the same day. When he'd surged against him in the spa, receptive and warm. When Shane had kissed him first on his porch. When they'd come together on his bed, heartbeats in sync, breathing a mingled cloud of shared passion. He'd thought Shane was afraid, but that underneath his fear, they'd wanted the same thing.

But how was he supposed to explain that to his upright and responsible father? No way he would approve if he knew. Dad lived in a world of absolute right and wrong, and fraternizing with
underlings? Definitely wrong.

"Probably, yeah," he hedged. "But he's not out, and it's not my place to get into his business."

David shook his head and went back to filing.

"Your mother and I worry about you all alone out there. And if you've got a single man who shares your orientation, it would only be natural—"

William's ears burned in mortification at the blunt approach. Apparently, as circumspect as he was trying to be, he wasn't fooling anyone.

"Dad," he muttered, "are you saying you think I'm the type of asshole who would do that?"

Because he was totally the type of asshole to do that.

"No," his father said. "I'm saying that if you're developing feelings for this man, it would be natural."

Hope surged through William as he laid files into the box. Natural? Yeah. It did feel natural. When Shane wasn't fighting what was between them, it was the most natural fucking thing in the world. His heart pounded. Had he been anxious for nothing? Maybe he'd sold his dad short.

Still, immediate acceptance felt too good to be true.

"It wouldn't be ethical," he ventured, wary of a trap.

"No. No, it wouldn't be."

William's hands stilled at the sliver of iron behind the words. He raised his head and met his dad's eyes. A wall of morality stared back at him.

"I was a CEO for a company with over eighty employees. When you are in a position of power, it's important you never forget that the people working for you are dependent on you for a paycheck."

William's stomach dropped.

Was it really like that? Ever since Shane's pullback after sex, he'd been as jumpy as a damn cricket. Was he worried William was going to cut him loose if he didn't give in? Was he a creep taking advantage of Shane's vulnerabilities?

"It would be natural," his dad continued. "But it wouldn't be ethical."

"Doesn't he get a choice in what he wants?" William asked, his voice barely above a whisper. His mouth felt dry at his father's conviction, his stomach tight. Because it also felt true, in a sickening way.

"Can you trust that his choice isn't compromised by his position underneath your authority?" David volleyed back.

It wasn't like arguing with Ma. Arguing with Ma was like two roman candles shooting at one another, mostly sparks with very little impact.

Arguing with Dad was like trying to climb a wall made of slick glass.

"If there was something going on," William said, "and I'm not saying there is, it would be
consensual. It would be because maybe, it's hard out there to find someone you connect with. And maybe you just accept it if that connection falls in your lap."

There was one box left between them. William stared at it.

"William," said his father, pulling it over, "you are a grown man who can make his own decisions. But you also must deal with the consequences of those decisions. So, if you think that a relationship between you and an employee could end in any way other than disaster, you are of course welcome to walk that thin line. But remember, whatever ends up happening? You're responsible."

"Right."

The word tasted like chalk. That was it, he realized. His father wasn't going to bring it up again unless he did. Though it was obvious that, like Shane, he thought the idea of a relationship beyond farm work was a terrible idea.

"I'm thirsty," said David. "Why don't I finish this box, and you go down and get me something to drink? Oh, and tell your mother what time your fair is tomorrow. I'm going to try to get time off to see that grange display."

William nodded and pushed to his feet, his hands cold and mouth dry.

Hours later, on his way back home, he drove with no radio.

When they were moving furniture and carrying boxes to the garage it'd been easy to ignore the conversation, but driving home left him prisoner to his thoughts.

It had to be more than a bad idea. They'd told each other things; things that William had never told another living soul. Sometimes it felt like Shane could read his damn mind. Sure, he'd given hints to back the fuck off this week. But was it so unreasonable to hope that after he'd had time to think, maybe he would want to try again?

William passed a billboard promoting the autumn fair in Pelican Town tomorrow. He gripped the steering wheel.

After the fair, Shane would be back on normal hours. They just had to get through tomorrow and they could talk. What was between them might blow up in their faces, but what if it didn't? The chemistry they had was unique. Special. Sure, there were consequences to breaking the so-called sacred bond of employer/employee, but what about the loss of never trying?

Better to take it head on than spend the rest of his life wondering 'what if.'

"Lewis was so excited," Marnie said, digging in the cupboard. She retrieved a canvas grocery sack and went to the fridge, pulling out several containers of food. "He went to Pierre's first thing this morning and bought a bunch of fall flowers for them to plant together. I swear, he was meant to be a grandfather. Shame Stacey never had children."

Stacey, Shane knew, was Lewis's daughter from his previous marriage. Who lived in Zuzu. Where they were currently headed.
He waited against the counter while she tucked a few water bottles in the bag, continuing to ramble.

"Jas was excited, too. He had a corner already cleared in his flower bed just for her." She stood, blowing a frizzy bang from her face. "I ought to make a plot for Lewis to garden here at the ranch. If Jas enjoys today, it could be a fun little project for them, don't you think?"

Shane stared at the tile, grid swimming. "Yeah."

If he had any reason to object to Jas and Lewis bonding, it evaded him today. Marnie's nerves were too distracting. Not that he hadn't been the same an hour ago, but when she'd left to drop off Jas, he'd found his relief—10:00 am, and he was drunk as shit.

Right now it was a good thing. Shane didn't often see himself as steady, but while Marnie blustered and babbled around he felt like an anchor against her nervous energy. It'd probably bite him in the ass later when he sobered up, but that was a problem for two hours from now.

Marnie patted her pockets, her purse, her canvas bag, double checking she had everything. She'd dressed up today in black slacks and a mauve blouse, her hair braided with care. Shane hadn't bothered, defaulting to jeans and a t-shirt that didn't have farm crap on them; he had no one to impress. When assured nothing was missing, she grabbed her keys from the counter and they headed out the door.

The ride was silent at first, Pelican Town sleepy on a Sunday morning in autumn. Barely a soul stirred, though Haley wandered alone near the town square with her camera, taking nature shots in the angled sunlight.

Everyone is a fucking photographer now.

The universe and its jokes.

He stared out the window as they passed onto the highway, thinking, in a cold and detached way, of the last time he'd ridden passenger down this stretch of road. Six days ago, trapped in a different truck, William asking Shane if he'd known about his sexuality before their kiss. And he did know. So did Corey, who hated him for it. But Shane didn't kid himself—Corey would hate him even if he wasn't gay, because he resented his son's entire existence.

Marnie usually filled any journey with happy chatter and gossip, but today she let the radio do the talking. It was over an hour before she spoke, when a song ended and an advertisement came on.

"You shouldn't have drank today."

Shane stared impassively out the window. "Yeah."

She said nothing more.

They listened to music for the final hour of the drive. The truck was warm despite blowing AC, sun beating down on Shane's side, and he'd almost fallen asleep when Marnie turned onto the exit leading to Zuzu's west end.

After the monotonous stretch of freeway, Shane's nerves prickled back to life. They were met by huge billboards at towering heights; gas stations and fast food places; bridges and roundabouts, funneling into a half-dozen lanes of traffic. Vehicles were stretched back-to-back for miles and as Marnie's pick-up merged to join them, Shane was struck by intense claustrophobia. The further they drove into the city—the buildings growing taller, tighter, closer—the more pronounced it
He hadn't been to Zuzu in over two years. When had it become so cramped?

Restaurants and subway stations gave way to office buildings, then condos and high rises. Skyscrapers spiked in the distance, though before reaching them they met a large blue sign: *Patterson Regional Medical Center*. Marnie slowed, following its arrow. Another ten minutes down a winding side road led them to a massive grey and white building.

When they pulled through the entrance, Shane's slow-building nerves turned into a rushing wave of panic.

It wasn't the hospital. Zuzu City had a wide sprawl, each district getting their own, and this was not the one that haunted his dreams. But Harvey's clinic notwithstanding, Shane hadn't been to any type of hospital in over five years, and the sight of it rose bile from his stomach. Agreeing to this had been fucking psychotic. He'd lost his goddamn mind, and so had Marnie, for that matter. So much for being the 'normal' ones of the family; they were both clinically insane.

His panic was at odds with her calm hands on the wheel, steering them into the dim parking garage, daylight blocked by the narrow concrete. Shane stared at the floor mat. He didn't want to see the rows of vehicles, somewhere among them a beat up black Chevy with the license plate 08LWE2.

"Shall we?"

He blinked and looked up. The engine was quiet, the keys in Marnie's hand. They'd made it to the far side of the garage and parked without his notice. She gathered her bags and Shane opened his door, stepping out.

*It's only for Marnie. You don't even have to look at his stupid face.*

They walked through the electric sliding doors and were met with a whoosh of central air, cool and mingled with hospital scents. A big, open lobby greeted them. Shane followed Marnie down the hall toward the elevators, staring at the floor. If he focused hard enough maybe he could close off his nose, block out all those smells that made him queasy.

It worked until the elevator doors opened. A nurse walked out wheeling a gurney, her patient asleep and hooked up to tubes and IV bags. Shane's breakfast churned. He turned, using the back of his hand to plug his mouth.

Marnie's fingers closed over his shoulder. "Shane?"

The nurse disappeared around a corner and they stepped inside. The doors slid shut and he shook his head, forcing his hand to drop: *Forget it.*

For once, Marnie was attuned enough to leave it alone.

The elevator pinged open to reveal a shiny waxed floor, and a world inhabited by aqua-scrubbed nurses and white-coated MDs. Several were clustered around a station of monitors, telemetry readings running across black screens. To either side were hallways lined with empty gurneys and chairs, visitors meandering between the medics. The air was full of more toxic smells, and Shane tensed as they went to the main desk to ask for Trudy's room.

"This way," Marnie said, nodding him forward.
Her door read "Daniels" on a little magnetic strip, and on the wall beside it were several posted papers. Mostly colorful graphs Shane could make no sense of, but also warnings: patient was a fall risk, oxygen tank in use. From behind the door came an awful hacking cough, like dry vomit.

Shane felt certain the room didn't want him to enter. There was an invisible forcefield pushing him back, like two negative ends of a magnet rolling against one another. Marnie must've felt it too, hesitating with her fingers on the door, but then with a deep breath she pushed it open and stepped inside.

Shane dutifully followed.

The room was long, a double, the first bed empty. Curtains divided it from the second, and Shane found his steps slowing as Marnie walked past them to the other side.

"Hi, Mom," he heard her say, timid but warm. Then, more brittle: "Corey."

Shane stopped.

"Sis," said a gruff voice. "You made it."

"Yes, we did."

The voice turned sharp. "We?"

Heart drumming, Shane tucked his hands in his pockets and forced himself to take those last steps forward.

Grandma Trudy lay pale and emaciated on white sheets. Marnie stood on one side of the bed, bent over and placing a kiss on her frail cheek. On the opposite side, in a stiff hospital chair, sat Corey. His thighs were spread wide open, the ankle of one leg resting on the knee of the other, like he wanted to take up more space in the room.

He stared at Shane with dark, sunken eyes.

"Well..." he breathed.

He was thinner than Shane remembered. His hairline had receded the last few years, the dark strands peppered in dirty grey and slicked back with too much product. He said nothing, just bored a hole into Shane with his stare. Total stillness, like the earth had forgotten to spin.

Stillness broken by Trudy hacking up a lung.

Three heads swiveled toward the violent wheezing. Shane—pulse racing as the moment caught up with him—took a good look at her for the first time.

She was a far cry from the grandmother he remembered as a boy. Back then, she'd always been done up like a caricature of a housewife: hair looking fresh from the salon, a cigarette dangling between her lips as she scolded him for breathing too hard on her plants.

Today, she was bald from chemo, wearing a knit cap with the hospital's logo. Her skin was almost translucent and covered in bruises. She was attached to oxygen and IVs, a half-full bag of dark urine hooked to the side of her bed. Four different monitors lined the wall, flashing heart rates and O2 levels, the lines on one of them spiking as she coughed.

"Well," she creaked, voice so raspy it sounded like it might break. "I've got one daughter and one
grandson. What a lucky day for me." She turned, scowling at Corey. "See? It's not hard. Took me one call."

"Guess you were lucky enough to get her at a better time," Corey said easily.

Trudy's gnarled finger pressed a button. Her bed lifted to its upright position with an electric hum. "Well?" she snapped. "Are you going to have a seat? Can't stand you all looming over me."

Marnie quickly sank into an empty chair beside the bed. It was the last free one, and while Shane knew there were spares around the partition, he didn't feel like making himself at home. He crossed instead to the window, leaning against the radiator that ran its length. "You look good, Marn," said Corey, reclining in his seat. "All that farm fresh air, eh?"

His arms rested akimbo behind his head, sweat spots dotting the pits of his denim shirt. Slowly, his gaze slid to Shane. "What?" he said with mock surprise. "Not even hello?"

Shane looked away, saying nothing. "Oh, shut up, Corey. You're like a big old dog, barking all over the place," Trudy grumbled, before succumbing to another coughing fit. As she spit blood into a bedpan at her side, letting it dribble into a pool, Shane remembered her words over the phone. Good-for-nothing, piece-of-shit brother.

If she was berating Corey just as much to his face, and he was fucking putting up with it, not even barbing back? Well, that was a golden confirmation of Shane's suspicions. There was a prize at the end of this, and Corey was going to squeeze it for every penny he wasn't worth. "So," said Trudy, giving a long wheeze. "I'm assuming your brother told you they gave me a few months?"

"He told me what the doctor said, yes." Marnie touched her arm. Corey's chair squeaked as he eased back more. Shane could feel the dark eyes still on him, his dad's gaze as tense as his body was relaxed; he tried to focus on the gross little glob of blood in the bedpan.

"Oh, I've brought you something," Marnie added, reaching into the canvas bag at her feet. She pulled out a tupperware of fresh cut melons, grapes, and strawberries. "Here. The fruit hospitals serve might as well be rubber."

Trudy looked at the fruit, then at Marnie. "Sweet thought," she said, patting her hand. "I'll try to eat it in a bit. Chemo hurts my stomach. Mostly on those nasty protein shakes."

"Only if you can manage it," Marnie agreed, setting the container down on the side table, along with a fork she'd brought.

Trudy coughed and closed her eyes, strength clearly ebbing. "How are things down on your little ranch, Marn?"

"She's—well, she's doing." Marnie glanced at Shane. She gave him a brief, encouraging smile before looking back at her mother. "It's been wonderful having Shane's help. He does so much of
the labor these days, I'd have to downsize without him."

Liar. We're struggling, and you have to downsize even with my help.

But Shane didn't blame her for not leaking blood into shark-filled waters.

"Well," said Trudy, a measure of cheer touching her voice. "Looks like Jessica did something right, even if Corey didn't."

Corey cleared his throat but Trudy ignored him, rusty wheels barreling on.

"Look, I won't waste your time. My estate? It's going to fall on you kids. Corey thinks he can handle the last of my care and carry out my wishes on his own, but I'd prefer to see you more before the end, Marn."

"Yes, of course," Marnie said, adjusting her legs in the uncomfortable chair. "Of course I'd help, Mom."

Shane listened carefully to the estate talk, despite trying to blend in with the sterile walls. Trudy was being reasonable, much as it clashed with his boyhood memories of her.

So far...so good?

He wasn't sure, and kept quiet.

Corey leaned forward and uncrossed his legs, resting his elbows on his knees. "And I've been telling her that you're damn busy on that ranch. You got a whole operation out there. Me and my little job at the factory? I got the time, and I'm right close by."

Yeah. Close by, and full of fucking bullshit.

Marnie looked at him, steady. "If it falls to us, I'm going to help."

"See, Corey?" Trudy reached for the side table, changing her mind about the fruit. She grabbed the fork in a liver-spotted hand. "You were so worried about Marnie being overwhelmed, you forgot she's got your boy helping out."

She squinted at the fruit and speared a slice of melon, holding it up to sniff before taking a nibble, as if it might bite her back. When it didn't, her face relaxed; she chewed and swallowed.

"The house," she said, setting the fork down, "needs to be boxed up. Someone needs to oversee the sale. Corey is keeping the yard cut, but I'm sure there are some repairs that need to be handled before it can be sold."

"Of course," Marnie repeated.

Trudy looked at Shane. Though she'd verbally acknowledged his presence, it was the first time her rheumy eyes had fixated on him. She inspected slowly up and down, then frowned.

"He sure does look like his daddy when he was that age, doesn't he, Marn?" she said, sounding disgusted.

Marnie fidgeted in her seat. "Well, um. I suppose he does."

Shane's face burned, and he made the mistake of looking at Corey—who stared back with a smirk, the apple of his cheek meeting his eye in dark amusement.
"Chip off the old block, all right," he said.

There was a beat of tense silence.

"The um, landscaping," said Marnie loudly, steering back to the safer topic. "And the sales. I could help with those. We'd have to make some arrangements, of course. Maybe ask my part-time help to come in extra days…" She glanced at Shane. "Perhaps if you talked to William?"

Hearing his name in that room, in front of everyone, Shane felt like his clothes had dropped. He could still feel his father's eyes.

"Who's William?" Trudy asked.

"Oh, sorry," said Marnie. She smoothed her pant legs, then her blouse. "Was just thinking aloud. William is Shane's boss. Shane helps on the ranch during the mornings and weekends, but his day job is for one of the local farmers. Our neighbor, so it's quite convenient. Very nice man." She turned back to Shane. "Was just wondering if you might take some more half days. Then, maybe not. I know it must be a strain for him…you boys have such a big load there."

It was like Marnie's visitor-mode had kicked into gear. She'd finally found her voice, and was rummaging in her bags for more food as she spoke. Shane wondered if she'd also been expecting the vicious, predatory woman he remembered, and had relaxed at finding her helpless in bed, fangs and claws removed.

"Corey?" Marnie said, surfacing with more fruit and some sandwiches.

Corey's gaze slid off Shane.

"You know?" he said, sitting up straighter. "Think I just might."

He pushed out of the chair, reaching over Trudy's bed to accept the sandwich container. Halfway there he met Shane's eyes—the smirk gone, and a dead, cold look in its place.

Shane felt trapped. He was as helpless as a little boy, no one else in the room, just him and his dad and whatever came next. Stale whiskey coated his tongue like sandpaper but his buzz was long gone, along with any backbone he'd scraped together that morning. He'd been determined not to give into his dad's bullshit games, to not even look him in the face, yet here he was, stuck—

Corey broke the line of contact, easing back in his chair as if nothing had happened.

"Thanks, Marn," he said, cracking open the container. "This'll hit the spot, all right. Always been the thoughtful one of the family, eh, Mom?"

He took a big bite.

"She sure is. Best thing ever came out of your father, that's for sure." Trudy turned her head, absently snapping her fingers at Shane. It was something she'd done often when he was small: snap for her cigarettes, her purse, the TV remote. The call to order broke him from his frozen state and he blinked at her.

"Shane, get grandma some water."

A beige pitcher and stack of plastic cups sat on the table closest to him. Feeling like someone else was controlling his limbs he freed one of the cups from its crinkly wrapper and began to pour, the trickle of water noisy in the quiet room. His blood was rushing back in, and along with it the hyper-
awareness of his surroundings.

Then his dad spoke. The words were sticky, too-sweet:

"How's Jas doin', Shane?"

Shane's hand jerked, spilling water down the side of the cup.

"Fine," he said quietly.

It was the first time he'd talked to Corey in over two years. Not looking up, he grabbed napkins from the tray, mopping the spill with trembling hands before passing the water to Trudy.

She took a small, careful sip. "Who's Jas?"

"What, never told you, Ma?" Corey swallowed a bite of sandwich, then dropped the half-eaten thing back in its container, wiping crumbs off his jeans to the floor. "He's got a kid."

He shot a sharp look Shane's direction.

"Hard to make time out of thin air, boy. Job at a farm, working at home, taking care of a little girl? Awful lot on one plate."

"Who's her mother?" Trudy snapped.

Shane's palms glazed with sweat. "She's not—she's not mine…"

"Mom," Marnie said, with a nervous glance at him. "Jas is Shane's goddaughter. He was friends with her parents."

"Huh," said Trudy, squinting. "Well, good luck, Shane. Kids aren't easy. You never know what sort of person they'll be when they grow up, no matter how hard you try."

Shane didn't know what to make of this statement from the woman he'd once regarded as barely a step above his own father. Yet before anyone could respond, she rubbed her forehead and spoke again, exhausted.

"Corey, Shane, could you give me and Marnie a minute? There's something I need to talk to her about in private."

Corey gave an exaggerated stretch.

"Right you are, Mom," he said, the words as easy as his mannerism. He took his time getting up, closing the half-eaten sandwich container and setting it on the chair.

Shane's eyes darted between the three other people in the room, heart hammering.

He'd come today to protect Marnie, and had thought that meant not leaving her side. Not letting her vulture family swoop down to make carrion of her during a vulnerable time, when it'd be easy to play on her soft nature. Until this morning he would've trusted Trudy as far as he could throw her.

Turned out in this fragile state, he could throw her pretty damn far. Dying had given her bitter, abusive old ass some clarity. If anything, Trudy asking for the room—along with her blatant lack of patience with Corey—was a good sign. It meant she wanted to discuss business where Marnie had a chance, and that it wasn't his grandmother he had to worry about anymore.
Just his dad.

The opportunity to corner Shane seemed sufficient compensation for them being shooed away, and he could feel the lasers of smug satisfaction from across the room. He also felt Marnie's softer stare, full of concern, silently questioning if he was okay with this.

Refusing to meet any of their eyes, he jammed his hands in his pockets and headed past the curtain toward the door.

"What, ain't even gonna wait for me?" Corey said, hot on his heels, "We gotta give them a minute, son. That means you and me, we got some catching up to do."

"Like hell we do," Shane muttered, rounding into the hall.

"Yeah?" Corey caught up to him, and within a few paces snagged Shane's arm with enough force to spin him around. "Like hell we do."

Shane jerked from the grasp and kept walking. He had no idea where he was going or what he was doing—only that he had to get the fuck out of this hallway, because standing around with his dad was not an option. He was here for Marnie, not this. This could fucking wait. This could fucking wait forever.

Corey laughed. "You gonna make me chase you all around the hospital, boy? 'Cause I got fucking time. I got all the time in the goddamned world."

Shane sped up, but Corey kept pace at his side.

"How 'bout you tell me why your ass showed up today?" he continued, poison inside the taunt. "'Cause I sure as shit know it ain't out of love for your fucking grandma."

"Fuck off."

"You ain't going anywhere, Shane. You're waiting on Marnie, so you and me, we're gonna fucking talk. So what is it? Why the sudden need for closure with dear old gran?"

Shane's head was going into a tunnel. For the second time that day his surroundings were closing in, but rather than the anxious walls of claustrophobia, now it was blackness. He focused on walking ahead, weaving between the nurses, trying with a childlike foolishness to pretend if he couldn't see his father, his father couldn't see him.

Corey stepped in front to cut him off, hand on the wall. When Shane tried to dodge, his path was blocked again.

"She's not mine," Corey mocked in an artificially high voice. "You wanna tell grandma why that is, Shane? Wanna tell her why a sweet little girl like Jas"—he tilted his head—"can't possibly be yours?"

Shane was not about to do this. He wasn't going to play chicken in a hospital hallway with his dad, with nurses milling about, those fucking empty gurneys lining the walls like they'd just finished dropping off their dead to the morgue.

Though it made him want to puke, he stood his ground, lifting his head to look Corey in the eye.

Corey stared back.
"My sister know?" he demanded, jabbing his face closer to Shane's. No more of the smarmy sucking up to his mother, or pretending he cared about his sister. No, he'd chucked all that aside before he was even out of the room. Too much work to keep up any mask of decency.

"I asked you," Corey repeated, louder, "a goddamn question, Shane. Does my sister know? Because I swear to fucking god, if you're sniffing around here for money—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

A nurse appeared behind them, face nervous but voice firm. She avoided looking at Corey, addressing Shane. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask that you keep it down."

Corey's sneer rearranged into an unpleasant smile.

"Course, sweetheart," he said, voice like grainy honey. He turned to Shane. "C'mon, son. We'll discuss this away from these nice folk."

With that, he draped an arm over Shane's shoulders and led him down the hall.

It was like being in a dream that he knew was a dream, and yet couldn't wake up from or control. He'd been here before, floating down surreal hospital hallways where people came to die, where blinding white and beeping red lulled one softly from dream to nightmare. And now he was here under his father's arm, trapped, a caught fucking mouse.

Stop it. Snap out of it. Push him off. Call the fucking security and tell them he's psychotic. Go back to the room. Do fucking anything. Anything.

But Shane did nothing.

Corey led him the rest of the way down the hall, and only once they'd turned the corner did he jerk back his arm, like he'd been touching something disgusting. The area was deserted by nurses and visitors alike, and in the privacy he rounded on Shane, index finger out.

"Telling you," he hissed, pointing it in his face. "You get involved in this? You make it so I don't get what's fucking coming to me? Your ass will pay."

 Apparently it was only disgusting to touch Shane, not to be close. It was a stare-off, the tunnel of black closing in again; Shane wanted to close his eyes but was afraid, and Corey was right up in his business, inches from his face, breathing the same air as him, performing the one trick that had never failed, this silent intimidation—

Then a cruel grin twisted over the dry lips. Corey eased back.

"Boozing it up before you came, eh?" He shook his head in mock disappointment. "Tsk, tsk. Then again, some things ain't never gonna change. What was the fucker's name? William? That your new Gary, Shane?"

Though the arm wasn't over Shane's shoulders anymore, the ghost of its weight still pushed down. The room pulsed, and the black tunnel swirled.

He'd left this before, he remembered, in some vague corner of his brain while the rest of him shut down. He'd walked out on this. But here there was no chance of that. He was disappearing, trying to pull himself out of the suction of a whirlpool while situated right over the drain.

Gary. Corey had called him that, when Garrett was alive. Shane hadn't known whether it was to
piss him off or because he just didn't care. Probably both.

And now William.

The new Garrett?

*William.*

Shane had been fucking right all along these past few days. It was written all over him, wasn't it? Like in hotels, when black light was shone over the sheets and carpet, revealing the sins of anyone who'd stayed there. Corey's eyes were like that—seeing William's fingerprints.

For several seconds Shane lost contact, forgetting where he was. He wasn't in the hall. He wasn't in the hospital. He wasn't touching ground. He was just existing, floating here in front of his father's face while loathing dripped down like slime. He tried to find the thread again—William?—as Corey's words continued to pour, more vitriolic than before.

"—because you fuck this up for me? Trust me, Shane, ain't nobody want a perv watching a little girl. You know that, right? Ain't nobody gonna let you near her after that. So you will *watch your fucking step*, and if I see so much as a hair from your head on that estate—"

Footsteps padded closer and Corey paused, listening to their cadence. Familiar.

"If you're smart?" he hissed, voice dropping to a whisper for his final thoughts. "You do everything you can to keep my sister away, too. 'Cause I fucking swear, I can make your life hell."

The footsteps approached the corner and Corey backed off.

He hadn't been touching Shane, but he'd eaten up all their surrounding air, and when he stepped away the rest of the world rushed in all at once. Shane was lightheaded when he heard Marnie's voice.

"Shane? Oh, good, that's where you are! I went the wrong way at first…"

She slowed as she neared them. Corey had slipped back into the mask of ease he'd worn in Trudy's room, while Shane remained against the wall.

"Shane," she repeated, eyes flickering between them. "We can go now."

Corey leaned back on his heels.

"Leaving already?" he said, his tone overly casual. "Finally got you up here, and can't even stick around for a game of cards?" He laughed, then clapped Marnie's shoulder. "Was good to see you, Marn. Still make a mean sandwich too."

Tilting in, he brushed a kiss to her cheek.

For the first time since arriving at the hospital, Shane could finally fucking move of his own accord—and it took everything in him not to jump his dad then and there. Marnie looked as uncomfortable under the kiss as Shane felt watching it, and neither of them breathed easy until he'd backed up.

"Good talk, son," he said, giving a genial nod to Shane. "Don't be such a stranger, yeah?"

With that he walked back to his mother's room, whistling.
When he was gone the hallway fell quiet but for soft hospital sounds. Marnie looked at Shane, and this time he looked back. Her warm, tired eyes greeted him like a flame after he'd been trapped in ice.

A lump rose to his throat.

"You, um. You ready?" he asked, pushing off the wall, trying to swallow it.

Marnie nodded. "Very much."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. Her gentle perfume wafted over him, and together they walked to the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for continuing to read! We appreciate all of you sticking with this story.

Extra thank you to our beta, Xylianna. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you'd like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is November 24th, 2-4pm PST.
Belong

Chapter Summary

In Which Everyone Has a Good Time At The Fair

Trigger Warnings:
- Country club khakis
- Fortune telling bullshit
- Teddy bear abductions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Stardew Valley Fair spread lavishly across the town square. Visitors lined up at ticket booths, food stalls, and ring tosses, courtesy of a traveling carnival company. There were red-and-white game tents lined with stuffed animal prizes, manned by workers dressed as ringmasters and strongmen. Most numerous of all were the colorful grange displays; an unprecedented turnout had them branching beyond the festivities, winding paths through local businesses.

Shane had come early to help set up the animals. Marnie spent the morning bustling between a hundred tasks, while Lewis made an annoying habit of stopping by every twenty minutes to note what a fine job he was doing. Now the fair had been open an hour and the work was done, but Shane still tried to look busy. If visitors thought him a handyman rather than one of the ranchers, perhaps they wouldn't talk to him. He was kneeling beside the pig pen pretending to secure hinges when a clear, familiar voice chimed out.

"Shane? It's Shane, right?"

A glance over his shoulder produced a pair of pointed, flat black shoes.

And a drop in his stomach.

Did William's mother ever fucking leave town? Or did she rent a room at the B&B, and only pretend to live in Zuzu?

Today, Angie Bauer was the model of casual chic. Her tailored jeans and striped shirt were made breezy by a loose yellow sweater. She held a paper cup of coffee in one hand, and a bulky, gem-blue bag rested on a crooked elbow.

Shane had a flash of his own mother. She'd been a hippie—and not one who wore exotic clothing meant to look earthy, while being just as fashion-conscious as the society woman before him. No, Jessica had been a patch-it-up, 'let the bottom of your skirt drag in the dirt' hippie. Her hair had been straggly, white, and long. She'd never be caught in pearl combs like Angie.

"Uh, yeah," he said, standing, dusting his hands on his jeans. "N-nice to see you again."

Then he caught on the dark-haired man at her side. He had to be close to Shane's age. In tan trousers and a green polo, he was handsome in a unforgettable way, yet his sleek appearance—more country club than country—made him a suitable fit beside Angie.
A new Cameron-like appendage? How many makeshift sons did this woman have?

Though Shane had at least showered that morning, he hadn't shaved in days and a scruffy beard was filling in. His eyes were dry, probably bloodshot. He was definitely advertising his hangover on his face.

Great.

Angie brightened at realizing it was her son's farmhand she'd seen from behind.

"Oh, thank goodness!" she said, shifting her purse. "Henry? This is Shane. He works for my son. Shane, this is Henry, a friend from town. David had something come up, and Henry gallantly offered to escort an old lady to the fair."

Shane shouldn't have eaten breakfast that morning, seeing as it now churned in his stomach. He remembered Angie's words from their first meeting: Cameron's an old friend, Shane.

His eyes settled on Henry, on the trim clothes, the handsome features, the expensive haircut. Probably went to the same place that did Cameron's fancy-ass fade. Men like this went to a stylist, not a barber. And they had professions, not jobs, which showed in their polished leather shoes.

For a guy as alternative as William, he sure did like the clean-cut types, didn't he?

Angie sipped her coffee, looking at the animals. "What lovely creatures. I'm sorry that I can't dawdle. William gave us directions to his grange display, but surprise, surprise—my son isn't answering his phone. Could you tell me where the produce booths are?"

"Um. Over there." Shane jerked his head toward the Stardrop Saloon. "Main square, on the right."

Angie beamed. "You are so helpful! Thank you, I'd be lost for ages."

"Nice to meet you," said Henry, giving Shane a nod and smile.

Trip on a cow pie.

Shane returned to his bogus job of inspecting the hinges once they were gone. Children squealed in the distance, and he saw Jas dragging Vincent to the rabbit cages.

He moved on to the next hinge.

Perfect.

All the hinges were fucking perfect.

This wasn't even a thing.

Sighing, he looked up. Marnie was seven or eight booths down at her grange, and at catching Shane's eye she stood and gave an exuberant wave for him to come over.

"The animals look set," she said, brimming with energy. "Do you mind sitting the booth for awhile? You can keep an eye on the pens from here, and I've promised to meet Lewis again, now that we're in full swing."

"Okay."

"Thank you!" She grabbed her clipboard and a canvas tote, then hurried off to the square.
Shane sat on the creaky folding chair. His body felt like an empty tin can.

God, this whole thing was surreal. The community coming together for wholesome family fun. Tourists flooding into their little hamlet like so many pieces of grain funneling into a bin, shaken down from the surrounding cities. The crisp autumn air that was full of laughter and 4-H sounds: chickens clucking, goats bleating, the ding! of someone winning a prize. A breeze that scattered dry leaves to the cobblestone, wafting scents of hay and warm cinnamon.

It was idyllic.

It wasn't fucking real.

Marnie had caught up with Lewis, now walking hand-in-hand with him to admire the granges. It was a corny fall festival—not exactly the romance of the flower dance or moonlight jellies—but for Marnie it was the perfect place to be. Her face glowed as she stole glances at Lewis between chatting with the vendors. Tucked into this quaint notch of life in the valley, dating a man central to its social hub? That position was made for someone like her.

Because she'd gotten out. She wasn't like the rest of them.

Shane sat, stale booze on his breath, slumped in a crappy chair at a festival he had no business attending. His dad's words sucked at his thoughts like a parasite.

Some things ain’t never gonna change.

This morning he'd treated himself to five shots with his coffee, instead of his usual three. He'd been nicely drunk while setting up, but now that it was gone he felt hollow, detached from everything.

Behind Marnie and Lewis, Angie buzzed through the granges like a bumblebee in her bright yellow and stripes, Henry at her side. They were almost at The Bowery's booth.

For the first time all morning, Shane looked that way. William was small in the distance, his back turned, tweaking his display. Probably twisting a jar of layered beans because it'd been a millimeter off or something, which in William's world was against the fucking law.

Shane's tired, hungover brain gave a delayed lurch.

The law.

Lawyer.

Blinking, he looked back at Angie and her polo-ed shadow. Henry— the lawyer from Zuzu. The guy she'd been trying to set both William and Shane up with, when she'd come over for lunch the first time.

So that was it? William jerked Shane off last week, and now he'd asked mommy dearest to set up that date after all?

Like anyone could blame him. William had to be dying for a hit of sanity these days. A week of space from Shane and he'd probably realized what a vortex of shit he'd gotten sucked into; finally remembered he lived in a world of men who didn't all run off like dramatic babies after sex.

They all fucking belonged. Marnie and Lewis, in the heart of small town life. Angie and Henry, in the elite circles of Zuzu. William, a bridge between both those worlds.
Then Shane, a useless lump no matter where he was.

"Oh, what a lovely design! Look, Trevor, at the egg sunrise!"

An elderly woman and young boy stopped in front of Marnie's booth. The woman gave a warm smile from under her purple and red hat. "Did you design this, son?"

"My aunt," Shane said flatly.

"How creative!"

The boy tugged on the woman's sleeve. "Grandma, can we please play the fishing game?"

She nodded, eyes still traveling over the eggs. "I suppose…you've been patient while Nana looks."

"Yes!" he cried, jumping and pulling on her hand.

As they crossed to the games on the other side of the fair, Shane could only think: **two more people who belong.**

Where did he belong? Probably back on 88th avenue with Corey. Back in a house with musty carpet, and a fridge empty but for cheap beer and condiments. A TV on top volume that blasted biased, angry news, punctuated by slurs of agreement from his drunk dad. Shane walking in late, also drunk from stopping at the bar after his shift. Accidentally slamming the door too loud, and Corey yelling, "KEEP IT THE FUCK DOWN!" over his blaring television.

That's where bottom of the barrel people like him belonged.

"You think you've finally got what it takes this year, Bill?"

William looked up from the final touches on his grange to see Pierre standing with crossed arms. It wasn't just the presentation that gave him pause. It was the list of goods the signs advertised. It was the unified tattoo-styled labels on his jams, salsas, juices and specialty oils next to the colorful layout.

Just like in poker, those tapping fingers told William the general store owner was nervous.

**Good.**

Retailers had an advantage over small farming operations; the rules only stated that items had to be local. It wasn't hard to source local when you ran a general store, and the last two years, Pierre had swept through the competition like a produce-festooned broom. Not this year. William was going to snatch the trophy out from underneath the smug shithead, and then Pierre could suck The Bowery's big, award-winning dick.

"Oh, I guess we'll just have to see, Pierre."

**See you pout like a baby when I win.**

Caroline and Jodi came up as he was folding the tablecloth smooth.

"It's very impressive," Caroline agreed, wrapping a hand into Pierre's elbow. "Isn't it, dear?"

Pierre sniffed and readjusted his glasses. "Well, it is certainly...meticulous. See you at the judging, Bill."

William gave him a half smirk as the three of them walked on.

The Stardew Valley Fair was massive this year. He ran the side booth next to his display, and it wasn't long before he'd gotten some potential contacts for supply contracts.

"Will!"

His smile at hearing his mother's voice died when he looked up.

Who in the hell is that with her?

He was one of his parents' crowd. Polo. Clean-shaven. Fucking winged leather loafers. Had to be a lawyer—only a lawyer would be clueless enough to wear winged shoes to a fair. Even Ma had been practical enough to wear flat Jimmy Choos today.

He leaned down and accepted a coffee-flavored kiss on his cheek, whispering, "Where's Dad?"

She pursed her lips, waving her coffee cup. "Something came up at the office."

That was a familiar as fuck excuse. Then again, the fair was on a Monday, and Mondays were when everything seemed to hit the fan for the financial district. He shouldn't have been surprised.

"Right," he said, recalibrating.

"But," said Angie, grabbing Mr. Replacement's arm, "I did bring a friend! Henry, this is my son, William. William, this is Henry Aldrich Jr. He's Nelson Aldrich's boy."

"Hello, William." Henry held out a manicured hand. It felt baby-soft in his callused fist, and William kept a pleasant expression plastered to his face while his pulse throbbed with fury.

Ma beamed in cheerful pride over Henry's shoulder. "I thought that you could show us around."

William had been counting on this networking opportunity, and with Shane working for Marnie today, he didn't have anyone else to man his booth.

"Maybe after we get through with the judging? Then I'll be free."

Henry gave a low whistle. "My god, man," he said, impressed. "You designed this?"

William nodded.

Handing him her empty cup, Angie pulled out her phone to take a few pictures. "Oh, it's wonderful, son!"

William sniffed her coffee then took a sip. It was too sweet, but he'd been up since three and it served her right after tossing a stranger on him with no warning.

"Are these also going up on the wall?" Henry asked, standing closer to William as she changed the angles of her phone to fit the entire display.
"Well of course."

"The wall?" William asked in a flat tone.

"Oh, you know." She flipped her thumb over the pictures. "I like to keep a record. Henry, honey, take a few with us in front!"

She handed Henry The Single Lawyer her phone, and William stood next to her.

"Why is Shane all the way on the other side of the fair?" she asked as Henry took the shots.

William felt his ears get red at the bald-faced question.

"Uh," he said intelligently. "What?"

She rolled her eyes and stepped away from the display, taking back her phone. "I asked why your employee is on the other side of the fair, you goose. Those loud farm machines are doing a wonder on your hearing."

William sat at the booth, stacking jam jars. He was over there because it was away from William, of course. Officially it was to help Marnie, but he wasn't stupid. Shane was avoiding him. William had hoped to see him later tonight when the fair was breaking down, to feel out the weather before it burst on his property tomorrow morning. Apparently the universe had heard his plan, snickered, then dropped a mom and Henry shaped turd right in his lap.

"His family's ranch has a display, and his aunt is doing a lot of the set up. She needed him more."

Angie brightened. "Oh, do you think—"

Before she could finish the question, her phone went off. She frowned. "One moment, boys."

She walked away, a finger in her ear as she tried to get reception in bumfuck wonderland.

"When Angela told me you were going to be presenting at the fair, I didn't expect such artistry," Henry said, his tone sincere.

His mom's formal name was like a record scratch.


Henry blinked stupidly.

Strike one, my dude.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Her name is Angie," William said. "She hears you using the full version, and you'll be blacklisted from her parties faster than you can wipe shit off those nice shoes."

Henry flushed, and William bit back telling him to fuck off with any pleasant expectations. Where the hell had Ma pulled this soft idiot out from? Was there something about him that screamed, 'Please, give me moronic twinks, I beg you'?

"Good catch," Henry said. "I won't forget."

William smiled at some people passing by. "You know, if you want, I can meet you and Ma at the
Food court after they do the judging. I really need to stay here. This is my biggest market of the year."

Henry picked up a jar of blueberry jam.

"Three fifty a pop, huh?" he said, turning it from side to side. He looked at the signs William had posted. "And forty for a case? How many cases are you trying to sell?"

William frowned at the sudden interest. "Not just the jam. I've got beer, wine, honey—"

Henry waved a hand. "Yes, yes. Your portfolio is diversified. How much would the total gross be if you were to sell every one of those boxes, hmm?"

William narrowed his eyes. "Four thousand," he said, snapping out a number that was twice his expectations.

"Done." Henry pulled a checkbook from his back pocket. "Who do I make it out to?"

William stared at his beautiful pen and watch. They were gold, like the stud in his right ear.

"The Bowery," he said, taking a card from the stack on his table. "And...perhaps we can do further business."

William knew the Aldrichs. Henry Sr. was the grandfather, who'd inherited his fortune from a rich mother. His son Nelson—or "Nel" as the old fuckers at the club called him—was a womanizing toad. There'd been a handful of rumors over the last five years that he'd pushed his attentions on secretaries, who'd all mysteriously left for better opportunities.

According to his mother, Henry was supposed to be different. A self made fucker, working his way up into a respected law firm. But it looked like the high-handed, control-freak nature of the family was still tightly ingrained.

William sifted through his options as Henry wrote the check.

The most attractive idea was throwing a fit and telling him to fuck off, but Ma was here. It was her first fair, and the best one to showcase his work. He didn't want to cause problems. Was he outraged and insulted? Sure. But who gave a fuck when he might be able to turn this to his advantage?

"You have a lot of clients, Henry?" he said, mind working furiously through his emotions, drop-kicking the shame into a box and locking it down. "Corporate law?"

Henry blinked, caught off guard.

*Strike two, jerk off. Don't underestimate me because I'm out in the boonies. My blood is the same ugly blue as yours. Just because I'm in coveralls doesn't mean I didn't grow up sucking from that same money teat.*

It made William's stomach sick, negotiating like he was purchasable, but the fuck if he wasn't going to do this on his terms. Sell a man a beer and get drunk for a day. Get a contract for a brewery, however…

"Um, yes. Yes, actually," Henry said, answering his question.

"You could buy today's output. But, I have another idea."
"What are you proposing?"

"You put away that checkbook," William said in an even voice, "and agree to look over a contract. I'd like to be the supplier for your practice's gift baskets."

He met Henry's eyes. The man was like a Ken doll, all plastic edges and polished beauty without a drop of authenticity in his soul. Maybe the hot rich guy waving fat wads of cash worked for some people, but not him.

"Why, William! This is gorgeous!"

Marnie's cheerful voice broke through the tension bubble with a snap. William swiveled his head to see her and Lewis approaching. They were like a gust of fresh air. He shook Lewis's hand, a kinship with the slightly shabby mayor springing up in him. William and Henry might share origins, but Stardew was his real home.

Lewis tilted his hat up as if to make room for his eyebrows. "You've outdone yourself this year, m'boy." He put a hand conspicuously to his mouth, stage whispering, "And between the three of us? You've outdone Pierre as well."

Marnie beamed. "I've got Shane running the show so I can take a gander at all these beautiful displays. Yours is so creative!" She nodded toward the opposite end of the square. "Can't see it too well from here, but Jas helped design ours."

In the distance, Marnie's grange stood out against the colorful produce booths. White, tan, and brown eggs created a muted sunrise, the darker eggs making a circle in the center, growing brighter as the sun spoked out. It was cradled by golden hay that gave the illusion of glowing rays. Shane sat beside it, hands in his pockets, slouching and staring at the ground as people mingled around him.

William pulled his eyes away, afraid that if his gaze lingered, he'd out them both.

"Thank you so much." He nodded to Henry. "Henry, this is Mayor Lewis and his girlfriend Marnie. Marnie is my neighbor. Henry is my mom's friend, all the way from Zuzu."

"Hello," said Henry. "Nice to meet you both."

Lewis met him with a hearty handshake. "Pleasure!"

"Is this your first time in the valley?" Marnie asked kindly. "Certainly a beautiful day to see it."

"It is, ma'am. Actually, I was just trying to convince this handsome fellow that he should show me around." Henry flashed her a sunny smile.

William kept his face even at the clear manipulation. No wonder his mother had pinged on this joker; he was just as driven as she was.

Marnie gave William a coy, in-the-know look, eyes dancing. "Well, don't let us interrupt!" She touched Lewis's shoulder. "Let's leave these boys to it."

After they were gone, William's mask dropped and he faced Henry, who was clearly enjoying the negotiation.

"Well?" William asked.
"You know, I'd love for you to convince me. Hard to do that if we're stuck at this booth all day."

"I'm not someone you can just write a check for, Aldrich. But if you wanna do business? Sure. We can talk."

Henry's eyes wandered his body. While William hadn't dressed with seduction in mind, he hadn't wanted to meet up with Shane for the first time in nearly a week looking scruffy. His hair was pulled back with the sides freshly buzzed. His t-shirt had the Bowery Logo on it—a stylized B over a cornucopia of produce and canned goods—and outlined a figure fit from years of manual labor. His jeans, while faded, fell neatly over clean boots. He could have been Mr. August for Gay Country Living.

"I'll agree to talking...but only if you promise you'll think about more later," Henry said, slipping his hands in his pockets.

William raised an eyebrow. "We'll see."

He snagged a brown leather jacket off his chair and shoved on a wide brimmed straw hat, covering his hair and tattoos in the motion. If the guy wanted an eye-full so bad, he could look at long sleeves and a hat.

As he'd closed down the booth, Ma returned, beaming.

"Good news," she said. "Funding was approved for the children's wing at St. Monica's. Sorry that took so long, but I couldn't sit on such amazing news."

Her enthusiasm bolstered him. He could survive the fair with the two of them for the next few hours.

"Great news, Ma," he agreed.

"Well," she said, pleased that he'd closed up. "We ready to go?"

Reluctantly, William abandoned The Bowery's booth, hoping the business cards he'd laid out would be enough to create the contacts he'd been making in person.

They passed a lot of granges first. He shook hands, introducing his mom to the different operations that existed in the valley. He knew almost all of them; helping Lewis on the planning board had made that inevitable. He let his guests try the different jams, juices, and fresh fruits. There was live music in one corner, Sam's band playing a bunch of cover songs. Some people even danced. All afternoon, they meandered through the booths, moving between handicrafts, local artwork, and food vendors.

Henry, William was learning, liked to flash his wallet.

Which was fucking annoying.

Angie accepted the drinks he bought them with thanks. She was a hummingbird of interest, fascinated by the hanging quilts and locally made jewelry, twittering when Henry purchased a piece she'd been admiring. William had been handed the bag, trailing his mother and her friend as they ooh'd and ahh'd over handmade candles and artisan soaps. The load of things he was schlepping grew with each stop.

When Ma was around he had someone to talk with, but William wasn't sure how to interact with the arrogant man alone. On the one hand, he'd feel like he'd won if the bastard would just agree to
the contract. On the other, it was clear Henry was way more interested in taking a walk on the
honky-tonk side than in doing business. Ma's presence kept a civil tongue in William's head. Still, it
didn't keep Henry from shamelessly flirting at every opportunity, and the more they wandered, the
tighter the muscles in his neck and back got as he held himself in check. Giving Henry the rejection
he deserved would only ruin Ma's visit.

They slowed next to an antique's tent, a huge mirror on two carved arms reflecting him back with
his mother on one side and Henry on the other, standing closer than any stranger had a right to. He
gazed at his trapped expression and flexed his jaw. It wasn't the first time he'd whored himself out
to get what he needed. It looked like it wouldn't be the last either.

It was hot. It was noisy. He had a fucking headache, and kept getting interrupted by idiots who
couldn't read body language.

Shane rested elbows on his knees, rubbing his temples in a moment of stillness between the
throngs.

"Shane?"

He looked up, relieved to see it was Marnie.

"Are you all right?" she asked, frowning. "You should take a break and get some lunch. The food
is amazing. I've gotten my rounds in and can man the booth again."

On the far end of the square was a beer tent, serving up hot dogs, nachos, and frothing brews to a
long line of people. Shane'd had his eye on it all morning. If she was offering…

"Okay," he mumbled, standing. "Thanks."

Marnie took his seat, rolling her ankles and closing her eyes; a look of tired contentment.

Much as he wanted that beer, he hesitated before leaving. Going to the tent meant passing
William's grange, which had been weirdly abandoned all morning. He glanced around until
spotting Angie's bright sweater; she, William, and Henry were at a craft booth in the distance.

William had spent weeks prepping his design. Then today he hands over the reigns to his business
cards?

*Because that makes fucking sense,* Shane thought dryly, heading for the tent. At least he could get
reasonably trashed without alert. No one batted an eye at noon beers when you drank them under
an awning with fifty other people.

Though he hadn't intended to stop at William's grange, the deserted booth drew him in. He'd seen
the blueprints for the design, but until now hadn't seen it put together. The array of colors and
textures was masterful, easily the best at the fair.

Shane knew he'd played a part in its existence. His help on the farm had given William the time
needed to lovingly tend to each crop and craft. Yet being here and staring at the art, he felt so
removed from it.
He picked up one of the business cards with the Bowery logo and phone number.

However much grunt work Shane put in, this was William's success. Maybe he'd inherited a farm, but The Bowery had been built from the ground up, and in a few years William had turned acres of wild, uncultivated land into a thriving business. Shane? After stocking soup cans for a decade and a half, he'd stumbled into this job by accident. A chance meeting. Luck, not hard work.

"Hmm," said a voice from behind. "Good use of color."

Shane turned. A man in a *Stardew Valley Annual Fair* shirt was addressing an identically-clad woman, who scribbled notes on a clipboard.

"It certainly is the most detailed," she said. "The farmer put the entire valley in the box. It looks as though he captured a topographical map."

She took a slice of apricot from the sample jars William had left out for the judges.

"Points for style and color," the man said, helping himself to a pickle spear. He took a crunchy bite. "Taste, too."

They murmured praise, jotting several more notes before moving on.

Once they were gone Shane returned the business card to its cradle, eyes drifting over the scene again. Like the judges had said, it was a map of the valley, and between the mountains and rivers he could see the town, the farm, the spa. A lump rose in his throat. William deserved to win. He wasn't sure why it struck him so hard, but it was critical someone besides Shane recognize the backbreaking labor William put into his work. Even just a ribbon or title, he had to get that recognition; particularly now, when Shane couldn't give it to him.

Last week he'd tossed a pile of applications in the trash. Maybe that was a mistake. What was he going to do tomorrow? Go back to the farm, and pretend he hadn't noticed Henry? Pick up where they'd left off?

Where *did* they leave off?

They hadn't spoken in days. William was giving him space, because Shane was a freak who couldn't take a good lay when it was handed to him on a silver tattooed platter. No reason to let his bed go cold in the meantime.

Shane shoved his hands in his pockets and walked toward the long line of the beer tent.

It had been hours of walking, and William and Henry were left alone while Ma dug through a clothing booth.

"Sure you don't want to shop with her?" William asked as they leaned against a fence.

"I doubt this provincial little hamlet knows very much about fashion."

William's eyebrow twitched. Of course he was a snob. Needing a break from Henry's privileged opinions, he cast his eyes over the crowded walkway until catching sight of the beer tent.
"You thirsty?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." Henry followed his gaze to the big banner, then his shoulders slumped. "But that line is so long."

William pushed off the fence. "I got it."

Before he could leave Henry's side, an insistent hand snagged his elbow. "I want the light beer. Something low calorie, okay?"

William grunted an acknowledgment and slipped to freedom. From the queue he could see the sign at his booth. No one stood in front of it. If this hurt his bottom line, so help him God...

As if God had heard, he realized Shane was standing in the row parallel to him. He stood like a depressed stone: hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped, face tired. Probably not sleeping well with the extra work for the fair. Still, his clothes were clean today, so he'd already put in more effort for Marnie than he had for William all last week.

His stomach churned in discomfort as he waited for Shane to notice him. Had he seen him with Henry? Did he know that he'd come with Ma, and William hadn't invited him? Maybe he could escape his capture and clear things up before the end of the day; it'd be nice to start tomorrow with a clean slate.

He glanced back and saw Henry still at the fence, lost in his phone screen. Emboldened, William coughed.

"Hey, Shane," he ventured.

Shane turned his head, then froze.

"Hey," he replied stiffly.

William focused on the line moving in front of him, so he wouldn't blurt out something stupid like I miss you, or, So when I get rid of this asshole, can we please go drink and fool around at the docks?

"Saw your family's booth," he said, seizing for a safe subject. "Jas outdid herself designing it. You put it together for her and Marnie?"

Shane shrugged, staring at a spot on the ground. "Helped."

"It looks good."

William doubted he'd just 'helped'. They'd passed by the grange on his mother's whirlwind exploration of the fair, and he hadn't missed the careful angle that each egg had been set. The shells were shiny and clean, wiped clear of any debris. The shades of ombre might have been arranged as a group effort, but Shane's meticulous memory and eye for detail was evident in the display.

He hadn't shared more than a 'hi' in days, though it felt like months. They were side by side, yet with no actual connection, the wall of unspoken confusion between them like a barbed-wire barricade. Had last week happened at all? It was practically a dream. No way he'd let Shane leave his bed without figuring out if he'd ruined things between them. Then again, they'd been so drunk. Chalk that up to one more Bauer fuckup.

As if he could hear William's self-berating, Shane glanced at The Bowery's booth, face flat.
Probably disapproving of his apparent abandonment of the farm's grange. His spine stiffened with guilt. Maybe Shane had seen Henry, and in his characteristic silence was thinking, 'What are you doing with this clown?'

William searched for an explanation. Yet there he was, infected with family and responsibility.

Itchy from obligation, he checked over his shoulder. His social wart wasn't at the fence anymore. Hope sprang eternal; maybe Henry had wandered into another booth. Regardless, it was a moment of freedom from his clinginess and William had one chance, if he didn't blow it. In for a dollar, in for a mint.

"Let's hang out after this."

Shane lifted wary eyes.

Encouraged, William said, "When the judging is finished, do you think that maybe we could—"

"Will." Henry slid next to him, huffy. "This line is taking forever. I'm bored. When we get done with this, we should go find Angie."

William's back molars ground together. Damn his timing.

"You're busy," Shane mumbled, stepping up again as his line moved. Henry's cheerful and obnoxious chatter drown out anything else he could have said, and William watched helplessly as Shane got his beer.

Busy.

It felt like a deserved slap. They hadn't spoken in days and then when they did finally get a chance to speak, William'd brought Wannabe Perry Mason, the city so slick on his clothes it was a miracle he didn't slide when he walked.

Shane thought he wanted this? Clearly he didn't understand as well as William had hoped.

"Of course," he muttered. Not that Shane could hear him. He'd already walked off, one hand deep in his hoodie pocket, beer to his lips as he escaped.

They were next. William ordered, then bit the inside of his cheek as Henry laid down money for the drinks. After, he dragged William back towards where his mom was finishing her purchases. The hand was uncomfortable pulling on him, too possessive for a fucker he'd just met a few hours ago.

"Are you boys are," Ma said. "They're going to be announcing the grange winners soon. Why don't we drop stuff off in Henry's car and go get the results?"

"Sure thing," William said, drinking deep on his beer. It wasn't going to help much, but at least it would keep his mouth busy from saying anything offensive.

"Oh, this is exciting," Henry gushed as they meandered towards the main event. "Do you think you'll win?"

What did it matter? Right now William felt like he was losing no matter what a trophy might say.
Shane downed his beer, silently fuming.

William wanted them to hang after this? What fucking drugs was he on to think Shane had any interest in forming a tricycle with him and his date?

Maybe he thought a third presence would make Shane behave better. Henry the lawyer—now with peer mediation.

That stupid sexy brown jacket. Those stupid jeans, hugging William's hips just right, with no sign of the sweat or grime that clung after real work. Of course some city-slicker with a cowboy fetish would be all fucking over that. Right now, Henry was probably feeling William's arms under his jacket; that muscle visible whenever he chopped wood, hauled loads, or dragged out the hoses. And if Henry was close enough for that, he was definitely close enough to know how good his cologne smelled.

Shane drained the rest of his beer and walked away from Clint's booth, where he'd been browsing the knives.

"Uncle Shane!"

Jas came careening around the corner, toppling into him. If his cup hadn't been empty it would've spilled.

"I ran out of tickets," she said, breathless, "and me and Vincent haven't even seen the fortune teller yet!"

She'd forgiven him for their spat, partly because Shane—feeling guilty—had chosen to give in to her whims all day.

And the little twerp knew it.

He dug in his pocket, pulling out yet another five dollar bill. "Here."

She squealed. "You're coming, right?"

"Huh?"

"To get your fortune told."

"I've gotta get back to the booth, kid."

"No you don't, Aunt Marnie is there. Come on. How else will you know if you're supposed to let me have a kitten?"

This was not a particularly strong argument in the mystic's favor, but Shane had no energy to argue.

The clairvoyant's booth was a gauzy, incensed affair. LED candles glowed from pillars of spooky-looking wax, and a veiled Gotoro woman sat behind a crystal ball, gesturing for them to sit down. Jas and Vincent went first. Throughout their readings Shane zoned out on the deep purple chiffon, dotted in glitter, that skirted the teller's table.

"And you, sir?"
He looked up to candlelight reflecting in the woman's eyes. Done with the children, she had one hand out for his tickets. He handed the stubs over, which she dropped in a silver goblet.

"Ah," she said, delicate fingertips dancing over her crystal ball. "You are…troubled."

Give this lady a promotion.

He stared at her, impassive. As if his issues were too much for the ball to handle, she slid it aside and reached for her tarot cards instead. She shuffled, golden bracelets jingling, then placed them on the table.

"Please, cut this deck."

Jas was on the edge of her seat. Shane warily cut it, knowing he owed it to her to play along.

The first card flipped was an upside-down woman holding a large gold coin.

"Hmmm." The word vibrated in the teller's throat. "Your work has caused you much trouble as of late. Your job has taken you away from your family. You are isolating and remaining in the background, when you should be seizing life." She gave him a penetrating look. "There are those who would help you with your loads, but you are unwilling to let them in."

It was bullshit. Horoscope crap, like in the newspapers—lines vague enough to apply to any working adult. Her mention of his job was a stupid coincidence.

Still, it made Shane more uncomfortable than he wanted to admit.

She flipped the next card: three cups in a pyramid, the top one overflowing with water into the two beneath. Her hand hovered over the image.

"Wonderful friendship awaits you. You must lean into those around you to find strength. Indulge in the things that bring you joy, and do not cut yourself away from those who would nourish your heart."

Shane stared at the card, heart pounding even as she flipped the next to cover it.

The things that brought him joy? Right now, that'd be blowing off this booth and going back to the beer tent. Keep cycling to the back of the line with each refill, until he couldn't stand anymore.

It was in the stars, William, he could say, when he showed up plastered tomorrow morning.

The woman's fingers waggled over the final image, six wands that formed a twelve-pointed star. "You are going through a time of great confusion, but you will emerge through it successful if you do not allow guilt or fear to hold you back. That success will let you be your truest self. Please embrace pride in your achievements, and hold your head up."

She suddenly grabbed his wrist in cool fingers, eyes boring into him. "You are worthy of the attention you earn."

Then, as if coming out of a trance, she blinked and let go. Her hand swept across the table, clearing the cards in a smooth arc. "May the spirits smile upon you this year."

The icy imprint of her fingers remained, and Shane rubbed his wrist, angry at the unsolicited touch.

Pride in your achievements.
Fucking horseshit circus mumbo jumbo. Well, joke was on her. Shane's only accomplishment was not killing himself.

Jas and Vincent bubbled in excitement as they left, comparing the cryptic phrases she'd fed to their impressionable minds. When they turned from the booth—the blinding daylight assaulting Shane's eyes—Jas skipped up beside him.

"You," she said, mimicking the clairvoyant's earthy voice, "are troubled. You are confused." She gave him a mysterious look, wagging her eyebrows. "You want to give Jas a kitten."

The noise of the bustling crowd had returned in full. Shane felt like he was up among the trees, looking down on the whole scene.

Why not say yes? What did it fucking matter?

"Yeah," he said, brushing a hand over her windblown hair. "We'll get you a kitten, Jas."

She shrieked, immediately galloping back to Vincent with an outstretched palm. "I told you! Now pay up, Clark."

Vincent grumbled and reached in his pocket, taking out a cherry sucker to drop in her hand.

They darted ahead, bickering playfully while Shane followed behind. Isolating. Remaining, as he belonged, in the background.

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Once they'd finally gotten to the center of the town square, Henry released William to check a text.

Focusing on the judging was less infuriating than thinking about how the last hour had looked to Shane. He glanced around but Shane was nowhere visible. Probably skipped out of the whole fair to drink in solitude, away from obnoxious blind dates and interfering mothers.

At the sound of the microphone feedback William jerked his attention to the front of the stage. His mother's hand slipped into his arm.

"You should be proud, no matter how it comes out," she said serenely.

He patted her hand, tense. Lewis marched up to the front of the stage, pulled on his suspenders with his thumbs, and beamed into the crowd. Then he perched a small pair of glasses on his nose and slid out a bright pink note card.

"Hello everyone, and welcome to the judging results! We've had a great turnout this year, so please give yourselves a big hand for coming out and making the Stardew Valley Annual Fair a success!"

There was a smattering of applause. Henry had slipped his phone back into his pocket and was clapping with a patronizing half-smile at the people around them.

"Now, we all know what we're here for, so I won't make you wait any longer. In third place we have..."

Ma's fingers tightened on his sleeve.
"Miller Farms and Fruits!"

*Good for them,* William thought. The Millers were a pair of brothers who'd been working their land for as long as Pops had owned his piece. They'd never tried for the grange displays before, and winning third place on their first attempt was a marker of their fine production. William clapped enthusiastically as the dark-skinned farmers cheered and high fived each other. They hopped on the stage and held up the bronze medal together.

Lewis beamed at them, then looked back down at his card. William held his breath.

"In second place, Pierre's General Store!"

William's eyes widened. Had he heard right? *Second* place?

He whipped his head around in time to see Pierre snap his jaw shut from shock. Caroline patted his arm with a 'there, there' expression, but as quickly as his unhappy frown had slid into place, it was replaced by a friendly smile. He too went on stage and accepted the silver medal, holding it up to the cheers of his neighbors and friends.

Everyone quieted as Lewis cleared his throat.

"And! It gives me great pleasure to announce that this year's first place blue ribbon goes to…"

He opened the envelope, a twinkle in his eye.

"William Bauer of The Bowery!"

Ma hugged him, screaming in excitement. William couldn't help the flush of pride and joy that ran through him, and he accepted congratulations from Henry, then Jodi, Kent, Gus, and Emily, who'd been standing nearby. The ribbon pinning led to photos, followed by his mom forcing him to pose in front of his award-winning grange again. Then she ran back to the car to charge her phone so she could call his dad.

Once more he found himself stuck alone with Henry. Only this time, instead of the shield of being a pack mule, he was responsible for entertaining. His jacket pockets were heavy from the tokens awarded to first place.

"You...want to play some games?" he asked as Ma's form faded in the distance.

"That would be lovely," Henry said.

They started out at a Milk Can Toss, where William found that any time they spoke Henry bulldozed over his words, rambling the entire time he threw balls at glass pyramids. They migrated to a fish pond, but as soon as Henry realized the prizes were goldfish, he began a diatribe on the inhumanity of keeping fish in a bowl. Next was a basketball game, which elicited a story about a sports team he'd represented, then a wheel of fortune which brought on yet another tale of fraud and chicanery in the courtroom. A round of mini golf, a ring toss, and a break for food later, William concluded a truth about Henry. The one thing he had going for him was that with minimum effort, he could carry an entire conversation all by himself.

He was waiting for a break in the current lecture—food standards for street vendors—when he realized they'd not been to the High Striker game, which had a wall of teddy bear prizes next to it.

A wave of nostalgia hit as he stared at the brown and black toys. There had to be at least forty of them, fur new and shining. When he was twelve, he'd accidentally thrown his favorite bear in the
garbage. It had been a careless moment of cleaning gone wrong, and ever since then he'd found himself pausing at different toy shops, wistful to replace that which had been lost. But he'd never seen a similar style until now.

"Oh, are you a macho guy?" Henry asked, smirking at the High Striker.

"Nah," William said, embarrassed, sliding his hands in his pocket. "You wanna try though?"

Henry grinned then grabbed him by the elbow—damn, William wished he'd stop doing that—and pulled him over to a man shouting, "TIME TO SEPARATE THE MEN FROM THE BOYS! STEP RIGHT UP, STEP RIGHT UP!"

"How much to ring the bell?" Henry asked.

The carnie grinned and stepped back, gesturing to the sign. "For five dollars you get three tries, gents! But I warn you, no one has rung the bell all day."

"My date here has big arms," Henry said with a flirtatious grin. "C'mon, Will. Give it a try."

His date.

Well shit. That's what this was, wasn't it?

"I'll try. But these things are usually rigged. It's that guy who decides who wins."

The carnie's face flushed. "Excuse you, sir."

William shrugged at the false outrage. He knew scams when he saw them. Sure enough, as the man took the dollar William saw him hit a button turning off the rigged device on the game.

"If you're strong enough, you'll ring the bell," the carnie said loftily. "Let's see if you can put your arms where your mouth is."

William's eyes wandered down the side of the peg board and settled on a dark brown bear. He swore the little toy was identical to Rocky, that old plush friend he'd lost all those years ago.

"Alright then." He accepted the hammer. "Let's do this."

He lifted the heavy mallet up and over his head, high.

"Aren't we dramatic," Henry said, leaning back and fanning himself theatrically.

William lowered it, not hitting the bell just yet.

"Alright, bet time. I ring this bell? You tell Ma you're tired and ready to head home."

"That's not very business minded of you," Henry said, frowning.

But William wasn't done. His mom might like the idea of him dating someone close to home, but he was so ready for this fucker to leave. He was tired of the condescension, and with the win of the fair he didn't need Henry's money or contract. Still, despite his desire to tell Henry to go fuck himself, he knew that wouldn't make Ma happy.

"If I miss? We go back to my place and you can have your wicked way with me. Hmm? That sweeten the pot for you?"
Henry blinked, and it was clear he was intrigued.

"Deal," he said. "Though now I'm excited for you to miss."

William grunted, then raised the mallet and brought it down so hard the puck raced to the top, slamming into the bell with a clarion 'diiing' that echoed around the entire fairground. He handed the hammer back to the cheering carnie.

"On the first try even! Good job, sir. Would you like a prize?"

He pointed to the Rocky look-a-like. "That bear."

Henry's face softened as the carnie pulled it down, and before William could reach for it, Henry seized it.

"Well," he said, smiling at the bear, "this does ease the sting."

William froze.

He'd never intended to give Henry the damn bear. It hadn't been for him. None of this had been for him. But what was he going to do? Snatch it out of his hands and whine like a child? Explain that he'd been looking for that bear for years, and it'd be great if Henry would hand it back? No. He couldn't do that, not while still being polite.

"Yeah," he said, mouth dry. "No hard feelings, right? I'll walk you out to the parking lot."

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Thank you to our beta, Xylianna. <3

Links to our tumblr and discord server if you’d like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is December 8th, 2-4pm PST.
After packing Ma into her car with her peon and a box full of preserves, William took down his grange. He'd just finished stacking the wooden booth into the truck when his cell rang. It was his dad.

"Y'ello," he said, punctuating the word by slamming the tailgate.

"William, congratulations on your win!"

"Thanks, Dad. How was work?"

"Exhausting." He heard his dad's leather chair creak and the click of a lighter. "Is your mother still there?"

"Nope, on her way home with that wind-up doll of a lawyer she thought I needed in my life."

"I told her you wouldn't like it. Son, you keep huffing. What are you up to?"

"Loading up and heading home."

William grunted, satisfied as he took one last look around. He shrugged off his jacket and hat, putting them on the passenger side, then fastened his seatbelt and started the truck.

"Hate that I couldn't make it," David said as he joined the line of cars leaving the fair.

"You couldn't help it," said William, repeating familiar forgiveness. "I know how it goes."

"When I retire, I won't have to choose between the job and family any more."

"It's fine, Dad." William kept his eyes on the tiny sedan in front of the line.

"Any developments with that fella who you know is a bad idea?"

William swallowed.

"Yeah. You know. It's a disaster waiting to happen. He's avoiding me. You're right, and I need to get over it."
David was quiet and William braced. He knew he was snapping, but all his fucks were on backorder.

"Will, yesterday when we talked I gave a lot of good reasons why you two should keep things professional. But I got to thinking about something."

"About how disappointed you were to have to talk about it in the first place?" William asked, sarcasm dripping.

"No. I got to thinking that if you got this fellow another job, the conflict of interest disappears."

"Tried that. He doesn't want another job," William said, as three more cars crept out of the lot.

Silence on the other end.

"Well, you should at least make it clear—"

"Dad, you don't want to know how deep this rabbit hole goes. This isn't some cut-and-dry harassment seminar. Facts are, he likes me back. We could be amazing together. But he's scared and has got something else going on that he won't fucking open his mouth and tell me about, so I'm playing blind man's bluff in a mine field here."

Dad blew out a breath. "Why didn't you say so yesterday?"

Someone tried to cut William off at the entrance. He blasted his horn, gunning his truck a little faster, then slammed on the brakes to keep from colliding with a minivan covered in stick-figure stickers.

"Because Dad, I know how stupid it sounds."

"Son, do you care about this?"

William sank back in his seat, phone tight between his fingers. If this had been Ma, he'd front the answer. Caring about things around her could be dangerous. But Dad was safer and more patient, and he'd also not tried to shove an unasked-for boyfriend on William this afternoon.

"Yeah. It's sort of been taking over my life."

"Then it's not stupid. And even though you've made bad calls, I believe you if you say that what's between you two is...somewhat consensual."

William snorted. Dad wasn't done.

"So what I want to know is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Wait him out, I guess," William said, flipping on his blinker.

"How's that been treating you?"

"Sucks."

"Talk to him. Open up. Lay it all out so he knows how you feel. And William, no relationship with you is easy, so be patient and control that temper of yours."

The advice stung.
"I'm patient!"

Dad’s chuckle rumbled and William shoved his phone against his shoulder as he made the turn towards home.

"Sure," David teased. "This coming from the boy who'd swing his bat four times before the ball was even shot out of the cages."


"Yeah. Be proud of yourself for winning that award. Your mom sent me the pictures. The grange was stunning."

Something burned behind his eyes at the praise. "Thanks, Dad."

"I love you, son. Your mother and I are always here for you, okay?"

"Yeah, love you too. Listen, almost home and I need to do some evening chores before bed."

"Of course. Goodnight. See you next Sunday."

William hung up and dropped his cell phone on top of the jacket and hat. It was late when he pulled in, and after staring at the load in the back he decided it was a two-man job and headed inside. As he got ready for bed, he felt nervous. Tomorrow, he and Shane had a lot to talk about. He'd given him space but now that the fair was over, it had to be dealt with. And he had to be patient. Not push. Be firm. In control.

Simple.

First thing in the morning, William set the stage. Extra coffee sat on the edge of the crate for Shane, a silent peace offering. He began to work, one eye on the clock. Five minutes passed. Then ten. At 6:13 he paused, nearly done with the first row of heifers. Shane was usually early. Had he ghosted?

Two minutes later—right as he'd finished his line and made the decision to call Marnie—Shane walked in.

His hair looked like a straw nest, his clothes wrinkled. Dark bags rested under sunken eyes, finishing the apathetic chic look he seemed to be going for today. He ignored the coffee and headed straight towards the cows, knocking over a step stool along the way.


"Morning," William said, waiting for Shane to realize all the lines were in use, and that the cow he was patting had half her reservoir full.

It was as though the clue gods had finally knocked him between the eyes. Shane blinked, and after standing stupidly for another few seconds he turned to the wall of tools and made an uncoordinated grab for a pitchfork.

Irritated, William followed, snagging the hose to spray down the clumps that fell off the fork when
Shane walked to the stall.

"Good morning," he repeated as he rinsed the pieces of debris into the drains.

Shane dribbled a forkful of manure into the wheelbarrow. "Hey," he muttered.

After watching three more clumsy dumps into the barrow William rolled his eyes and turned off the water. Marnie must have been working Shane stupid for him to be this careless.

Nothing some coffee wouldn't fix, he decided while hanging the hose. He snagged the thermos and crossed over, plucking the pitchfork out of Shane's hands and pressing the java into his empty fingers.

"You look like shit, Shane. How late did Marnie keep you out last night?"

"Course I look like shit," Shane grumbled. "You finally get your eyes checked or something?"

Without any further acknowledgment he walked off. He set the coffee back down on the upturned crate without opening it, then reached for a second pitchfork off the wall.

William stared at the abandoned coffee.

"What crawled up your ass and died?"

The tines of Shane's fork scraped across the wooden floor. "Nothing."

"Yeah, uh huh. Nothing. Right."

Apparently today was backwards day, where they cleaned before getting all of the herd through the milkers. William glanced once more at the coffee and then at Shane. Whatever. If Shane wanted more work in the long run, he could have it.

William released the first cow into the pasture. He took his time, letting Shane get through the mucking while he alternated between freeing and milking the herd. The pattern of changing hoses and re-hooking the pumps was meditative and when he was on the last cow, he broke the silence.

"You were running later than usual. Everything okay?"

Shane jammed his fork into the manure. "So I'll stay ten minutes late," he said, tossing a scoop into the full barrow. Half of it slipped over the edge and splatted to the floor.

"Ten more minutes of that?" William deadpanned. "How could I ever refuse."

Like the stubborn pig he was, Shane grunted.

Frustration welled and patience died.

"Right. Okay. Well, clearly you're PMSing, so." William finished the cow he was working on and stepped back. "I'm going to leave you and your pissy attitude for the other women in the room. Got a fence to finish today. Come see me when you're done to help unload the truck."

He left the barn to predictable silence. Figured. Shane was so busy playing with shit, he'd decided his attitude should match.

It took William thirty minutes to prep the fence, and another thirty to rearrange four of his work tables while Shane dragged ass. It was one thing for Shane to avoid him on their personal time, but
why the fuck had he suddenly lost the sharp, professional worth ethic that had carried them through
the end of summer and first half of harvest?

When Shane rolled in, William bit back the 'finally' that threatened to escape his lips.

"Done," Shane said, slumping against the work table.

"You eat molasses for breakfast this morning, Daniels?"

"Yep."

"Then no wonder you're slow as fucking Wintersday."

William jerked a thumb towards the truck and all its fair contents. Shane crossed his arms and
stared, as though this was the first fucking time in his life he'd seen a truck, and that he needed a
map and neon light to figure out what to do. Snapping his fingers, William pointed at a stack, then
where he wanted them moved. While Shane did that he sliced off the zip ties holding The Bowery's
banner to the side of the truck. As he cut, he listed all the things that could be contributing to this
shitty energy between them.

"For the fucking record, I didn't know that Ma was going to bring Henry with her."

Shane snorted. "Not my fucking business."

William whipped his head around, hand tight on his knife. "The hell it's not your business! Unless
last week wasn't your business either and I jacked myself off?"

He dropped the banner onto the ground, letting the vinyl flag crumble in a heap.

Shane's ears turned cranberry red.

"On your own. With me. With him." He dropped one box of preserves on top of another, jars
rattling. "You're a grown-ass man, do whoever the fuck you want."

The words stung. Whoever he wanted? Couldn't the stupid fucker see that he'd been tying himself
in knots because he wanted him?

William stepped off the ramp and touched Shane shoulder. "It wasn't like that," he said, needing
him to understand. "Look, I never met him before yesterday. Remember the other week? Ma was
talking about trying to get me to go out? Hey, look at me. I'm serious. I'm not like that, Shane."

At first, William thought maybe he was getting through. Shane was accepting the touch; he stared
at the boxes with confliction in his brow, on the verge of giving in to the comfort. If William could
wait out this stubborn denial, maybe he could earn a glimpse of that guarded mind.

"Doesn't matter," Shane mumbled.

Finally he looked up, and William was surprised to see how runny his eyes were. Not like he'd
been crying. Like he'd been drinking. Sure enough, the tangy scent of whiskey hit his nose.

Guilt swirled.

"Did you...drink?" William asked. "Before you came in? Because of yesterday...?"

"I said it didn't matter, okay?" Shane aggressively rolled his shoulder to slide the hand off, then
stormed back to the boxes, grabbing another.
There was lead in William's stomach.

"Maybe not to you. But it fucking matters to me. I like you. I don't want to piss you off or hurt you. But you're not out, remember? I'm trying to respect your boundaries."

"Boundaries," Shane repeated as he dropped the box on the stack. He leaned against it, rubbing his forehead and giving a cold, unhappy laugh.

"I promised, didn't I?" William snapped.

He closed and opened his hands, each icy chuckle making him feel like he'd run them along a splintered board. If Shane wanted this too, why was he being such a shithead about it? Did he not believe him?

"Look," William said, dragging calm into his voice, "I get it. I'm not you're favorite person today. I dunno, I just thought you'd fucking see that Henry isn't my type." He rubbed his head, his velvet trimmed scalp a reminder that he'd wanted to look good yesterday for Shane, only to have received unasked-for attention.

Shane jerked up, erupting in a noise of frustration.

"Okay! So Henry's not your type. You weren't together. Fucking noted, man. But this—whatever the fuck this is..." He trembled, dragging the final box from the truck. "Can't we just get back to work? Just...wanna get back to work."

Resigned, William stepped back.

"I'll make it easy on you," he said. "You finish up here and then come to the fence when you're done."

Shane would have a chance to sober up by then. It was a long walk, and maybe with the air cleared they'd be able to find better footing. William wasn't in the habit of lying to himself, but why not? Today was a day of mistakes.

He mounted the ATV and drove out of the barn towards his rotten fence, shoving away the unease about how things stood between them. He focused on the wins instead. Shane had softened under his hand. He wasn't writing him off. William had to trust that maybe, just maybe, they'd end this day as more than enemies.

He had to think positively. After all, they'd already endured their worst fight, right?

Right.

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For most of his life, Shane's thoughts were an anchor: at rest while he slept, launched into murky waters upon wakening. A dense, heavy, plummeting hook, landing with a thunk to embed in the sea floor.

Except recently, some fucker had started sneaking in at night to replace Shane's anchor with a buoy—some fucker who did not understand how disconcerting it was to wake up, chuck the familiar object in a lake, and watch it float.
Shane carried a box from the truck and dropped it atop one of the storage shelves. He stared through a dirty smear on the barn window.

God, this would be so much easier if William liked Henry. If he'd admitted to boning them both; if he'd told Shane he was one of many, and that settling on 'secret' had never meant they'd settled on 'exclusive.' Then the anchor could go thunk. Shane could swallow the juvenile heartache of seeing his crush win another man a teddy bear, and shove all these stupid feelings back to the bottom of the ocean.

And he could do that. He could work under William for years, watching men come and go from his life. Shane knew that road of silent suffering better than anyone. It hurt in ways he understood, being invisible, being nobody.

William? William was somebody. Yesterday, his name had reverberated like a shockwave through the town square, starting in Lewis's microphone and pulsing through the crowd. Bossman William Bauer: farmer of farms, drinker of beers, winner of granges.

Destroyer of anchors.

Because no, William hadn't just won a bear for another man. He'd won a bear for a man he had zero-fucking-interest in.

Shane was reminded of the day he'd met Angie—the discovery of that tight leash on her son. She'd been at the fair. She'd set William up, and he'd not done any of those things for Henry's sake, but his mother's. Because he didn't like Henry, he liked Shane.

Dumbass.

Shane pulled out his whiskey and chugged.

William had deserved to win that ribbon. He was an asset to the town, improving the lives of people around him. The regular business he gave Marnie was a substantial boon to the ranch. Because of the community center he'd helped build, Jas had a new schoolroom. Hell, even Pierre had benefited—grange competition or not, William's part in driving out Jojamart could only mean good things for the general store. He was a Midas who turned all he touched to gold.

Even pieces of shit like Shane. For a hot minute, William had shined him enough to fool them both.

He took another swallow of whiskey; gave another gasp. Blinking wet eyes at the window smear, he tugged his hoodie sleeve over a hand, clumsily rubbing the glass to clean it.

What was his contribution to people's lives? Crashing on Marnie's couch like a leech? Bringing in a kid he couldn't support on his own?

Well, he'd padded Gus's pockets too. Pat on the back for that.

Dropping his hand, Shane stared at the fields through the still-streaky window.

William was a fucking idiot. Did he get off on chasing someone fucked in the head? Enjoy having his nuts crushed? Henry was a thirsty tart, but at least he wasn't ashamed and afraid, and if the public hadn't been around yesterday William could've gotten his dick sucked right in the square. They could've kissed without the guy going through an existential crisis.

Fistfights notwithstanding, he'd failed to show William what he'd gotten into bed with. It was like the fucker was immune to being scared off, Shane straining against an immovable boulder while
his feet slipped in the dirt.

He pried a splinter from the window pane, flicking it to the floor, then pushed off the shelf. His steps were a slow zig-zag as he walked out of the barn and toward the fence.

William didn't believe he was a walking disaster? Fine. Let the fucker think whatever he wanted. Shane knew the truth.

When William spotted Shane walking an unsteady line across the fields, any confidence he had in the two of them getting back to normal died. Based on the sway to his step, he was even more drunk than he'd been in the barns. Dread mingled with exasperation. Did Shane think William could ignore open intoxication?

When he got closer, the air stank of whiskey. It was like an olfactory sign: Too Drunk To Give A Fuck.

"Are you fucking for real right now?" William asked.

Shane reached for the extra shovel on the back of the fence. When William tried to block him, he gave a dismissive wave of his hand, a silent reassurance of, 'Don't worry about it. I'm cone sold stober.'

William shook his head and jerked off his gloves. Before Shane could make use of the shovel, he snagged him by the shoulder, forcing him to sit on the open back of his wagon.

"Listen here, you drunk piece of shit. You're too fucked up to work."

Shane absently swatted at him, only making contact with the air. "I'm fine."

Fine? In what world was being this drunk fine? It was one thing to loosen up with a few shots before going home, but this was beyond the pale.

"Fine," William said, grabbing his wrists to hold him still, "stands for Fucked up, Insane, Nuts, and Egotistical. If that's what you mean, then sure. You're real fucking fine. C'mon. Don't pull this fine shit on me. Your family might be blind, but I know you, dumbass. We've spent how many days drinking after work? You're not fine. You're fucking drunk, and you're lying to me about it."

He stared down at him, heart aching with the mess he'd somehow triggered. God, he couldn't keep anything he touched from turning into shit, could he? But damn it, he hadn't been trying to set off another brain bomb. He'd wanted to be honest, to bridge this gap that kept widening between them.

Shane was a flimsy pole underneath his fingers, his eyes unfocused.

"Can still do my damn job," he mumbled. If William hadn't been practiced in deciphering the lower register of his voice, it would have been a garbled mash of syllables.

He moved his hands off Shane's wrists and onto his legs, gripping the muscles with conviction.

"Bullshit."

He began tapping fingers in order on Shane's thigh.
"You were late today."

Tap.

"You've taken double the time to get anything done."

Tap.

"You've dropped literal cow shit on yourself."

Tap.

"You are walking like you're on a fucking boat."

His fingers stilled.

"You wanna drink? Fine. You do that shit off the clock with me. You don't get fucked up when I need you steady. Otherwise we're going to have issues."

William's heart thudded but he forced his face to remain neutral. One of them had to be a goddamned adult today. Shane's head tilted woozily from side to side, so slight that William was sure he had no clue he was reenacting his best impression of a dashboard bobblehead.

"So fire me," Shane slurred, rubbing a fist into his eye.

"For having issues?" William pulled the fist down, staring into his ruddy face. "I'd have to fucking fire myself."

He pressed Shane's hand to his inner arm, against the pocked skin covered by bright ink. His pulse was pounding into the fingers, but he didn't care.

"Shane, you've got your issues inside. You think I don't know how that feels? I know what it's like to have fucked up days. Lemme repeat it in case whatever you drank washed it out—you ever need an ear, babe, and I'm fucking here. I ain't scared. My house is made of glass and I'm all out of stones."

William released his hold, but Shane didn't pull his hand away. His fingers rested on rose vines that bound William's skin in blackish green and bloody red, slowly tracing the leaves and thorns inked over blown veins. The longer his touch remained, the more hope swelled. William let himself breathe; he was gaining ground.

Shane might be shitfaced, but that didn't erase desperate kisses under a setting sun. It didn't negate the vulnerable cries they'd shared between his sheets. It didn't take away the fact that neither of them wanted to be alone on this dirtball, and if they could just reach together, they could have something real.

"William, what are we?" Shane blurted, the words tumbling out like rocks against a mirror.

"A fucking dumpsterfire," William replied.

It was, he discovered, the wrong thing to say. Shane jerked his hand away.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Without waiting for an answer he pushed off the back of the wagon and stumbled toward the fence posts, almost tripping on a stack of nearby tools. William glared.
"It means that you're fucking drunk and we shouldn't be talking about labels when you're like this," he snapped, dogging Shane's heels so he could catch him before he ran into something dangerous. "It means that I'm tired of you making me feel amazing one day and treating me like shit the next. Things are all fine and dandy when we have drunk talks, but then you sober up and turn into an asshole."

Shane grabbed the top of the nearest fencepost with both hands, kneading the old wood like it was dough.

"You do this on purpose," he murmured, dropping his head on top of his hands. He nuzzled the post, rocking from side to side. "You just, you fuck me in the head, and then I just...you don't fucking get it, Will. You don't." He pushed back, stretching against the post like a runner before a race. "Can't fucking do this."

It was as if William's hands were full of sand and the harder he tried to hold on the faster it slid through his fingers, yet he was so desperate he didn't know how to stop clinging.

"What can't you do?" he asked.

Shane rocked in his stance.

"This. I don't know how this all fucking happened, William. I'm just supposed to work here, you know? It's not like...I don't..." He struggled, battling each word, his slurred voice almost pleading.

*If you think that a relationship between you and an employee could end in any way other than disaster, you are of course welcome to walk that thin line. But remember, whatever ends up happening? You're responsible.*

Each drop of Shane's denial blended with his guilt, which blended with his bone-deep knowledge that they'd been so much *more* than just fooling around. William closed his eyes, his back a taut wire.

"So. You want it to stop? Want me to back off completely? Because if that's how you feel..." He swallowed back bile. "I can button it up."

Shane's knuckles went white in his grip.

"I want...to WANT it to stop."

He straightened and pushed hard off the wood. Digging a hand in his hair he stomped away, following the row of rotting fence posts.

Panic added a shot to William's guilt-frustration cocktail. What did that mean? Did that mean he wanted to quit working? Did that mean he wanted William to never speak to him again? Never touch him? Did he just want to be friends? Did he want to go blow his head off?

"Hey!" he called, following after him.

Shane didn't stop.

"THAT'S NOT AN ANSWER, DAMN YOU!"

Still tugging his head down, Shane clumsily bumped the top of each post with a hand as he passed them. William stared, shaking.
He should just let him go. It wasn't like he was going to make him understand this way. After all, he'd just committed the heinous sin of trying to be the person he'd wanted when he was going through his own spiral of destruction. The only option was to let Shane take his toxicity elsewhere. Give up and write it all off as a bad experience. Take the lick and lie the fuck down.

Did he really need him?

Yes. And fuck if it's not like watching my goddamn heart walk away.

Much as he'd tried to keep it casual, Shane ending it before it could start? That shit felt worse than a broken bone.

William wasn't thinking when he stalked after him. Ignoring the sane part of his brain that said not to, he grabbed Shane by the arm, whipping him around until they faced each other. He took him by the collar, letting his fury, anger, and hurt shine down so that Shane was forced to see what he'd done.

"You tell me to fuck off then," he snarled. "If you want me to leave you alone, you tell me to my face to fuck off."

For the first time all day, Shane finally met his gaze. He glared back, hatred beaming through his red, sunken eyes.

"Fuck. Off."

William felt struck by frostbite. He closed his eyes and dropped his hold, the walls in his mind slamming up hard. When he opened them, he hoped they reflected the icy chill in his chest.

"Understood," he said, voice cold. "If you come back tomorrow, it better be fucking sober. Otherwise? You are fucking fired."

He waited, wanting to make sure the ultimatum sank into the pickled asshole's drunk brain.

"Fine," Shane spat.

Then he stormed off, leaving William alone under a blue sky next to a rotted fence.

Shane didn't follow the dirt road home. He went through Cindersap forest instead, head down, temples throbbing. He stumbled over poison ivy and brambles, swatting a low-hanging tree branch, which retaliated in a sharp lash against his shoulder.

Tears sprang instantly to his eyes.

He stopped in his tracks and looked up, vision blurring as the forest spun around him, a breeze spangling the leaves like autumn glitter in the sunlight. Inside his mind words danced too, fluttering from one side to the other in a chorus of echoes: What are we, William?

He'd sounded pitiful, like he was twelve, not a grown-ass man in his thirties. God, this was all so fucking wrong. Shane was supposed to get drunk, go to work, and pull a curtain on this whole goddamn nightmare. He'd wanted William to tell him this was it. No more drinking on his dime, no more stupid teenager games of hot and cold, no more putting up with his piss-ass attitude. He was
supposed to get fucking angry. Fire him.

He wasn’t supposed to answer with empathy and understanding, or put his hands on Shane's thighs and call him 'babe' all over again. Now Shane didn't know where to go. Instead of pulling the curtain, he'd brought the whole bullshit rod crashing down.

And it was bullshit.

Not wanting to be with William was bullshit. Trying to push him away? Bullshit. This wasn't one-sided. Whatever their label, this wasn't casual and they both fucking knew it. Except William had been trying to tell him that, and Shane had been too fucking scared to listen.

At the edge of the forest was a fork in the road, leading west to the dock and east to the ranch. He went east, but instead of going home, stuck to the river on the opposite side of the road, keeping close to the bank. It was heavily shrubbed and hid him from the residential area. When he finally emerged on cobblestone, a footbridge led him to the far side of town, a place so abandoned Shane could be invisible in broad daylight. Just the library, Clint's currently closed blacksmith shop, and the big slab of concrete under Shane's feet.

He lifted his gaze, staring at his old place of employment.

Jojamart was boarded up from the front, splashed in black graffiti. Shane crossed the lot where the delivery trucks had parked, walked around the side of the building, and paused in front of a heavy door. Trash blew over the cracked pavement and except for the seagulls circling above, it was deserted. He fumbled in his pockets, feeling around the empty liquor bottle for his wallet.

Coming down from drunkenness always made him uncoordinated and weak, but when he managed to dig out his lockpicks, the lock melted like butter in his practiced hands. There was a tiny click, and when he pulled the silver handle it creaked open. Sunlight streamed through the door, dust particles floating in its pale beams between washed-out darkness.

Shane stepped inside and closed the door into black silence.

The first thing he noticed was the bitter smell of old metal: pipes, carts, forklifts. Then came the mustiness of concrete and dusty cardboard boxes. The air was stale, like it'd been ages since it was swirled by a human presence.

The store had been closed a month. While it seemed like a lifetime ago to Shane, being here was uncomfortably familiar, like slipping on an ugly old coat. How many times had he been in this back room, the depression creeping in as his morning buzz faded? Shots in his coffee had been a ritual long before he'd worked on the farm. With their help he could arrive on time and punch in like a good employee, even greeting a few early shoppers. While buzzing, people felt more real to Shane—there was a vague sense he shared an actual reality with those customers and coworkers.

Yet once he started sobering up…

Some days, the walls had closed in while he sank deeper into his head, until he was drowning and couldn't see anyone else, like he was the only person alive. Other days, he drifted. Detached. Float toward the ceiling, watching himself work, unable to feel any of it. Like no one existed.

The room of solid black fizzled into a shadowbox of dark shapes as his eyes adjusted. He could see enough to take a few steps forward, hands connecting with shelves, softly groping his way around. Muscle memory helped him find the door that led to the back hallway and he pushed it open.

The hall was brighter, windows near the rafters letting in trickles of light. Shane followed it past
abandoned mop buckets, giant drains, and the trash compactor, then ran his hand along the inside ledge of the cardboard baler. Were the store operating, he'd be written up for safety violations. They'd worry about him losing a finger, not knowing that Shane used to imagine crawling inside to be crushed out of his misery.

He passed ladders, with their ridged metal rungs fixed right to the wall. Those rungs disappeared into a gated storage above the coolers, near the ceiling. How many times had Shane considered hanging himself there?

At the end of the hall he rounded the corner, stopping before a door that led to the store's interior. For as many hours as he'd logged on the sales floor maybe he ought to have some memories attached to it, but he'd blocked out those times the hardest. The colors, the people, the cart traffic. The non-stop music interrupted by Joja jingles. It'd been so fucking overstimulating he'd shut down until his body functioned by automaton.

Shane turned with his back against the door, sinking to the cold concrete. Elbows on knees, he dropped his head and rubbed soft circles on his neck.

For better or worse, it was these back rooms that defined half his waking life. Getting a job had been the first decision he'd made on his own. Garrett helped him with the paperwork, but it'd been Shane's choice to start working the summer after 10th grade, and Garret hadn't understood why he was so eager. After all, he'd unofficially adopted Shane into his lifestyle, providing him with everything a guy could need.

Except alcohol.

Shane had brought a fistful of bills from his first paycheck to Jerry's porch; Jerry, who'd mopped up his nose that day when he was fifteen. Jerry, who'd warned him off things like meth, heroin, and joining gangs, but who'd been more than happy to be the middle-man between a sixteen year old boy and his liquor. It's just what kids did. What they'd always done.

Youse a good kid, son, he used to say, shaking his head with a smile while handing over the cheapest whiskey money could buy.

Shane pulled the bottle from his pocket. Sunlight from the rafters shifted, a blinding strip darting over the glass; it stung his eyes as hard and fast as the branch that'd whipped him on the trail.

He began to cry.

Today, the whole building was his closet. Nobody was around to hear his stifled sobs, or him sucking in his runny nose. He cried until he was hiccuping. Their echoes bounced off the concrete walls, and he pressed his fingertips into the bottle again and again, as if he could squeeze out whatever was inside him.

"I can't do it," Shane choked, the words garbled. "I can't. I can't do it again."

Maybe…he was listening. If there was anything worth a damn in the world, maybe he was here.

"I can't," he repeated, loud and wet. "I can't fucking do it again. Will can't be here, and then not be here. He can't fucking do what you did, Garrett. And he fucking wants me?"

The last sentence came out like something dislodged from his throat; Shane choked and dropped his head, rubbing more circles on his neck.

William circles.
Slow and self-soothing, his thumbs worked with the same pressure William used when gripping Shane's neck, chasing back the fear.

"He wants me," he whispered, a lone tear splattering to the cold floor. "He does. I'm a fucking idiot, and he wants me, and what do I fucking do with that? How do I just…"

Shane sucked more snot into his nose, wiping the drips with the back of his hand that held the bottle.

"It's a joke, right? It's a sick fucking joke. They aren't gonna let him stay. Not that I believe in some higher power, but he's too goddamn good to be true and they're gonna let me get attached, and—and then they're gonna fucking rip him away from me. It's what they do. Whoever or whatever the fuck is in charge, it's what they do."

Shane cried all over again.

It was different than it'd been with Garrett. He and William had known each other months, not years. Yet Shane knew in his heart they weren't some fling. They weren't fucking casual. Whatever had grown between them in this short time, it'd started with fireworks and ended in roots. People weren't meant to plant themselves in your lives so damn fast, but like always, William hadn't played by the rules. He was already a voice in Shane's conscience like he'd lived there all along, and Shane didn't have to know him for years to realize he was irreplaceable. Just like Garrett; there were no more Williams in the world.

From the moment he'd opened his eyes in the steamy spa and met William's gaze back, all Shane had known was fear of losing that. He couldn't do it again. He'd go mad, and not in some self-loathing drunken spiral. He'd go truly, deeply insane.

The second wave of tears began to slow, the water drying on his cheeks. Shane gently gulped air, still rubbing his neck with those circles.

Those slow, soothing, William circles.

"I'm so tired," he whispered. His thumb pressed harder, voice cracking as he said, "I'm so fucking tired, William."

It felt like a prayer—something that couldn't be taken back once it was put into the universe. But Shane didn't want to take it back. He grew quiet and still, except for the thumb rubbing circles. They slowed his pattering heart, into that drop of time and space after tears when everything felt softer.

There was nothing left in him to fight this. William, and everything he was doing to Shane's heart, had won.

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William stalked towards the four-wheeler and snagged the first tool that came to his hand: a claw hammer.


Just like you.
He squeezed the handle and then whirled on the fence, slamming it down, cracking a rotten board.

God, that felt fucking good.

He did it again, then again. The process became rote: slam hammer down, break board, and jerk nails to the side. He found a rhythm, pounding with steady focus.

Three slams. Crash. Dig out the post. Replace. Nail the fresh board. Repeat.

Five boards.

Fifteen.

Forty-Five.

Posts piled behind him. His hands were blistering, competing with the pain in his heart. It didn't matter. If his muscles were screaming, then he wasn't able to think.

One hundred.

He was sweating now, sheets of the awful stuff coming down his skin, stinging his eyes, gluing fabric to his back like a damn t-shirt tattoo. He ripped it off. It tore in the process and he stared at the damp cloth, then at his bloody palms. Two more rips and he had the shirt wrapped over his hands.

He went back to work; it was another hour before he started to feel the pain, which gave him something real to focus on.

Nothing else about the last few months had been real.

As the shadows lengthened, he replayed those false weeks through his mind, letting the tempo of the repetitive work act like a drum, keeping beat to the story in his head.

That first fight should have told him all he needed to know. He should have recognized that he was a violent sociopath fixating on someone to bully. Why wouldn't Shane run from that? And then later by the lake, Shane had been desperate, so of course he'd taken the job. He'd even told him, hadn't he? It wasn't because he was doing William a favor.

But William hadn't wanted a favor. He'd wanted to explore what had been between them on that porch. His entire life he'd been throwing himself into relationships that were wrong. Telling himself over and over again to ignore warning signs. Why? Because he was lonely, and Shane made him feel like someone was sitting in his corner.

He slammed the next board into place, his thumbnail cracking to the quick, blood beading up around the ragged edge. Pain erased the thoughts in his mind, leaving behind only throbbing clarity.

*You knew it was too good to be true. You knew no one could want you. No one who knows the real you.*

Because even if it had been real, even if it was *still* real, William wasn't good enough to make it worth it. He wasn't stronger than what drove Shane to drink.

He ran out of fence posts after midnight. His hands were throbbing balls of agony; skin raw and throbbing when he gripped the ATV handles. He drove his four-wheeler back along the perfectly
straight and new fence, stopping to throw rotten boards into the back of the wagon.

*Shit where you eat.*

He threw another board.

*Pushed too hard.*

Each clunk echoed in the loneliness of doing this alone, each board another reminder of his mistakes. All the times that he'd ruined what he'd touched. Disappointed his parents. Let down people who'd trusted him with their lives.

He was on the last set of boards when his grip slipped and he ripped his knuckles across exposed nails. He hissed, dropping the wood and folding his arm against his chest. Tears sprang.

God. When was the last time he'd cried over physical pain?

His physical therapy, he remembered, swaying as he held his ruined hands. Every physical therapy, he'd cried. Sobbed while trying to learn to walk again. He flashed to how it'd felt, arms shaking on metal rails, two therapists holding him steady, his twisted vine of a spine screaming against the pins and screws that held it straight.

Those had been good tears. Cleansing. He'd screamed as he fought for his legs again, each leaky tear a release giving him room to heal.

Now, each tear was a barb. Salt in a raw wound of loss, because once more, he was alone.

Back at the house he parked his four-wheeler akimbo, and on the porch kicked off his shoes and struggled with the door handle. Ingrid fled when he crashed onto the guest bed.

"Fuck you, too," he muttered, intoxicated from exertion. Exhaustion came over him like a wave and he turned his head, peeking at the clock.

2:00 am.

He closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hope you're all having a good week. Thanks for reading!

Links to our [tumblr](#) and [discord server](#) if you’d like to chat with us/other readers.

Star Burst updates every other Saturday
Next update is December 22nd, 2-4pm PST.
5:40 am, the stars were out, and Shane sat in Marnie's parked pickup with headlights flaring yellow tunnels into the darkness. He stared at the bushes they illuminated, the glossy dark leaves outlined in harsh shadow. The engine was off and he was hyperaware of every sensation. The vinyl steering wheel slipped under sweaty palms. His hair was damp, his head cold, and when he scratched the stubble under his chin the *scritch-scratch* echoed in the silent cab.

He'd woken to awful hangovers as far back as he could remember. What he couldn't remember was a day like today: turning away from his red-eyed reflection, and walking out the door without caving to the cure in his sock drawer.

He hadn't driven to the farm since his first day. That was the one time he'd arrived sober, and even then he'd brought a pint to sneak shots throughout the morning.

Today, there would be no booze.

Shane was terrified of returning to work, where yesterday's threat had been delivered in ice and backed by hardened blue eyes. William wasn't supposed to run *cold*. He was temper and violence. He was headlocks and fists. He was thick arms, soft lips, and warmth, like the glow of a fireside. Yet last time they spoke, he'd had the chill of a man who'd cut someone straight from his life without looking back. Even with Shane arriving sober—as per the ultimatum—firing wasn't off the table. This screw-up could be irreparable.

Shane's trembling fingers kneaded the slippery wheel. Sick with nerves, he took a deep breath and twisted the key in the ignition, revving the engine to life.

The farm was eerily quiet when he arrived. He stepped out into still air, not a whisper of a breeze; it was as if the coldness of the previous day had put a frost over the land. He felt it in his bones as he stared at the open barn door.

No music playing.

*Shit.*

Whatever mysterious courage was pushing his feet forward, Shane wished it wouldn't. He wanted to do what the Shane two months ago would've done: bolt. It'd been over eight hours since his last drop of alcohol, and he desperately needed some if he was going to survive this without puking.
Pulse thumping through his whole body, he stepped inside. William was hard at work attaching hoses to the pumps and didn't notice his entrance.

Shane took one look at his careless appearance and realized something was very wrong. He was used to William starting the day impeccably groomed, before the sweat and grime of hard labor painted him rugged. Today his hair was damp, thrown into a hasty top-knot with flyaways. His boots—which had never looked anything less than pristine during the first milking—were caked in yesterday's mud. He wore a pair of thick gloves, unnecessary for the task, and when he reached for the hose his movements were like that of an old man.

Shane took another step and William turned at the sound. His eyes were flinty, his face a rock.

"Finish up," he said, and without another word, limped to the door and left the barn.

Shane stared for a long time after he was gone.

He'd expected to feel a lot of shitty things today. Regret. Mortification. Self-loathing. A desperate need for William to accept him back. What he hadn't counted on was the sharp guilt that cut the moment he saw William's face, searing through all those other selfish emotions.

Shane hooked up the first cow, listening to the shuffle of hay under hooves. He hooked up the second, irritated by a few errant crickets pestering the morning silence. After the third, he couldn't take it anymore and stalked over to turn the radio on. It gave a crackle, then soft classic rock settled through the speaker—like any normal morning in the barn.

Two cows later, he walked back over and flipped it off.  

_Stupid radio._

If William had been ice yesterday, today he was a glacier. That should've terrified Shane, but instead it kindled determination. He was back to his usual efficiency, finishing the cows early and going double-speed on the chicken coop. The whole time, he tried to make sense of why. Why _wasn't_ he terrified anymore?

This morning, he'd showered, cleaned, and shaved. Had given himself a fucking pep talk in the bedroom mirror, while his whiskey lay like a siren's call in the drawer. He'd watched the wave of liquid shift from one side to the other when he pulled out a pair of socks, but William had made it clear: come in sober, or they were done. And with a willpower he'd never known before, he'd closed the drawer, then shown up sober and anxious as fuck—until now.

Shane was hardly aware of his own emotions anymore. It was like William's cold had slowed them with a freeze spell.

After powering through the rest of his chores, he headed straight for the equipment barn. The first thing he noticed was the unusually akimbo four-wheeler, its trailer stacked with dead posts for the burn pile. Parked next to it was the tractor, where William was struggling to hook up his tiller.

Shane frowned, watching the labored movements in silence. With a grunt and wince William snapped one of the connectors into place, then caught Shane's face in the tractor mirror.

"Got fresh posts there," he said, pointing to one side of the barn with a gloved finger. "Unload. Reload. Fix the fence."

Shane expected those short, tense commands. What he hadn't expected was the way William moved like his joints were crusted rubber bands. Following where the finger pointed, his eyes
He'd been trashed yesterday, but not so much that he'd forgotten the lay of the land—when they'd stopped working the fence, there'd been hundreds of posts left to do. Today, the stack was a quarter what it'd been.

"Right," said Shane.

William needing him to load them in the first place was another red flag, when every other day they'd been stacked and ready to go. Methodically Shane began the transfer of dead wood, trying to avoid the limping figure in the corner of his eye. When the task was done he paused with his hands on the side of the cart, staring at the new posts inside.

"What'd you do?" he asked.

William finished hooking the tiller. He hoisted himself on the tractor's step, clearly in pain. "I fucking off."

Shane's fingers twisted around the side of the cart. "Your body is jacked."

"Fence, Daniels." William sat with a wince, leaning against the backrest. "You want this to be about work? Then we work."

Before Shane could respond he turned on the tractor, the engine roaring between them as he let the big-wheeled machine roll out of the barn toward the pumpkin patch.

Shane waited until the tractor was but a hum in the distance before climbing onto the ATV. The four-wheeler cranked along the property, and when he reached the section of fence they'd left off on, he slowed then sputtered to a standstill. The exhaust kicked up fume clouds behind.

In his gut, he'd known from the moment he saw the stack in the barn that William had gone crazy, but part of his brain had tried to rationalize that maybe he'd just moved them to store somewhere else. Yet there was no denying the row of gleaming posts, which stretched so far in the distance they disappeared from sight before disappearing from the ground.

He gave the bike more gas, following the line all the way to its new end.

William had worked like a fucking madman through hundreds of posts; a pace that would be insane even with two people. Shane parked and began to unload, but froze when he got within a few feet of the fence.

Dark brownish-red stains, painting the last dozen tops. Blood.

He grabbed the shovel and jammed it into the base of the next rotten one, heart hammering.

Shane busted his ass.

It was a sunny autumn day, the temperature growing to a boil as the morning progressed. Shane sweat harder than he had all summer. William was way the fuck off in the fields—the tractor's purr inaudible—and for the first time since working here, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it aside. The sweat rolled in beads down his back. Whenever he grew fatigued he paused to look at the measly number he'd put in compared to William, then turned back to the shovel with angry determination.

At 11:00 he wiped his forehead, staring at what was left. There was still a lot to do, but he needed
water and food and had to admit defeat before collapsing.

His eyes drifted back to the bloody posts.

He tugged his shirt on over his damp body, then unhooked the cart from the back of the four-wheeler. Leaving it unceremoniously behind, he kicked the vehicle into gear.

William knew how to work when he was tired. After all, if the army had taught him anything it was how to dig ditches, work a double patrol, and turn in correct reports on minimum rest. His body being worn to shit? Nostalgic.

The part of his brain that was alert enough to give a fuck noted that he'd been wrong yesterday. Shane had come back. If he'd had any energy left, he'd have been shocked. Instead it was more puzzling static in the buzz of his emotional hangover. Dehydration made his head pound and he couldn't follow his thoughts. All the neat boxes of his mind were in a jumbled pile. All the spaces of an orderly system were an uncomfortable blur of angry squiggles.

Spaces. Like the spaces between the rows he was tilling. The long furrows in the field next to his pumpkin patches; the even, perfectly spaced furrows that would lay fallow over the season, nutrients replenished as they rested.

Hunger was a dull ache against his ribs, but he couldn't eat until finishing. He watched the tiller blades cut into loamy soil, the brown earth breaking open, black flesh revealed with shining moisture. His shirt stuck to his back, but the fuck if he'd be caught dead today stripping it off.

God forbid he get accused of reaching. The very sight of his bare chest would fuck with Shane's head, and they couldn't have that. Might be a fight.

Though with the shape he was in, Shane would win.

He re-focused on even lines, on the neat rows. The wheel of his tractor vibrated under sore hands, each throb another reminder of his solo battle against the rotting fence. He got to the end of the row and rotated the tractor, only to see Shane barreling towards the field. The untilled dirt kicked up a small hill when he hit the brakes, and William was forced to switch off his engine with the ATV blocking his path.

What the hell is his issue?

Whatever the problem was, William hoped it wasn't complicated. No pump malfunctions or bovine emergencies. Nothing that would create more work today.

Shane dismounted and stalked towards him, sweat patches on his shirt. At least he'd gotten something done today, instead of bitching out early to drink.

He slapped the fender of the tractor, startling William.

"The fuck you even doing?" he asked, green eyes glaring up with a barely-contained fury.

Had Shane gone blind? Probably should stop jacking off so much. Priests warned about that kind of shit.
"What does it fucking look like?" William said. "Finishing up the field."

The world gave a gentle spin. He focused on the solid seat underneath him and pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his face and leaving a grimy smear on the fabric. "You finish that fence?"

"Me?" Shane asked. "What about you? You stay out there 'til dawn or something? Pound 'em in with your bare fucking hands?"

Pounding? The hell?

Whatever. Looking at the angry fucker was making him even dizzier.

"What are you on about, Daniels?"

When Shane only glared, William decided this was a conversation best had on the same footing. If he kept staring down, he was going to fall. He carefully shuffled off the big machine, body protesting, while Shane waited.

"You go for a dive in a shallow pool? What the hell is going on, William?"

"Fuck off," William retorted, his feet hitting the ground. Immediately his lumbar spasmed and he lurched forward, hands flat on the metallic side, stomach churning.

He could use this as a quick break. Not for long...only to catch his breath. How much did he have to do today? The field was almost done. Still had to finish pickling for the winter orders, but he could sit for that.

"I'm breaking for lunch," he said, pushing off of the machine and herding his legs into the appropriate movements. The world tilted but he caught his balance, determined to stay strong in the face of Shane's untrustworthy concern.

"Let me drive you up."

"I can fucking walk," William said, taking another limping step.

Shane sighed. "Well, congratulations. Now get on the fucking four-wheeler."

"Bossy little shit for someone who can't do this anymore," William bit out, ignoring that the ATV was the same direction as his porch.

Shane stepped in front of him. "This isn't about me right now. This is about you and your jacked-to-shit body. Don't be stupid."

God, that's the pot calling the kettle black.

"Oh, what? And break my streak?" William said. "What bullshit you talking now?"

He gauged the distance between field and porch, then gave in, getting on the vehicle. Gripping the seat was like plunging his palms into fire. Tears bloomed behind his lids, but he was so sweaty he was sure it wouldn't be noticed.

Breathe in and suck it up.

"Like it matters what bullshit I'm talking," Shane muttered as he started the engine. "I'm always talking bullshit."
William wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean, but he was too focused on staying upright—and not touching Shane for the duration of the trip—to care. When they parked, he felt like Pops, hobbling towards the house. At least Shane didn't try to assist. That would have been worse than being driven home.

Shane walked up the porch with no effort, like a fucking showoff, and crossed his arms at the top.

"So, you plan on going back out there after lunch? 'Cause I can call Harvey now or later, doesn't matter to me."

"Unless you're planning on needing someone for when I kick your ass," William growled, "no fucking doctors."

He leaned against the rail, climbing the three steps. His eyes locked on his house like he was approaching the pearly gates for a hot date with St. Peter.

"Didn't answer the question," Shane said. "You going back out there? Your call."

William gave him the middle finger.

Once inside, he sank back onto the couch and crossed an arm over his eyes. Under the darkness of closed lids he heard the distinct rattle of his silverware drawer, the crinkle of plastic deli bags, the tapping of half-full condiments on the counter. Shane had never been bold enough to prepare food in his kitchen before.

"Since when did you grow a goddamned spine, shithead?" he groaned.

Shane clicked the toaster on. "Found the one you broke doing those fence posts."

*More like broke it when the bombs dropped.*

"Shocked you could manage it," William said. "Being as yesterday was too hard."

Why the fuck was Shane doing this? What was his freaking angle? Yesterday he'd been stinking drunk, going off about how he *didn't want* or *couldn't want*, or whatever his goddamned mysterious excuse was for rejecting him.

Instead of the expected explosion and retreat, Shane ignored his insult. William listened to the soft noises he made maneuvering around. The scrape of a butterknife being laid in the sink. The seal squeaking closed from the fridge. Footsteps into the living room.

Something ceramic pushed against his hand.

He raised his arm to see Shane holding a plate with a turkey and cheese sandwich. He was steady, eyes focused. It was too reminiscent of that moment in the spa…the one where he'd felt that Shane understood him. Confusion burned against mistrust.

"Why?"

Shane flushed. "Because you were gonna pass out on the tractor."

The words were factual, if not what William meant. Grudgingly, he took the plate and placed it next to Shane on his coffee table. Just like Shane had set aside his offering of java yesterday.

See how he liked it.
William lay back, covering his face again. "Wouldn't be the first time I passed out. You made it pretty clear to me yesterday that you don't consider me your business."

"Shouldn't have shown up drunk," Shane mumbled.

William grunted an acquiescence to that bit of obviousness.

"Why did you come back?" he asked, face still hidden. "Was it to turn in a two weeks? Was it to work? What?"

Silence greeted his questions, and William found it comforting proof that he was at least dealing with the real Shane and not one replaced by body snatchers.

"To say sorry," Shane finally said. There was another pause, then he whispered, "Don't want to be fired. Still want to work for you."

William slowly pulled his arm off of his face. Shane was dirty from work, his eyes fixed on the floor. He was absently picking a corner of the bread, a pile of crumbs forming on the plate next to him.

That wasn't endearing, damn it.

William closed his eyes again, taking stock. His back was well and truly fucked. Only sleep, a massage, a hot soak, and some babying would ease the overexertion. His hands were disasters with fingers. His stomach grumbled that it wanted something other than coffee and rage for sustenance.

"Fine," he said, rolling on his side and pushing up. He groaned again, leaning against the back of the couch.

Shane looked at William's hands.

"Can take your gloves," he offered quietly.

William grimaced but pulled his hands free. His palms were raw, and two of the bigger blisters had popped into angry welts of red, weeping skin. Small white strips hung from the edges.

"Might need to wash them off before I eat," he said.

Horror warred with concern on Shane's face.

"Fuck, William. Did you clean them at all?"

"Took a shower this morning. Stung like a bitch." William pulled a white string of skin away from the wound. "Meant to cover them, but..."

But he'd forgotten, because he hadn't given two shits or a damn.

"I'll go with you," Shane said.

William pushed up from the cushions and swayed to his feet. He felt exhausted. Hungry. And...lighter. Because Shane had come back, and he was trying.

But trying for what? Was this only about the job?

Shane didn't attempt to steady him but walked close, a silent assurance that if he fell he'd be caught.
"Do I remind you of that dog you had to put down?" William asked dryly. "Too stupid to know what to do with himself?"

"Dog wasn't stupid," Shane said. "He got hit."

"I dunno. I'm good at running into traffic." William pushed into his bedroom and fumbled for the light switch, slapping the reached over to flick it on. William grunted his thanks, then made it to his bed and collapsed.

"You remember where the first-aid box is?"

Shane nodded. After retrieving the massive case from the bathroom cabinet he placed it on William's bed.

"Just...one sec," he said, and disappeared into the hall.

While he was out, William turned on a lamp and fished a stool from behind the bed.

Waiting for Shane while his damp shirt clung to his skin made him twitchy, but the situation between them was too delicate to strip. Laying down, he entertained himself by picturing Shane's flushing and stuttering if he gave into that urge, but before he could follow the fantasy his back spasmed again.

_It's your farmhand. Helping you clean your hands. Nothing weird. Not like you've seen and fantasized about his dick. Not like anything special is between you idiots at all._

Shane returned with a bowl of water and lingered at the foot of the bed, hesitating before taking a seat. William tried to sit up.

"Here, I got this," he said.

Only to fall back against the pillows with a huff.

Galvanized, Shane snagged a washcloth and soaked it in the soapy water. He wrung it out then set the bowl aside, taking William's hand.

"I didn't mean it," he said, gingerly wiping a blister. The soap stung sharp across raw skin. William stared at him.

"Mean what?"

"That I wanted you to fuck off, okay?"

William didn't trust himself to say anything about the fight. Shane was a frightened bird. One wrong move and he'd ruin it. God, he was tired of ruining things.

"Okay," he said.

Shane focused on his careful strokes, wiping dirt from the creases of William's broken skin. "It's just, you know...there's a lot of fucked up shit in my head."

"I don't know what's going on in your head unless you let me in, Shane."

The quiet stretched, Shane meticulously cleaning. It was surreal submitting to this, his touch softer than any William could remember. He worked the cloth around the raw, open blisters, getting off the top layer of sweat and grime.
William took in the face of someone who was trying. A man who'd hurt him, sure…but trusted him too. Trust had to be returned, no matter how scary.

"You know what I was thinking about two days ago?" he asked.

Shane dunked the cloth back in the water and rang it out. "No," he said, beginning the same motions on the other hand.

"Was thinking about how much I'd rather have been hanging out with you. And how pissed I figured you were at me. And how you deserved at least half of that award I won. Because even though we have our moments, I can't do this shit alone." He looked down at his clean wound. "Because trying to puts me in states like this."

The cloth slowed.

"Wasn't pissed at you," Shane said, dropping the rag in the water. "Almost never pissed at you."

"You don't have to bullshit me," said William, no heat to the words. "You're fucked up because of me. Said so yesterday."

Shane sighed. He sank down on the edge of the bed, elbows to knees, and massaged his scalp as if trying to soothe something inside.

Then, like nothing had happened, he straightened.

"I'm fucked up," he said, opening the first-aid kit and pulling out the alcohol, "because of a lot of shit that has nothing to do with you. You didn't do this. And you didn't ask for all this bullshit when you hired me."

"Let me let you in on something," William said. "I don't have a history of connecting with a lot of motherfuckers, you got me? It's not like I've got a harem of buddies ready to come hang. And, regardless of whatever the fuck is going on in your head, I don't like when we aren't cool."

Shane uncapped the bottle, dabbing it onto clean gauze. "I fucking hate it," he whispered, eyes on the pad.

William took a deep breath.

"Then don't run from me. Don't run from this. Whatever this is." He gripped Shane's wrist; it hurt, but holding onto Shane was a pain he took on willingly. "Don't tell me you're not able to be here, then turn around and drag my stupid ass home and make me a fucking sandwich and wipe my blisters."

He realized he was speaking too fast. He forced himself to let go of Shane, palm throbbing.

"If," he said softly, "you just want friendship, I can do that. What I can't do is deal with the thought that I ruined the first friendship I might have had in five years."

Shane rubbed the wrist William had released.

"And what's the alternative," he asked, voice raw, "to friendship?"

The alternative? William's heart stuttered and he licked his lips.

"What do you want that to be?"
Shane got up, setting the supplies on the stool. He paced across the room, like moving his feet would push the words out.

"This shit," he blurted. "Like…doing shit, just because. I can't, okay? Maybe that makes me fucking stupid, but I can't do it. I'm not like that."

William watched him pace. He tried, but his tired brain couldn't translate Shane's babble into normal-people words. He rolled on his side and snagged a roll of gauze from the kit to wrap his hands.

"Not gay? Not interested in me? Not...?" He made a frustrated growl. "I'm trying to follow you here, babe, but you're making it tough."

"Like that!" Shane exploded. "Babe. What the fuck is that? And of course I'm fucking interested, of course I'm fucking gay. Christ..."

William froze, then pulled his hand to his mouth, ripping the gauze off with his teeth before tucking it closed. Understanding filtered into his pounding head.

"Okay," he said. "We're having that conversation."

He reached for the alcohol, soaking a cotton pad for his other hand.

"I like you," William said. "You're deep. You listen. You pay attention to details. You're attractive, and being with you makes my dick hard." He wiped the hand then began to wrap it, meeting Shane's eyes. "But you keep running from me. It's giving me mixed signals. You're confused? Hell, I'm confused because from where I'm sitting, as much as you claim to feel the same, you balk at any type of mutually beneficial sex." He tied off the bandage and sank back in the bed.

Shane drug his hand down his cheek, pulling on the skin under his eye.

"That's what this is, then?" he asked.

Why wouldn't he just spit it out? Why did they have to do this right fucking now when William's head felt like a throbbing march of rattling rocks, his hands hurt like fire, and his back was twisted like a pretzel? He wanted a drink. He wanted some fucking weed. He wanted a cigarette. He wanted a nice syringe full of H. Something to pull him off this exhausted pain fest and to lock into what was clearly an important mine field to travel through.

Head on.

"Shane," he said slowly, picking each word as though they were seeds. "You said you were interested. I've heard that from guys before. But you're also not out. So whatever I might want? That has to be held against the reality of whatever you're going to give me. It feels like every time I reach for something beyond casual, you freak the fuck out. So I don't know what you want me to say."

He shifted on the bed, trying to get as comfortable as his back would allow.

"The other day on the porch, you said you weren't scared," Shane said, staring at the floor. "Well, I fucking am, okay?"

William closed his eyes. That day on the porch? Yeah. He wasn't scared of Shane's passion. He'd enjoyed kissing him, no matter what horrible things had happened to him in the past. Because without what he'd gone through, he wouldn't be who he was. And who he was deserved to be cared
"There are a lot of things to be scared of," William said. "What if I fuck it up? What if you fuck it up? What if we try to be more and it all goes to shit?"

He opened his eyes. "But what if it doesn't? And you let that fear and the people who hurt you before decide what you're going to do? We can't control other people, but we can control ourselves. You came here today, sober, because you're not done. Well, I'm not done either. It's okay to be scared. It's not okay to let being scared hold you back from what you want."

He let the words hang between them, waiting Shane out. He was rewarded when Shane cautiously stepped closer. William patted the side next to him.

"Shane, first step on a road is the hardest one. C'mere and lay down with me."

Shane had two choices. He could bolt, like he'd been mentally preparing to do during his whole impassioned outburst. Or he could stay and lay down.

He'd thought this morning was the make-or-break moment for them: his decision to be sober, William's decision to fire him or not. But it wasn't. The moment was now, when Shane would either give in to what he wanted or give in to his fear.

And if he kept giving into fear, there would be a time when William stopped trying.

Not long ago he'd been in this room in very different circumstances, and even with a week to brood on it Shane couldn't understand how—in what felt like seconds—they'd gone from kissing on the porch to William getting in his pants. But today there was no drunken whirlwind to blow him here; he'd somehow ended up on this bed of his own sober accord.

Spine as stiff as a 2x4, Shane laid beside William and fixed his eyes to the ceiling. He was trembling, and not just from nerves. It was a different, familiar set of shakes, his body making him pay for going so long without alcohol. All day he'd had other things to focus on, from the anxiety of showing up, to the heavy labor at the fence, to the meticulous cleaning of William's cuts. Now they were here in silence, nothing to distract Shane from every uncomfortable flutter.

It felt like ages before William spoke.

"I liked you the first day we worked together, Shane. I like the way you think, how you notice things. You make me crazy, because some days I want to choke you 'til your eyes pop. Then you fold my damn shirt and leave it on the porch. You remember where I put my shit. You step into the messy-ass problems without flinching. When you've got my back? When you don't leave me hanging? Things are good. I can't get you out of my head."

One of William's blistered, bandaged hands reached over and squeezed his.

"So here is what I think. Let's be together for a week. We can keep it private. Get to know each other better. Spend time together as lovers, not playing these bullshit casual games. Then, if after that week, you still can't? We call it off, no hard feelings. I'll accept my rejection and we'll go back to working like nothing happened."
Taut silence followed and William held his breath, putting the whole room at pause. Shane stared at the broad, white ceiling as his pulse picked up speed, the words tumbling through him.

He wasn't an easy person. How could William know what he was taking on, when he'd only seen a small portion of Shane's crazy? His freakouts, numerous as they'd been, were only the tip of the fucked-up iceberg. When William popped the hood to get a real look at him, the likelihood of him noping the fuck out was high.

Besides—despite his talk of reaching beyond casual—he'd spoken about 'mutually beneficial sex' in the same breath.

William had always felt too good to be true. Larger than life. Their first night had been cataclysmic, shooting Shane's world into motion after years of treading air. The job offer that followed had been a ticket out of the endless apathy of his Joja days. Ever since, William had shown he understood things about Shane no one else did. Not even Garrett.

"Can't do casual," Shane whispered, pulse hammering. "At all."

William's bandages were soft, his hand calloused. Both tightened over Shane's fist.

"So is that a yes?" he asked. "Because if it is, I can erase casual from my fucking vocabulary."

If a deity really had created the world, it was like they'd made Shane, promptly forgotten about him, and three decades later tossed down William Bauer as compensation.

Certain he was in a dream, Shane turned to his fallen angel.

"Yes."

William intertwined their fingers. "Consider casual a four-letter word, then."

A long time ago, probably back in elementary school, Shane had had a science lesson. Magnets. A simple enough concept, but at the time his young brain had been fascinated by the demonstration when his teacher held one over a dish of metal shavings. Shane had watched in awe as they shivered and snapped into place like an iron swarm.

That's what it felt like now: the wild, scattered feelings within him, pooling into the touch between their hands.

"Still got that field to do," William said, closing his eyes. "But for this? It's worth the wait."

Shane was afraid to move; afraid to disturb the careful, clear assembly of those shards. William rubbed the top of his knuckles with his thumb, going back and forth several times before his stomach let out an indelicate growl.

William sighed. "Why am I such an idiot?"

"Because I'm a big enough idiot that it's probably contagious," Shane said, still scared to move.

"You're right. It's all your fault I decided to super-soldier the fence. And to not take breaks. And to ignore my war injury in the face of mindlessly destroying posts." William gave a tired snort. "Or, you know. If I were less of an idiot, then you'd have a better example. So, guess that's a factor."

War injury?

Shane had wondered. The way William always struggled with back pain during work…for a man
so physically fit and strong, it made sense there was an explicit cause. But right now William was worn the fuck out, and it was dawning on Shane that he'd picked a really fucking bad time for this conversation. William could barely keep his eyes open, and looked like he had the energy of a sack of feed.

Maybe if Shane quit his stupid habit of running, he'd be allowed to know about the injury. One day.

He didn't want to get up. Breaking a moment like this was a curse between them, a risk of going several steps back. But much as Shane wanted to stay—to hold and kiss him, to have William whisper reassurances that he meant everything he'd just said—it'd have to wait until he wasn't a broken mess of a man.

"I'll bring your food in here," Shane said quietly, "then go finish the field."

William rolled his head to face him.

"Maybe when you get done..." He hesitated. "You come hang out for a bit?"

This time, Shane was pretty sure he didn't mean, *come have a beer as a bro.*

"Yeah," he said, self conscious. "I will."

William nodded, closed his eyes, and let go of his hand. When Shane returned a minute later with his sandwich, he was already fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! So, it is nearing that time. Star Burst will be completed on January 19th, clocking in at 24 chapters. We appreciate you all so much for sticking with us! If you are sad to see it coming to end, all we can say is...please stick around. When the last chapter goes up, we post an announcement in the author’s notes detailing what is going on with us, and our future story plans.

You can also follow us on [tumblr](http://tumblr) or join our [discord server](http://discord) to keep up-to-date.

Next update is January 5th, 2-4pm PST.

Happy Holidays to all!
Shane remembered being fifteen and harboring his first soul-wrenching crush.

The day they met, Garrett had thrown an arm over Shane's shoulders as they walked to the bus stop together—the first in an endless string of flirtations. Straight or not, the boy was a living PDA and each one was a tiny flag waving at Shane, saying, you could have a chance. It was seeing Garrett on lunch and his stomach turning flips. Garrett winking at him and Shane obsessing over it for his next three classes, his heart racing as the clocked ticked closer to the end of the day, when he'd see him again and maybe flirt more.

Working in the field, Shane replayed his earlier conversation with William over and over, stomach flipping in ways it hadn't done since those teenage years. The hours crept by and he checked his watch with mounting anxiety: 4:00, 4:10, 4:20, 4:25.

He was going to be sick. Though, in a weird way, the nausea felt really fucking good.

At 4:28 he couldn't take it anymore. Quitting time was usually 5:00, but if he spent another minute in these fields he'd end up chickening out, going home with his tail between his legs and proving to William—once again—that his words meant jack shit.

At 4:29, he nested his gloves and tools into their proper place in the equipment barn, thinking about how William had listed that as one of the things he found most attractive about Shane.

At 4:30, he sat on an overturned crate and stared at his visibly shaking hands. The prospect of seeing William had kept his nerves in the realm of butterflies and excitement rather than frustration, but Shane was worried. How long would William want to hang? Would they share a few beers like usual, or after yesterday's stunt, was all alcohol off the table? Maybe he'd survived everything up to this point while sober, but it'd been way too long since his last drink and he wanted this stupid monkey off his back before they talked again. Especially now, with everything out in the open.

Shane slapped his cheeks, hard.

At 4:45, he finally found his balls and walked to the house.

William was on the couch, zoned out in front of a sports talk show. He had the air of a man mellowing after a cold, and seemed to be using the TV as soothing background noise more than
entertainment. The house was neater than it'd been at lunch, and on the kitchen table sat one glass of whiskey.

Shane licked his lips. He slid off his shoes, staring at the lonely shot.

"This, um. This a test?" he asked, not quite joking.

"Nah." William held up a second glass, an inch of liquid on the bottom. "Just decided to get a head start. Bottle's over here."

His words took all the wind out of Shane's anxious, tattered sails.

God, he fucking needed this. Worse than he'd ever admit to William. He downed the poured whiskey, closing his eyes and basking in the burn that untied a dozen knots from his nerves.

"Harvest in the silos?" William asked, eyes on the TV.

Shane walked over to the couch and sat down, keeping a bit of distance between them. "Yeah. Full as they'll get."

The TV flashed a recap of a fumble and the announcer clapped, belting out a laugh. William nodded and swirled his whiskey.

Shane stared at the bottle on the coffee table, unsure if he should grab it and help himself. With each second that passed he grew more self-conscious of the awkward way he was sitting on the edge of the cushions, and his stomach flipped again when he realized how clean William looked compared to earlier.

Goddammit. He'd showered? Shane was nervous enough without picturing William in the shower. The asshole could be two steps from death's door, and he still had to keep the upper hand.

As if hearing his thoughts, William threw back his shot, slammed it on the table, then grabbed a pillow and dropped it against Shane's legs.

"Work's over for the day," he declared, looking up as he settled, "so you get to be my pillow."

Guess I'm done drinking.

William had lured him to this couch under false pretenses. Shane woefully eyed the bottle of whiskey, which might as well have been in Zuzu City for all he could reach it in this position.

"You, uh, feel any better?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for the sandwich, by the way." William closed his eyes. "Turned on the other sports show, but they had that asshat who can't swallow his spit before he talks."

"Oh," was Shane's brilliant response.

Then silence.

This wasn't going to work. It wasn't. Where was the guy who'd rubbed Shane's neck and told him not to be afraid? The one who always made things better after Shane had ruined them? Yeah, now would be a great time to send him in—before he destroyed this friendship out of pure fucking cringe.

"I uh, put more gas in the tractor," he added.
William opened his eyes, looking up again. "You wipe the stupid off of it, or did the hose run out of water?"

A joke. If Shane were a normal person, he might try to laugh, or say something playful in retort, or do anything beyond his current imitation of an ironing board. Instead:

"Ran the hose over it. Should be clean."

_Clever. Good one. A-fucking-plus._

William raised an eyebrow. As if finally realizing Shane was a pathetic creature who needed to be put out of his misery, he rolled up and reached for his empty glass. "Gonna get another?"

Shane's shoulders dipped in relief. "Yeah. Yeah, that'd be good."

Not that one more shot was _enough_, but it was something.

"So," said William, lying down again after they'd thrown them back. "Ingrid is getting really fat. Vet said she was going to have three kittens."

"Yeah. I, uh, told Jas she could have one."

"Dude, that kid? Totally got me in trouble with Kent and Jodi."

Shane bit his lip. "You walked her home that night."

William nodded. "It was on my way. She's a smart kid. Nice too. Gave me a brownie." His eyes flickered to Shane's. "Hope I didn't step on any toes. We didn't ask you if it was okay."

Shane thought back to that night, to the righteous anger that had bloomed like a fireball in his chest, to all the _how dare he_ thoughts. _Was_ it okay? He wasn't sure, but it didn't seem the right time to discuss his fathering insecurities.

"You hang out with them a lot?" he asked, trying to sound casual. "Kent and his family?"

"Didn't have a washer or dryer when I first moved here, and Jodi and I worked out a trade. Veggies for laundry help. Kent was a captain. POW, got released after the war. Came back…" William shrugged. "He'd seen some shit. So every few weeks I pop in on him and his family. It helps sometimes to know you're not the only one, that other people were over there too."

It was a kind thing to do, Shane thought. William genuinely cared for his neighbors, and it'd be selfish to wish he were any different. Yet that didn't stop the tendril of jealousy weaving through his veins.

Shane knew Kent was a vet, but hadn't known the details.

_POW. Seen some shit._

Kent surely understood William on a level Shane never would. The closest Shane had been to war was managing not to murder all the elderly people who joked, "No price? Must be free!" at JojaMart. He'd spent his whole pathetic existence in a cushy life of retail and drunkenness. Unambitious, lazy, too stuck in his own mental issues to do unto others.

How could he compete with a war bond? How could William fall in love with him once he realized how little Shane had done with his life? He'd called Shane _deep_, but apparently his only frame of
reference was a rain puddle.

"Kind of you," Shane said, gruff.

"Thanks."

A stretch of silence followed, William looking tense. Maybe he realized he'd rather be with Kent, where the conversation didn't constantly flow back to a plugged drain.

"Look," Shane said, rubbing his eyes. "Maybe I should just go. Then you don't have to sit here and pretend I'm not really fucking bad at this. Tomorrow you can tell me if you changed your mind, or whatever."

William sat up, folding his knee in. He rested against the back of the couch to face him. "Stupid and nosy-as-fuck question. Am I your first trial-basis boyfriend?"

Shane wished the cushions would suck him into their folds.

"Well, obviously I haven't done this before. Fucking look at me."

"I am looking at you. I look at you all the time, dumbass." William leaned forward, rubbing his back. "The first time you kicked a ball, were you amazing at it?"

Shane looked up in disbelief. "Are you seeing this shit, too? Or is it just me? Who the fuck needs a pep talk to date someone?"

William stared back, unflinching. "Kiss me."

Shane's heart almost stopped. Then, as if to make up for lost time, it booted into high-gear.

"You...you're in a lot of pain..."

"Kissing makes ouchies better. Everyone knows that. Now kiss me."

Of course; he wanted Shane to lead it. Why not hand over a full tray of fine china to the guy whose hands were shaking?

Feeling like he was about to take a pop quiz that would determine the pass or fail of this trial run, Shane shifted inch by clumsy inch to face William.

He closed his eyes, then kissed him.

Immediately, William cupped his cheek, darting his tongue into his mouth. He took control, steering the pressure, the need, and Shane sank into it with skin-tingling relief. He chased the kiss as long as William let them, until at last he pulled back.

"Kick that ball real damn good, Shane," he said, voice rough.

Shane lingered in the space, not ready for it to be over.

"Sometimes I should just shut up," he mumbled.

"If shutting up means getting more of that taste? Then hell yeah, shut up anytime." William kissed his forehead, then stroked his flushing cheek. "I'm really glad you came back today."

Me too.
Shane knew there was something else he had to do. Even a few minutes ago it would've been impossible, but this reassurance…those rough, bandaged fingers still on his face…

With difficulty, he met William's eyes.

"I've been a fucking dick. I'm sorry."

He wasn't sure what he was expecting—but it wasn't for William to lean in and brush his lips a second time.

"Okay. Forgiven."

Shane blinked, waiting for the catch. That was it? That was too easy. He'd been a dick for weeks, and with one sentence it was over?

"Okay," he replied, not trusting that his sins were forgiven in full.

Perhaps enough to move on, though.

It wasn't late compared to their usual happy hours, but William was clearly beat. There were heavy bags below his eyes, and despite moving more, it wasn't with ease. Shane knew he should let him nap longer. More selfishly, he knew there was a full bottle in his drawer at home that he could chug without counting shots. William needed rest, and Shane needed whiskey—and they both needed to process the day.

"Do you need anything else before I go?" Shane asked.

"Nah. Just gonna heat up some leftovers and go to bed. I'll be up and around in time for work tomorrow." William dropped his hand reluctantly. "Look, I'm not easy either. I've got my demons. I've got my skeletons and baggage. No one who's tried to be with me sticks around long. So I understand it, Shane. And I meant it. We're cool."

Maybe this wasn't doomed.

Shane nodded, trying to solder those words inside him as strength to face the rest of the night. "Should probably go now."

"Alright." William pushed to his feet with a heavy sigh. "Thanks for everything today."

Shane set his glass in the sink and put his shoes on. At the door, he paused.

"You deserved that medal at the fair," he said earnestly. "Didn't get to say it, but…you did."

Then he rushed out before William could answer.

It wasn't everyday someone convinced a wild creature to be friends. Even rarer was to have scared that creature multiple times and get another chance. Somehow, William had stumbled into the land of do-overs and thus far managed not to fuck it up.

The day after his overworking idiocy was the easiest he and Shane had had all week, and though he was still a sore knot their progress was gratifying. The afternoon milking was done, the ripe crops
pulled, and they'd put fresh labels on the finished preserve jars. Once the casks had finished aging, his fall brews would be ready for mass distribution. No fights. No glaring. No tension. The peace was balm to the spirit, no matter how slowly his body was recovering.

They sat in their respective chairs on the porch after work, one beer apiece.

"Good work today," William said.

"Thanks." Shane wiped his hands with a rag before cracking the cap off his beer with a thumb, as usual eschewing the use of a bottle opener. William smiled despite the low throb in his head.

"How you holding up?"

"Probably better than you," said Shane. "How's the back?"

"The sins of yesterday are taking their pound of flesh."

Flesh that was hot despite the cool weather, and while his body wasn't in the best of shape, at least the farm was better off. William looked out at honey-colored fields that were dappled in stretching shadows, each one long, like a finger caressing the waving crops.

He sank into the waves of pain. The cramping was the worse part. He needed a hot shower, or a taste of something stronger. He could picture how easy it would be to swing by the good doctor's office and ask for a ten day supply of muscle relaxers, something to ease the overwork. They were so far from Zuzu there was no way Harvey would know his history.

Could he do it?

No, that 's a rabbit hole that has no exit.

"I can do double again tomorrow," Shane offered.

"I'll just go to the spa this weekend and soak it out," William muttered. "Won't take me long to get back on my feet."

As soon as he said the words he could've kicked himself. The spa? Smooth, when the last time had turned into a shit-show.

Shane checked his watch. "What's wrong with today?"

"Can barely walk to my room without busting my ass," William said.

"Thought that was in the job description though. You know, making sure you don't die on the way up."

William met his eyes. Something...something was different.

"Guess you're right." He stood as straight as he could manage, then tossed the empty beer bottle into the bucket. "Might switch to something stronger. For medicinal purposes."

Once he was moving he went inside and gathered the towels, managing not to trip or knock into anything. He glanced back at the door and called, "You need to borrow some clothes?"

Shane lingered near the entrance. "Yeah. Hadn't really planned on..."

William grabbed two sets of clothes. On his way out, he snatched a full fifth of whiskey from his
"Medicinal, he thought. *Not a damn thing to do with your nerves.*

"You ready?"

"Yeah." Shane shifted his weight from side to side, eyes on the duffle. "You, um, want me to carry that?"

William handed him the bag, their fingers brushing at the exchange.

They stepped out onto the path and William kept his gaze on the sky. The sun was going down faster than the last time they'd done this. He moved steady until they reached the curve of the path, when his back spasmed. The pain shot down his hip and forced him to stop. He stood still, sucking in air while a rainbow of aches flared from the cramp.

"Looks like you're making your money today," he said, the words working around the spasms. It'd been five years; one would think his muscles would have gotten with the program and knocked off the pain game by now.

Shane didn't comment or complain about William leaning on him. He focused on the dirt road, holding William's arm.

"I know what I said earlier. But this…” Shane hesitated. "It's off the clock, okay?"

William soaked that in.

"Good to know."

The spa was warmer than the autumn chill, the constant blow of fans humming and echoing in the tiled rooms. When they made it to the lockers, William sank onto the bench.

"Thanks," he grunted, kicking off his boots, "for talking me into this."

Shane took his time untying his shoelaces. "Wouldn't be like that in the first place if it weren't for me."

William snorted. "Not your fault that I've got a body full of issues."

He pulled his shirt over his head and rolled it into a ball, then slid his jeans off to reveal snug shorts.

"Meet you in there," he said, grabbing the whiskey. He used the wall to keep upright on his way inside.

Just like before, there were echoing clicks from the spa's large clock. William leaned against the back of the pool, muscles already easing as the heat soaked through flesh and down to bone. This time, he didn't have to wait nearly as long. Shane slipped into the water, close enough to touch, the steam rising up around them in a heavy cloud. The only sounds were the fans, and water lapping at filters along the pool walls. William opened the whiskey bottle with a squeak and took a long swig. The liquor burned his throat, opening a groove into his mental boxes and bleeding out thoughts across his mind. Mutely, he offered the bottle to Shane.

They passed it back and forth. The atmosphere loosened knots and William sank into the tranquility, welcome from the brittle rubber band tension that had been between them since last
week.

Shane lowered the bottle. He stared at the label, turning it slowly from side to side.

"Shit always feels really easy with you," he said, offering it back with a sigh. "Until it doesn't."

"I'm not an easy man, Shane. But. Neither are you." William met his eyes and capped the bottle, stowing it behind them. "I meant what I said. Whether you'd set me off or not, my body being fucked up isn't your fault."

"Whose fault is it? Because you wouldn't have busted your ass like that if I hadn't been a dick to you."

The question was meant as sarcasm. Another self-flagellation.

But Shane didn't know.

"Gotoro soldiers," William said. "It's a messy story. I don't think you really want to know."

"I don't want to know, or you don't want to say?"

He was too damn sharp at this.

"Might as well find out how fucked up the boyfriend model is before you decide to keep it," William muttered, sinking deeper into the pool.

Shane's fingers found his under the water. "Fucked model doesn't mean I don't want it."

"You sure you want to know?"

Shane's voice dropped quieter. "I'm sure."

His affirmation pulled off the scab of the wound, blood seeping along the rend in William's mind. Names formed in the viscous ooze. Manny. Walls. Yancey. Roch, Tommy, Bane, Greenie, Jake, Kodes, Justin. Max. Eleven faces that he took and carried with him.

The clock on the far wall ticked a few seconds off. William wanted something to fidget with, something for his hands to do while he unwrapped crusted and bloody bandages away from the story. He sorted the tale, searching for the beginning.

The steam in the spa melted into muggy nights. The buzzing fans turned into mosquitoes. The potted ferns that framed the edges of the skylight reminded him of waxy-thick leaves that hid the sun, creating confusing shadows on a swampy jungle floor.

"C'mere," he finally said, pointing to his left side where a cascade of bullets was inked into his arm, under a rotting peach.

Shane slid over. His eyes followed the spent casings, each marked with different birthdays, all with the same death date. One finger tentatively traced the outline of a bullet.

"Twelve of us. My unit." William swallowed back bile that rose from the memory, but now that he'd begun, his words were a stone rolling downhill. "It was raining. It rained every day out there, nonstop. Constant, clinging, confining drench. We'd been out for ten days, waiting for our relief troops to rendezvous." He shot a glance at Shane, his body a rod of tension. "But it was a shit assignment on shit intel."
Shane drew back the hand tracing the tattoos. His face was still with deep, silent attention.

"That's why...your t-shirts and stuff. That's why you can't stand the wet?"

William nodded. "Yeah."

He licked his lips. How could he accurately portray the way heavy, damp fabric brought out the confining claustrophobia? He trusted the whiskey, which oiled down the burrs of his unease, and plunged ahead.

"So, there we were. Twelve men, waiting for a supposed sneak attack that intel assured us was coming. We were the fifth team out of ten. They didn't know which team was going to intercept, mind you. Who cared if we were eaten up by mosquitoes or foot rot? The border was our priority."

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, dampening the strands. "It was an ambush. Six of us were asleep, six of us were on watch. Didn't hear 'em. Above us but we never knew. Grenade, right in the hole. Those Gotoros shot us like goddamn fish in a barrel."

He could see it as he spoke, the way the shadowed boy had glared down at them with hatred, his hand open with the terrible explosive falling in slow motion. That moment of stillness before the collateral aftermath replayed in his nightmares. The smell of the mud and the blood. He could feel phantom pain as his skin had ruptured underneath shrapnel, and remembered screaming, not hearing the sound over the ringing in his ears.

"William," Shane whispered.

His voice pulled William out of hot jungle and into the warm pool. He floated, feeling as though he'd poured out his own weight in memories. Shane's eyes prodded him on, and he continued, the words too heavy to stop.

"I got up, and my face? Felt like it was on fire. Arms hurt. Couldn't hear. And there was Justin's arm...right there. With no Justin. I started yelling, saw my people get up. Saw my best friend Max moving. He was still alive, but his legs were pouring blood."

His eyes stung from the steam. Max had been reading a letter. Fiftieth time he'd read that paper. The folds were soft, and the picture of his daughter had been pinned on his log book.

"Max was a father. Had a little girl about Jas's age. I picked him up first. We had to get out of there, and Max had the comm's box. I tell him, 'Hit the mayday.' I tell him 'We're going home.' I tell him 'It's going to be okay.' Got my feet underneath us. Got less than a few inches of progress."

He stared up at the glass ceiling and in the reflective panes saw rustling trees, then heard the whistle, like it was that day all over again.

"That's when the second bomb hit."

Because it hadn't been enough to drop one, not when half the target survived. So instead of letting his men fight back, the enemy had come again, finishing the job with a shrapnel double tap.

He'd heard things as he'd lain broken and dying. Gotoro voices speaking in raucous tones, ears working even as the rest of him refused to move. For an hour he'd memorized their conversations; words and phrases that would mean something later to commanders and generals. In feverish dreams, he'd replayed them over and over, crushed underneath Max's corpse, his blood turning cold in the endless rain, clinging to the knowledge as a lifeline for revenge. As the insects came and crawled over him, he'd breathed. He couldn't feel his legs. He'd lost too much blood to reach for
anything. All he could do was breathe, in and out, in and out, knowing if he ever made it out of the jungle, he'd never let himself be trapped again.

He shook out of the memory. That was a long time ago. He'd been different then, too fever-sick and injured to think beyond survival.

"And that was it?" Shane asked quietly.

It was as much as William could convey without dragging them through the darkest reaches of his memories. He nodded.

"Took them two days to find me. My back was eaten up with parasites. My spine was damaged." He reached behind him for the whiskey, then took a long drink. "Sole survivor."

Once he'd been conscious, the information he'd gleaned had been given to the higher-ups. What he'd said must have checked out. They'd questioned him before releasing him back into medical care, sore and tired. Later, there had been more visits, more questions—this time from generals with stars on their hats. After he'd returned home, some jackass in a suit awarded him a medal for honor, courage, and valor. It was on his mother's mantle. He'd not been able to look at it without being sick.

Hero? What was so heroic about hiding underneath your best friend's body to survive?

"Relive it a lot, I bet," Shane said, plucking the whiskey from William's fingers.

The truth was, not if he could help it. But Shane deserved to know. Cameron had known. Hell, he'd been there the day they'd brought his sack of a would-be corpse into the OR. He wanted Shane to have that knowledge, too. No point in taking him on without being completely clear about the monsters in his closet.

As fucked a story as it was, Shane would understand.

William stretched his back, one elbow against the pool wall. The booze was hitting him hard, loosening his tongue. "You ever lose anyone?"

Shane's eyes flickered over the lip of the bottle.

"Not the same," he muttered, taking a drink. "But yeah."

"Jas's parents?"

A darkness crossed Shane's face. "If they were still here, I wouldn't be."

The truth of that struck William deep. If they hadn't died, then maybe Shane wouldn't have moved down to live with Marnie. He'd be out in Zuzu with his friends. With his family. He would be somewhere else.

The world was full of fucked up ripples like that. If Garrett had been in this world, he and Shane would have never met. If Max had made it through the war, his own life would have been totally different. Each of those events, tragic and pointless, had brought them to one another, crashing like two stars in a universe that was so wide, neither of them should have crossed.

"I know how that feels. Max...was like family. We were drill instructors together. And yet, I couldn't save him."

"And that was it?" Shane asked quietly.

"Took them two days to find me. My back was eaten up with parasites. My spine was damaged."

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"I know how that feels. Max...was like family. We were drill instructors together. And yet, I couldn't save him."
Shane glared at the water. "You don't want a fucking award for surviving. You just want them alive."

Simple words. But they made all the difference.

"Yeah," William said, taking back the whiskey and capping it. "Think I'm a PTSD basket case now?"

There was a beat of silence.

"That day you gave yourself stitches," Shane said, lifting his head to meet William's eyes. "I saw your back. Bumps and stuff. You have surgeries?"

Shane had noticed. Shouldn't have been surprising. He was like a little ghost, acting as though he heard or cared for nothing, when the truth was he didn't miss a thing.

"Broke my back out there and it got died a few times. Lots of surgeries. Lots of rehab. Lots of doctors. I..." William swallowed. "I'm as good as I've ever been now, but still have bad days."

Bad days that people didn't usually see. Not like yesterday.

When Shane looked at him, William could feel it along his scars, the hidden ones. It was like he had x-ray vision, as though he couldn't fool him with his posturing. Then again, William wasn't afraid of Shane's past. Maybe what Shane saw didn't scare him either.

"Be good to have help on those days," Shane said, sliding closer, the heat radiating off his skin. "Maybe help that doesn't make you overdo it."

"Help would be there if I didn't keep chasing it off. Didn't keep losing my damn temper." William reached out, running his thumb over Shane's temple. The bruise was gone, but he could still see it in his mind's eye as he traced the brow bone.

"Won't do that again," he said softly. "Hurt you so bad like that in anger. You don't have a reason to believe me, but I mean it. Never again, Shane."

Shane leaned into the touch.

"Been hit in anger, Will. Was never like that with you. Not even the first time."

"Still not right." William's hand stroked Shane's cheek, the five o'clock permashadow like velvet against his calluses. "You don't deserve it."

"Yeah I do," Shane murmured. "Other times...I didn't like it. But with you, it always feels really good. Afterwards, it's like I can finally think and don't have a million voices in my head."

"Are you a masochist, Shane?" William asked curiously.

Despite their drinking, Shane's eyes were steady. "You like hurting me?"

It was a trap because there was no right answer. If he said yes, would Shane think him a monster? A horrible person who enjoyed hurting people? But if he said no, he'd be lying—ruining the trust they'd built.

He nodded.

"Does that scare you?"
"I think it turns me on," Shane said, cheeks flushed.

William moved closer.

"It's got a name," he said, pulling him in. "Masoehism. But it can be dangerous. If you want that from me, we gotta be smarter."

"I do want it," Shane said. "All of it. I've been such a fucking idiot. I've got issues, okay? But I'm done with them. You said yesterday that it's not okay to let being scared hold you back. And I can't keep working for you if we have to pretend we aren't—that we aren't like this. It's fucking exhausting."

While speaking, Shane grabbed the whiskey. The steam created a veil, blocking out the rest of the room. In that close bubble he had to tilt the bottle at an angle to fit between them as he drank. He set it down after, the glass clinking hard against tile.

"I've never fucking done any of this. I've never been with a guy, Will. I've never been with anyone. After that time—in your bed—I didn't know if it was supposed to feel like that, you know? I mean, it felt good. Of course it felt good. But I didn't know what it meant, and then I started thinking too hard. It's why you need to fucking hit me. I'm an idiot. I start thinking, and my head won't fucking shut up..."

He trailed off.

During the entire outburst, it was all William could do not to let his mouth drop open, each word bringing clarity and understanding.

When William couldn't talk about what he was thinking, it was because he focused on what he was doing. Touching up details. Problem solving. Accounting or calculating balance. Worse came to worse and he was in The Nothing Box. All this time when Shane was silent, William thought it was because he too was blocking out the bad shit he couldn't handle. But that wasn't the case at all.

Shane's face shone with drunken honesty. His shoulders relaxed and he exhaled, as though by sharing all of that, he'd removed a weight he'd been holding for too long.

William leaned forward and kissed him, pressing in acceptance and pride. After, he eased against the hot tile, the final tightness in his lumber loosening. He pulled Shane to straddle his lap so he could look up at him.

"Is that what it's like in that spaghetti warehouse of a brain of yours?"

Shane, already ruddy, flushed deeper across the apples of his cheeks.

"It's a fucking mess."

William kissed him again, slow and hungry, rewarding him for the upfront answer. The soreness of the day was gone, leaving only languid stillness.

"After our fights, it was better?"

"Yes." Shane adjusted on his lap, his cock semi-hard against William's stomach. "I don't understand why I can't just be like this. All the time."

William ran his fingers up Shane's neck and down his spine. He was beautiful, green eyes soft and head raised without shame. The man in his lap was nothing like the angry creature he'd
agonized weeks before.

"You said you've never done it before," he pointed out. "So it makes sense that it's not easy. New things are hard."

The hope William had felt earlier grew as he ran his thumbs down Shane's chest.

"I can...hurt you, if you want. But no more fights. We do it on my terms. Controlled." He brought Shane's knuckles to his lips, kissing the fist. "And you don't hurt yourself. Not if you want me to do it for you."

"Been hitting myself more than I used to," Shane confessed.

William pulled him closer and kissed his collarbone, taking the hand he was holding and resting it on his shoulder.

"Let's go back to my house," he said in his ear, kissing the shell. "Lay down. Talk more before you go home." He kissed his neck, hands resting on his hips. "I've been moving too recklessly, Shane. Show me how you need me."

Shane blinked slowly, pulling back and wiping his hair from his face.

"Yeah. Yeah, we should go..."

Between the two of them they'd finished half the bottle, and together they moved drunkenly to the locker room. They got dressed and as Shane put on his watch, William laid his hand over the wrist and turned it, fastening the band. They didn't speak as he locked the buckle into place.

He wanted that submission. He wanted to test the limit of what was allowed. Shane needed him to take control? It made it so clear. He hadn't been pushing too hard. He'd not been pushing hard enough.

The walk back was easier, if unsteady. William leaned against Shane, who carried the duffle. The sun was down and the katydids and crickets hummed through the evening, softening the darkness with the shushing creak and flow. The wind blew above their heads, dry leaves crunching as the insects sang. The moon was out, the stars a blanket bursting over the dark sky. The Bowery's path-lights made a golden glow leading them home.

On the porch William braced himself against the railing, kicking off his boots before going inside. Shane did the same.

"Marnie knows we've got shit to catch up on, after the fair," he said, walking to William's bedroom. He leaned against the doorframe, head resting nonchalantly. "Could be a late night again."

William turned off the porch light, letting the front door swing closed. He crossed over and rested his hands on Shane's hips, looking down.

"I'm okay with a late night."

Shane wrapped his hand around the back of William's neck and kissed him.
Thank you for reading, as always! We’re so blessed to have you all here with us through the end of this story.

A reminder that even though next update is the final chapter, we’ll still be posting an announcement to discuss what’s going on with us/our future works.

Follow us on tumblr or join our discord server for more info and a cool group of people to chat with.

The final update is January 19th, 2-4pm PST.

Happy New Year!
Chapter Summary

In Which There Is a Bed Discussion

Trigger Warnings:
- Goodbyes
- Happy endings
- Watching sunsets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was cool, William's mouth hot.

Shane was used to alcohol slowing his thoughts, but never making them silent. Right now the only sound was the slip of wet lips as William led them across the room, his tongue delving deeper with each stride. He reached the edge of the bed and groaned, pulling Shane down, rolling over top of him. The pillows smelled like his woodsy aftershave; Shane went slack against the sheets, lost in the scent, in the feel of his hands sliding over William's velvety-soft scalp. He had no concept of time. Just long, hot kisses, and William's heavy chest on his.

It wasn't like last time, when they'd rushed to bed in a flurry of grappling zippers. Tonight they'd brought home the languid, steamy atmosphere of the spa, and Shane liked this pace. A lot. He liked William's bedroom with its neat, king-sized bed and dark masculine furniture. He liked how anchoring those heavy silhouettes were, the way they kept him in the moment.

William rolled to his side, tugging Shane to face him. The lights were off but the door ajar, a faint glow emitting from the kitchen and filling the room with shadows. With a soft sigh, William tucked an arm under Shane's neck and cradled his head, the other hand lazily stroking up and down his side.

"I've been moving too recklessly, Shane. Show me how you need me."

In the short time they'd known one another, there'd been so many moments William had felt like a shield against the harshness of the world. But tonight, tucked into the heat of his embrace, Shane felt more than protected.

He felt truly, deeply safe.

"Been an idiot," he whispered.

William tucked closer, fingers sliding an inch under the hem of Shane's shirt. "Me too."

"You?" A shiver trailed down Shane's back. "How? You've been…"

Way more forgiving than I deserve.

"Because," said William, hand sliding further up his shirt. "If I were smarter, I'd have figured out
that you don't do things half-assed."

His lips brushed Shane's forehead, the corner of his eye, then down to his mouth where he worked them slow and hungry once more.

Shane wasn't as smooth or practiced as his lover. But so what? Here in this bubble of safety, it didn't matter. He felt no fear of rejection as his hands explored William's neck and torso, not even when he experimentally slipped a finger into the waistband of his pants.

William gave a *hmmm* of approval, hips shifting closer.

Shane tucked another finger into the band, heart thumping as he touched the bare skin. William pressed into his thigh, forcing him to feel the hard bulge beneath his jeans. "It's okay," he whispered. "It feels good."


But it wasn't like other surreal moments in Shane's life, when he disappeared into disconnection and apathy. Tonight was like falling into a dream where he could function the way he wanted, without overthinking or poisoning the moment.

He drew his fingers out of the waistband and grabbed the hem of William's shirt. Sensing what he wanted, William reached behind his neck and jerked it off.

"Touch me," he demanded, tossing it to the side. "Wherever you want, okay? I like it."

Shane had adjusted to the low light and could see William's figure perfectly: the muscles, the outline of his tattoos. He stroked the firm bicep, and thought of all the afternoons he'd watched him working the fields from afar. About the time William stitched his brow on the porch, bare chested, when Shane's eyes had danced over his ink and scars.

Since when was this allowed? Why was it okay to lay in bed touching *any* man—let alone one who set his emotions on fire—without a barrage of toxic voices in his head? The only voice here was William's.

Shane slid his hand back, feeling the rivets along William's spine. He thought of the story he'd listened to in the spa, how parasites had lived in him while he was stuck in wet ground and surrounded by other men's scattered limbs. The image was dark and grotesque, something he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. Yet god—if touching those bumps didn't make Shane harder.

"I covered them," William said quietly. "Used to be when I was in recovery, people would stare. Go to the beach? It's like I could feel eyes on them. Ugly puckered welts that told the world I was a gimpy fuck."

An echo of heartache rang under the simple words.

So the tattoos weren't just a preference. They were a way to hide, because William hated what other people saw.

If there was anything so fucking relatable…

Shane didn't tell William they weren't ugly, and he didn't tell him that while touching those bumps, he felt more attuned to him than ever. It was hard not to make that sound messed up. He just ran his fingers down each ridge, unable to keep his eyes off the man in front of him.
William was, in this moment, so damn human.

It was an odd thing to think. Of course he was human. Yet until now, even in the midst of all their touches, he'd felt untouchable to Shane.

"If it weren't for this," Shane said, fingers trailing to the next rivet, "you probably wouldn't be here."

William watched his face.

"Maybe. Mostly it's because I didn't want my grandpa's land to be eaten by shitty relatives. But yeah. If I hadn't been injured, I wouldn't have needed a place to stay, either."

Shitty relatives. Guess everybody had some of those. Images popped into Shane's head, first Corey and Trudy in the hospital room, and then a snapshot of William, Angie, and Henry at the fair. He remembered thinking how far below William's world he was that day. And out in public, that was probably still true. But here alone in his bedroom, touching the parts William wanted to keep hidden from that world?

"Don't like being seen either," he whispered.

William softly threaded fingers through his hair. "You know what I see when I look at you?"

Shane shook his head.

"I see someone like me. I see a man who was given a shit hand, and has done his best." William eased onto his back, guiding Shane's hand to the eagle wing tattooed on his pec. "Someone who doesn't flinch when they see my dark side. Someone I could..." He swallowed. "Someone who could mean a lot to me, if he thought I was worth the effort."

Shane stared at the eagle, at the trail of broken feathers that led down to sleek hipbones and disappeared beneath William's jeans.

If Shane took off his own shirt, William would see a softer, hairier chest, and a beer belly pushing over his waistband—a body that didn't have a prayer of matching, even with all the improvements from physical labor these last few months.

Was he shallow? Browsing online or in magazines, he'd always gravitated to men like William and Garrett. Fit, beautiful, smooth men; never average messes like himself.

He remembered calling William a faggot on their first meeting, and tried to think what had possessed him to say that to a total stranger. Something about having a deathwish. Rude people who invaded space bubbles, and not caring whether he lived or died that night. Then he remembered what he'd told William in the spa...about why he liked being hit.

"Thinking too much," he mumbled.

There was a beat of silence. Right as Shane wondered if he'd been heard, William surged up, and in a single swift motion flipped Shane to his back with the same effort he'd use to toss a fifty-pound bag of feed.

"Ask me what I want," he ordered, settling between Shane's thighs.

Shane swallowed, heart in his throat. "W-what do you want?"
"I want you to kiss me."

Without missing a beat, he took Shane's mouth in a hard, powerful kiss, and with the same force gripped his hip to grind their erections together.

"Know what else I want?" he panted, pulling back.

The room spun; Shane shook his head and William ground harder, letting him feel every inch of his bulge.

"I want to take off your pants and give that poor cock of yours a break from all that thinking."

On cue, Shane's dick jumped. He licked his lips, eyes going back and forth between William's.

"Last time…" he whispered.

The grinding slowed.

"Last time," William agreed, brushing a thumb over his eyebrow. "Last time…you said you didn't know what it meant." He took a deep breath, then laid his head on Shane's shoulder. "It means that I want to be with you, Shane."

"Even if I'm not out."

"Yes."

Even if I’m stunted. And inexperienced. And feel like a goddamn teenager again.

"Even if you're starting at, like, point zero," Shane stressed, uncertain.

"No bad habits to untrain," William said matter-of-factly, propping up on one elbow.

"But I might suck. You're agreeing to this and you don't even know how fucking bad I might suck."

William grinned. "Babe, I'm sort of hoping you're going to really like sucking, so…not a dealbreaker."

Shane rolled his head to look at the nightstand, surprised to see it empty. He needed booze. Last time they'd fooled around, they'd been so wasted. But this current mild drunkenness, and these thoughts of William in his mouth, that made him both very scared and very hard…

"Need more whiskey," he mumbled.

William's body was thrumming. Whiskey? At this stage in the game there wasn't a thing booze would do other than ruin their perfectly good hard-ons. He ran fingers down Shane's cheek, his needs making his focus sharp.

"Babe, no. Trust me. We're in a good spot right here."

Experimentally, William slid his hand down the lightly furred chest. He could feel Shane's heart going rabbit-fast. "You remember what you said? About pain?"
"Yeah..."

In the stillness of the room, Shane's word had the impact of a sigh.

William took an inch of skin between his thumb and forefinger, pinching. He increased the pressure, heart pounding in anticipation. The effect was beautiful. Shane's breathing hitched, an expression of tranquility washing over the nervousness on his face.

*So this is what you need,* William thought, twisting the pinch sharper. The flesh was soft and would bruise as he broke blood vessels under the skin. Unlike their previous encounter, this dark stain would linger. William might be Shane's secret, but he wouldn't be someone Shane could ignore. His shirt would cover the mark, but he'd see the effect of their connection every time he had to shower or change.

As William tortured the skin, Shane's body painted his submission. Yet, his eyes took on an air of challenge, as if to say, *Do better.*

So he did. He let go of the red, marked skin with his fingers and leaned down, biting into the tender flesh. Shane sucked in air, curling towards the pain, then relaxing as William turned the bite into a suck. It wasn't the gentle and accidental hickey that someone would leave after a clumsy make-out session. It was the intentional marking of ownership.

William traced Shane's long cock against his pants. As soon as he sucked harder on the bruise Shane's body arched, groin pressing up against William's exploratory fingers. He was rock hard.

*Good.*

William leaned back, blowing cool air over the bruise. "Ask me what I want."

"What do you want?" Shane panted.

William stroked the needy cock. "I want to taste you. Tell me I can."

Underneath his other hand, Shane's heart rate was rapid.

"You can..." he said, voice breathy.

Consent acquired, William opened his jeans and yanked them down. He bent over to take Shane's cock between his lips, wetting the head with his tongue. He tasted clean, skin soft from the hot water of the spa. William rubbed his bearded cheek over the shaft before kissing the base and dragging to the tip. When he raised his eyes to check in, Shane was watching him, entranced.

William kept his gaze as he went down, pulling hot flesh between his lips. He cupped throbbing balls, letting his mouth make wet sucking sounds as he took him deeper, rubbing his tongue along that pulsing vein. He held the cock still with his mouth and slid one hand over Shane's hip and back to his purpling flesh, then dug his thumb into the bruise.

Shane covered his eyes with one arm, swallowing back a moan. His other hand closed on William's neck, a plea to continue.

William abandoned the bruise, both hands going to Shane's hips. He twisted his mouth, coaxing harder and harder. The fingers curling against his neck urged him faster.

Cocksucking was an art. One didn't just shove their mouth down and suck the root like a popsicle. It was also a hand job with love. A well-performed cocksucking would give a partner an orgasm
and make him feel cared for. William replayed how Shane liked to be touched and stroked. He took his time, paying attention to the bottom and moving all the way back to the tip. He was long, so William used his fist to keep the friction consistent and unrelenting. He raised his gaze, meeting Shane's when his mouth was full.

Shane didn't moan or talk. He was all breaths, twitches, and writhing against the bed. But it was a language, if William could learn it. Each roll of his body was a sentence, each new burst of sweat and tightening of fingers on his neck an essay of how much he wanted this. When he shoved his silent partner over that edge, it was going to be hard and fast.

William's cock strained for relief, the loose workout pants giving it plenty of room to grow and seek. He ground his hips into the bed and relaxed his throat to swallow Shane deeper, fist tight around the base—earning his first audible groan of pleasure.

The moan felt like a victory, pulled out of Shane's shy mouth against his will. Shane's balls tightened in warning and he jerked, one hand gripping the sheets.

William wasn't going to let him come in his mouth. They hadn't been tested yet, and fluid-sharing this early in a relationship wasn't wise, even if Shane was a virgin. He could taste the salty hint of pre-come, and common sense told him to pull off.

Few more seconds …just a little longer...

He lost himself in the act, coaxing out barely-heard cries that made him push for more. He was going to stop after he had him on the edge. He was going to finish him with his hand and be smart. He was in control, and could quit any time he wanted. Then Shane began to arch and William realized it was too late: a hot and musky load shot onto his tongue, and he jerked his head up, gasping, swallowing out of habit and instinct.

Any regret for not having more self control died the moment he tasted him.

In for a copper, in for a gold. Whatever happened, they'd get through it together. He pumped Shane, watching him with possessive satisfaction. He let the second and third stripe cross his chest, painting himself in Shane's beautiful release. Underneath, Shane was gasping and panting, his body twitching. It was primal, the most free he'd ever seen him.

Gently, William released Shane's over-sensitive cock and crawled over him, seeking his lips, needing to give reassurance. He pressed Shane down against the bed and rubbed the creamy spend into his bare skin, letting him feel what they'd done together. He let the kiss tell him things, things neither of them had managed to figure out with words. That he was important. That he mattered. That he wasn't going to let him go.

Shane clung back to the demands. It was a silent promise that he could take what William gave him, a begging not to stop. Only when William knew they needed to breathe did he release his lips, a cloud of shared wheezes between their mouths while their bodies remained tight and close.

"S-sorry," Shane stammered. "T-tried to warn you…"

William kissed his forehead, pushing acceptance into the touch, then flopped onto his bare chest and snaked an arm around him.

"Tskay," he said between his own breaths. "It was good. Really good."

He pulled the blanket at the foot of the bed over them, tucking Shane into a spoon. His cock throbbed with need but he ignored it. He didn't want to rush him. He wanted Shane to be able to
roll in it, to know he was safe.

For a while it was enough, the closeness, the heat. Yet, as the silence lingered, William began to drift. Afraid he was going to fall asleep like the first time, he ran his hand down, stroking the bruise he'd made on Shane's chest, the barest touch and reminder that he existed.

"Talk to me," William whispered. "Tell me what's in that spaghetti warehouse...keep me here, Shane."

The walls breathed. Shane's nipple was hot and throbbing from the bite, his cock so sensitive the air hurt. Talk to him? No thanks. The spaghetti warehouse was closed. William had dumped all its contents into a blender.

He shut his eyes, still breathing hard, for once letting the sensations roll through his body without trying to make sense of them. William didn't press him to speak, just tucked him close as a final drops leaked from the tip of his dick. Shane shivered, staying quiet in his arms until he'd begun to soften.

He licked his lips.

"I want…I mean, maybe I could…"

"Tell me," William ordered, gentle.

Shane was exhausted. He wanted to swim in this closeness and comfort he'd been denied last time, to bathe in this warm reassurance that it was more than a fling. But he also knew if he stayed in William's snug hold any longer he'd pass out, and as his thoughts trickled back in, there was one at the forefront: he needed to make William feel as good as he did.

Uncertainly, Shane moved his hand to William's waist and slipped one finger behind the belt.

William crooked a smile.

"I get it," he crooned, bass rumbling through the room. He rolled his hips to give Shane more space. "You like to show, not tell."

Shane's focus on his own pleasure melted at the sight of William's mass pushing against his jeans. Before he could stop for doubts, he sat up and reached for the belt. Not used to undoing pants from this angle, his stupid, clumsy hands made several attempts before the buckle fell open with a metallic clink. He fumbled with the button, then the zipper, which snagged twice. His cheeks reddened as he worked it down.

"Sorry…"

William shifted his hips so he could be pulled free.

"I told you," he said, guiding Shane's hand over the head of his cock. "No bad habits to unlearn. It's okay."

William's fingers wrapped over his, beginning to stroke with both their hands.
It shouldn't have been a big deal. Shane had a cock of his own; he didn't need a fucking instruction manual on how to use one. But he'd never touched another before William's, and his felt silkier than Shane's, and so much thicker too. Last time they'd done this it was all William, Shane only cupping the tip. But this time…

"Feels good," William whispered.

His eyes drifted shut and he released Shane's hand, giving him the freedom to lead. It didn't take long for instinct to kick in. Shane rubbed faster, finding a rhythm, gaining confidence with each flex of William's hips. Before he could overthink it, he leaned in and wrapped his lips around the head of his cock.

Warm. Musky.

William gave a low, gravelly groan, hand winding around Shane's neck. When Shane slid to take him deeper, he pushed into the heat of his mouth.

"That's good," he said, deep and strained, as though biting back another moan. "Just like that…"

Though Shane had already had his turn, William's stupidly hot voice—his stupidly hot taste and smell—turned him on all over again. On one of the thrusts, his dick hit the back of Shane's throat. He gagged but it wasn't enough to make him stop; the sound turned him on almost as much as William's noises and he went for it again, holding longer, coughing then pulling back with a string of saliva.

One deep gasp of air, then right back to sucking.

He cupped William's heavy balls, pushing against their swollen base. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the sensation of his mouth being filled for the first time. It was better than he'd hoped, William thick and already tasting of salt. It was making him long to be hard again. It was—

"I'm close," William growled.

Shane didn't stop, up and down, his tongue working over the firm shaft. William squeezed the back of his neck.

"Not in your mouth," he gasped, yanking Shane off on the upstroke. "H—haven't been tested in over six months…"

He was trembling from holding back, and Shane was determined not to ruin the rhythm. He kept thrusting his fist over the ready-to-burst member as he climbed onto William's lap, aiming at his already-soiled shirt.

William gripped his shoulder, crying out and shooting a thick, pearly stream.

Twice more he painted Shane's shirt, then shuddered and sagged, his legs falling open. Shane didn't know what was better: the musk he could taste on his lips, or the sight of the boneless, breathless man in front of him.

William tugged his wrist, pulling him down into an embrace.

"That was mindblowing," he whispered, shaky.

Shane sagged, closing his eyes as William pressed a sloppy kiss to his forehead. Something stirred deep inside of him.
It wasn't just the sensation of William's warm lips on his skin. It wasn't just the afterglow of their orgasms. It was everything. Whatever had been holding Shane together began to unravel.

William said he wanted to be with him, and these touches felt like promises. Yet Shane knew 'be with' could mean different things to different people. For him, it meant wanting William as far into the future as he dared to dream possible. But for William, who called him babe and kissed his forehead, did it mean the same thing?

"How much longer you got before you have to go home?" William asked.

Shane closed his eyes. "Not long enough."

"Do you like it?" William pulled the blanket higher. "It's gotta be nice, not to be alone at home. People around. Someone to cook…"

Shane didn't know how to answer. The truth was, more often than not, he'd fantasized about living alone, having no one rely on him, and no one to disappoint.

"It's…better than what I had before," he admitted.

"What was it like before?"

Several seconds passed.

"Shitty."

Shane didn't want to get into this now. Not here, in this place of kisses and blankets and warm arms, of woodsy musky pillows, where everything felt so good.

"Know about shitty," William said. Then his voice went quieter. "Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah, 'course."

"When I'm around you, things suck less."

Shane played with the corner of the blanket. "Don't like living there, Will. But makes me feel like an ungrateful piece of shit to say that. I'm lucky. But it's just…it's not like being around you."

"You're not ungrateful for wanting to fit somewhere," William said, tucking him closer.

It'd been years since Shane had talked to someone like this. Back before the crash, and losing the one person who listened. Before he'd turned into the barely functioning alcoholic he was now. Before he'd had to move back to that toxic shithole he'd grown up in, and learn that it was even more toxic as an adult.

He shook his head against William's chest. "Marnie drives me nuts, okay. But she got me and Jas out of a bad fucking situation, and she's put up with a ton of my crap since. So yeah, I'm an ungrateful shit. I've put her through the wringer."

William was quiet.

"Jas is a good kid," he said at last. "And I don't care, you know? So you have a little girl. So what? Doesn't bug me to be with a guy who's a parent."

A new, uncomfortable sensation crept down Shane's spine. How had he never thought about that before? It was the truth. He was a guy with a kid. A parent. He had baggage, and didn't need
experience in the dating world to know that was usually a bad thing.

But then, William was saying it was okay.

"Be with," Shane repeated, rolling the corner of the blanket. "You said it'd been six months since you've…since you…"

He focused on the fabric, rolling it tighter, fingertips going white. The thought of William lying in bed with anyone else drove him crazy.

"If we do this, it's just us?" he finally blurted. "Just me and you?"

William pulled back, zeroing in on his face. "If we do this? It's just us. I'm not a cheater, Shane."

Shane's cheeks grew warm. "I wasn't saying that. Just, maybe you had a different idea. I wouldn't blame you. I'm not out. How can I ask you to only see me, when this is all I can do?"

William shrugged.

"It's not a bad idea to clarify, Shane. I've not exactly found someone worth sticking around in the past four years. And my last exclusive relationship ended when my ex threw my shit out the window. Which happened to be my fault. So maybe instead of asking why I'm willing to come visit your closet, you should be wondering why a slice of dick like me is still single."

Shane shot him a look. "Joke all you want. Maybe you should be wondering why you're going after a guy who's been single for thirty years. Some would call that a red fucking flag."

In a flash William rolled over top of him, folding his hands on his chest.

"Shane," he said, resting his chin there, staring down in amusement. "Red is my favorite color."

Well, that was good, considering it was the color Shane's face turned every time William talked to him. He didn't smile though, just quietly looked up.

"Cameron threw your shit out?"

William sighed. He rolled off, putting an arm over his face. "Yup."

Shane thought back to the conversation he'd overheard in the hay loft. Back then, he'd thought William was the one who'd broken it off, while Cam still harbored an ocean-liner of feelings, and in his jealousy, Shane had imagined a hundred different scenarios of how it'd gone down.

Not in one of them did Cam chuck William's shit out a window.

He didn't want to confess to eavesdropping, but it'd be wrong to pretend he knew nothing.

"So," he said, letting his eyes drift to the ceiling. "You're supposed to be honest and shit. When you're dating someone."

He paused, waiting for some small acknowledgment that it was okay to use the d-word.

"Alright," William said, tone flat. Then, as though buckling in for a story: "I told you I was addicted to heroin, right?"

Shane's heart sank at realizing he'd misinterpreted that as a request.
"Yeah…"

"So it didn't start out that way. Used to just be painkillers from surgery, stuff they give you when you're post-op. Well, it didn't last. My body fast metabolizes or some shit. And Cameron is a nurse practitioner. He could prescribe medications, like a doctor."

As if it would assist his confession, William reached up and began petting Shane's head.

Shane ignored the rustling thoughts, the painful memories stirring at the touch. This was was allowed to feel these things for the man running fingers through his hair.

"So anyway," William said, oblivious. "Cam is clueless about where he leaves his shit. Pens, notebooks, workout clothes. Bus passes and car keys. You name it, he could lose it. So one day after his night shift, I took his script pad. Forged a bunch of refills, and then, you know…nearly lost him his license."

The words dropped heavy as barbells. Shane remembered being in the spa, touching the rivets from William's surgery. Cam had seen firsthand the vulnerability under those scars, and whatever Shane's opinion of the shoulder-sweatered socialite, he knew the truth: Cameron had loved William. He and Shane were two of the only people in the world to understand that beneath the unbreakable exterior, he was human.

But there was one thing Cameron couldn't understand.

The need for a fix clawed through your entire being. What addict hadn't been an asshole? What addict hadn't lied, hurt, and scared loved ones?

Shane was all out of stones, too.

"I dunno," he said at last. "Maybe I shouldn't have an opinion about him. Don't know the whole story."

William shrugged. "Shit between me and Cam has been dead a long time, but he just got out of an abusive marriage. For some fucked up reason, he sees me not burning my life from both ends like the bad old days, and comes sniffing around like we have a chance."

He rolled onto his side, looking at Shane. "I can't go back to that, babe. I can't just turn on feelings we both killed. I'm not the same dependent fucker who couldn't wipe his own ass or hold down a job. And you don't try to change me. You don't think I'm a useless piece of shit because of my past. That's why I'll move into your damn closet, and order us some take-out, okay? Because this? It's not anything I've felt before with anyone else."

With anyone else.

"What I said, about being honest," Shane began, the words burning in his chest. "I wasn't trying to pry into that. I was trying to tell you I was there in the loft, the day he came over. Overheard you guys talking in the barn and froze up."

William blinked, looking stunned. "Oh."


The stunned look didn't last long. William resumed the head petting.

"I'm sorry you had to see that go down. I'm not at my best when I'm fighting with him."
"You just…seemed so uncomfortable."

"Most people would see that sort of thing as a red flag. Did you worry about getting involved with me after watching us fight?"

"What? Why would I? Will, I'm a fucking walking red flag. I was only worried about him bothering you..."

William kissed his forehead. "Do you know that outside of my mom, no one worries about me?"

"Didn't like him touching you," Shane said, ears growing warm.

"Then don't let anyone else touch me again. Because if you don't care about red flags, I don't care about closets. I want you to give me a shot."

The idea that had haunted Shane for months surfaced again: too good to be true. This time, though, it held no water. It was as if his brain had provided those words out of reflex. He was lying in the bed of a man he'd completely fallen for, sweaty and messy from sex, listening to how much he wanted them to be together.

Maybe you just had to find someone whose red flags matched yours.

Shane kissed him.

William let the kiss linger, but didn't chase it. After it was done he tucked Shane in as the little spoon.

"Is that a yes?" he whispered, voice gravelly in Shane's ear.

He knew what William meant. But part of him—a dumb, young, stupid part—wanted so badly to hear the words.

"A yes what?" he asked, heart beating fast.

"Will you be my boyfriend?"

Shane closed his eyes. He hugged William's thick forearm to his chest, the world still and quiet.

"Yes."

William brushed off the leaves from his jeans. He'd been deadheading and pruning the new rose plant at his grandparents' memorial. The hardy strain of flowers thrived with minimum care, and blended into the older plants that Pops had put in ten years ago. In the spring, the multicolored blooms gave softness and life to the stone altar. Yet, even with the thorny bushes dead, William found the stark site comforting. His grandfather's kindness was only evident to those who got to know him. The monument reflected that same need for discovery.

Four candles were lit, framing the carved Joseph David Bauer and Gloria Anne Bauer.

William wiped down the granite, shining up the glossy finish. His grandfather had taught him how to care for the altar during summers. He'd explained it all while lovingly cleaning Gloria's etchings.
and caring for her flowers. The memorial was a project of the heart. His grandfather had found the stone, polished it himself, and then planted every shade of red and pink rose he could find. They were her favorites. When William had inherited The Bowery, he'd commissioned Pops' name next to hers. Inseparable in death, as they'd been in life.

Pops had told him a lot of stories about his grandmother out here. How they'd met, all the times she'd caught his father misbehaving. All the ways she'd made life worth living. After all those days of talking about their marriage, it felt the perfect place to explain his own new relationship.

"You'd have liked him," he told his grandparents as he dusted leaves into the compost bucket. "He's quiet. Steady. And you always said I needed someone steady."

The wind drifted through the trees and for a moment he thought he could smell the rich waft of his grandfather's tobacco and cologne.

"It's not going to be an easy road, but he's real," William said, straightening with the bin. "And comfortable. Like when you two would sit on those old porch swings. Like when Ma and Dad are together."

A flush rose to his neck at saying it out loud.

He looked around before turning away from the memorial to fetch the hose. After power-washing off a year's worth of dirt, he couldn't help the smile that stretched his face. Shane had put that smile there.

Two years ago, William'd arrived in this town, a lost dog in search of home. Now? He felt like that myth of adulthood was within reach. He'd learned how to farm. He'd learned how to take care of animals, and to get by on his own sheer grit. And if Shane didn't get spooked and leave him again, he was going to learn how to be someone's partner.

"Maybe putting the cart before the horse," he murmured, turning off the hose and winding it.

But then again, maybe not.

Who else had he been with in the last ten years that made him feel like an equal? Who else stood boot-to-boot on his property, saw his vision, and not only carried it out, but knew how to make it easier?

Shane. That was who.

He stacked the hose in the wheelbarrow that he'd hauled the supplies out in, then spread pine straw around the base of the bushes.

When he looked up from the mulching, he could see a flicker of color deep in the brambles. There was a living rose—a late bloomer, and the last one of the year. It was smaller than the roses that came out in the spring, but no less vivid and bright. All he had to do was work around the thorns.

Slow and careful, William pulled a few branches left and right until he'd opened a path. Some of the needle-sharp bushes scratched through his shirt as he worked. He aimed his shears and took a breath, then cut the flower free of its thorns.

The petals were deep red, perfectly formed. He drew it out, not wanting to ruin it on the removal. Once untangled from the barbs, he held it up. It was beautiful.

He tucked the treasure to the side and finished the cleaning. As he pushed the wheelbarrow
towards his house, the flower in his front pocket, his mind rested on how good it was with Shane.

Despite his issues, Shane was like that rose. Vibrant and soft, if only you could pull back the thorns.

Worth the effort.

"I'll probably go with Juniper," Jas said, sniping Shane's military commander square in the forehead.

The man with the blond buzz-cut crumpled in a pool of blood on screen. For weeks, Shane had stuck with the busty secretary character in an attempt to remove any reminder of William. But tonight, he was back to his old tattooed favorite.

Playing him again under Jas's nose felt taboo.

It was a familiar feeling these days. Like coming home after work, speaking to his family with William's kisses on his lips. Or keeping the shirt William had lent him for the spa, then wearing it under his hoodie while out making liquor runs. Or rushing to the farm on Saturday to help with an 'emergency,' like his boss's dick being too dry.

William was everywhere, yet no one suspected.

"Or maybe Misty," Jas continued, oblivious. "Or Mercedes!"

Shane gave her a squinty side-eye. "Mercedes the cat?"

"Well, William named his cat Ingrid," she pointed out, as if that were the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

Before having to admit that he very much liked the name Ingrid, the bedroom door creaked open and Shane saw Marnie standing with her hand on the frame.

"Change of plans for supper. Lewis is going to drop by with a pizza from Gus's." She glanced at Shane. "Just a heads up, if you...had other plans."

Other plans, like preferring to eat one of Gus's pizzas at a solo table in the saloon.

Ever since the trip to the hospital, things between Shane and his aunt had taken a turn for the better. Or at least, they had once he'd gotten his head out of his ass about William. Apparently Marnie had ascribed those dark days to Shane seeing his dad, and after he'd resurfaced, she'd been treating him with newfound respect. She shared knowing looks with him, ones that said they were on the same page. She honored his privacy more. And now, when Lewis came over, she gave him proper warnings in case he'd rather be alone.

Strangely, that made the visits easier to stomach.

Shane leaned back against the cushions, waiting on his player to resurrect. "No plans."

Marnie's shoulders relaxed and she smiled. "Good. Now, when you two fini—"
Then her smile dropped as she noticed the game, and the halo of blood around Shane's dead character. Her lips pressed into a thin line.

"For goodness sake," she muttered, turning toward the hall. "Come out when you're done being morbid!"

Shane looked at Jas, who looked back at him and giggled.

The season was changing. It seemed like yesterday that William had nudged Shane's elbow on their walk to the spa, suggesting the leaves were about to drop. Now the ground was covered in red, orange, and yellow. On cold mornings frost turned it into a crunchy mosaic, thawing in the late autumn sun.

The Bowery's fields grew emptier, the same way Joja's stock had trickled off the shelves in its final days. Plot by plot, crops died and flattened the land. Piece by piece, equipment was used for the last time then hauled to the shed to be cleaned and stored. William talked to Shane about the new work they'd be taking on. Winterizing the property. Preparing for calving next month. Dealing with the surplus of artisan goods from their abundant harvest. Most exciting, William was going to teach Shane his home brewing process. Together they'd expand the business, earning better profits and giving more people access to The Good Shit.

After another morning of hard, dirty labor it was lunchtime. They returned to the house and kicked off their boots, William grabbing a glass of water while Shane pulled out leftovers from the fridge. In the corner of his eye, he saw a single red rose on the center of the table.

It was tiny but beautiful, the bright burst of life a welcome sight after so many shriveled crops.

Trying to be casual, Shane nodded at the flower.

"Another admirer from the fair?"

William, who'd just pulled off his sweaty shirt, proceeded to throw it at Shane's head. Shane ducked, his cheeks turning pink as always when they swapped from work to play. He grabbed his steaming dish from the microwave and settled at the table.

"From your mom?" he asked, more seriously.

"Nah." William popped his own plate in the microwave. "Ma buys flowers, she doesn't pick them."

He busied himself at the counter, bare back on display. It was like he knew his ink still had the power to drive Shane crazy. When the food was done he sat down across from him, finally meeting his eyes.

"When I was cleaning up Pops' spot, I saw that there was one rose left in the bush. Last bloom of the season." William speared a potato, shrugging. "Reminded me of you."

Shane looked at the flower and blinked.

"Oh," was all he could manage.

But his face flushed from pink to as red as the petals.
He couldn't stop staring at the rose during lunch. He thought about it all afternoon, and it was still on his mind come quitting time.

They sat down on the porch steps, William offering the neck of his bottle to clink against Shane's. They drank, then Shane leaned against William's broad shoulder. A gold sunset descended on the horizon and turned the farmland to bronze.

Quitting time had always been his favorite part of the day. Before becoming William's secret, he'd loved the shared beers and conversation after work. But lately, it was more. It was breathless kisses and desperate hands. It was a red rose on the center of the table; a rose that reminded William of Shane, and sat in his kitchen where anyone could see it.

He thought, unexpectedly, of Lewis. Shane had once hated him for keeping his relationship with Marnie a secret. But last night, Lewis had joined the Daniels for supper, and Marnie had glowed with a smile as warm as the sunset in front of Shane now. It was the same smile she'd worn at the Stardew Valley Fair, when Lewis had walked hand-in-hand with her through the square.

Then he thought again of the flower on the table. Hidden in plain sight. Like him.

Shane reached over, taking his boyfriend's hand and intertwining their fingers.

One day, he'd be brave enough. The season was changing.

Chapter End Notes

And...we've made it!

Thank you, THANK YOU to all of our readers. We've loved having each and every one of you join us for this story; a story that has totally reshaped our lives as writers over the last year. Your support has meant the world to us.

While this is the end of Star Burst, it is not the end of us as a writing team. It is not even the end of this tale.

Please check out our Tumblr Announcement Here to read about what is going on with us, and our future projects!

See, Star Burst was planned as the first in a series of books. Due to life circumstances, as a writing team, we have decided to move forward with the series. However, we'll be rewriting it as original fiction (which we will then post here, on AO3!) We love William and Shane's story with all our hearts, but hope you can understand why as writers we'd like to take the next step forward in our work.

Thank you again, everyone. Whether you follow us into the future or end here, we are so grateful you chose to spend your time with us. Best wishes into the new year!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!