You Can't Fight Fate

by ArcticLucie

Summary

After his wife leaves him for his best friend, Rick Grimes is left alone for Christmas. A sympathetic employee invites him to volunteer with her at the local shelter for the day where he meets a man down on his luck. When their lives start to become more and more intertwined, will they be able to deny their unexpected connection to each other, or will they eventually learn that you can't fight fate?

No zombies-AU

Notes

No zombies or apocalypses here, and I'll be alternating between Rick and Daryl's pov's.

****This fic ends in a cliffhanger, so proceed at your own risk****
Rick's Christmas

Chapter Summary

Rick and Daryl unofficially meet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Rick**

Rick was not going to have a good Christmas this year. It was an inevitability that he tried desperately to right after Lori had made it so very very wrong. He knew she was leaving months before she did, knew she was going to run off with Shane, his best friend...former best friend.

That was all well and fine. Him and Lori had their good times together, he knew there was no use dragging out the pain and suffering of a broken marriage, even with the kids involved. No need for them to have to grow up like that, in a house where their parents actively hated each other, with the fights and the tension in the air. That was no way to raise children.

Carl and Judith were the reasons he didn't fight it. Maybe Carl more so than Judith. He could see Shane in the little one, in her expressions, a little around the eyes too. There were no illusions that she was Rick's. So, he let them go.

That was two months ago.

They put the house up for sale shortly after and he moved into a two bedroom apartment closer to his work. He had quit the force after getting shot during a car chase gone bad awhile back. He spent months in a coma and weeks in recovery after waking up. When he did get out of the hospital, he knew things had changed inside and out.

For the better, he hoped.

He quit his job immediately, a move Lori protested, and decided to follow his passion, which Lori also protested. He wanted to live life a little, enjoy it and not just go through the motions. Then, the baby was born, interestingly ten months after he went into the coma. Lori just said she was a late arrival. But there was the way Shane looked at his wife now, all possessive and hungry. And he just knew it was over between them.

In all honesty, he should have been the one to leave. Instead, he put up a wall and pushed her away.

With the settlement money he received after the accident, he had opened his own little carpentry business. He got to build things everyday with his bare hands, got to smell like saw dust all day long, and spent all the time he wanted in the hardware store, the aroma of lumber always making him feel like he was home. He was also a good craftsman, and as word spread, so did the work orders.

In fact, he had to hire help to keep from being buried under it all. He hired a nice Korean boy named Glenn to run his deliveries. If someone brought in a broken chair or a table for him to repair, he liked to be able to get them back to their owner as fast as possible. That was just good business.
Glenn was great with his hands too, helping where he could.

Then there was Carol, the recently widowed mother who ran the front office. She answered the phone and kept an eye on his books, taking payments and such. He even hired Shane for a time to lighten his workload after Lori started to complain that he was never home anymore.

At least Shane had the decency to quit after everything went south.

Eventually, he settled into a routine without his family around. He'd get up every morning, make coffee, read the paper, and go to work. Sometimes, he'd pick the children up from school or the sitter's, but mostly he just got them on the weekends. He didn't even mind taking care of baby Judith. She was Carl's blood, that was good enough for him.

He was looking forward to getting them on Christmas Eve. Lori had them on Thanksgiving so the plan had been to swap for Christmas. Of course, Lori changed her mind last minute spouting something about going up to Atlanta to visit her mother. She hated her mother.

He did everything he could to try to change her mind. But the stubborn woman wouldn't budge. Hell, he even offered to go with them, Shane too, just to be able to spend Christmas with his kids/kid. Shane was the one to shoot that idea down, the backstabbing bastard.

When he came out of the office eyes red-rimmed and puffy, Carol tried to bite her tongue. He knew she really tried.

"Everything alright, Rick?" she asked softly.

Her husband used to abuse her so she never liked to come off as anything other than meek and compliant. Rick hoped that now that her asshole of a husband was gone for good, six feet under, that she would come out of her shell a bit. It was early still, but he could hope.

"Lori's takin' the kids to Atlanta for Christmas. Last minute thang," he replied without looking her in the eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that....you are more than welcome to join us if you'd like."

"You and Sophia? Nah, I wouldn't feel right puttin' you out like that."

"You won't be puttin' us out. We're going to the shelter—"

"Nah, nah, I can't let ya do that, Carol. Spending Christmas at the shelter? Come over to my place and....what?" he stopped when she smiled big, shaking her head and holding up her hands for him to stop talking.

"We'll be volunteering. I think it's important for Sophia to remember there are less fortunate people than us out there. Also, I owe the woman who runs it for helping me out with...some things once upon a time. You should come along. That way you won't be alone, you might make some friends, and we can eat something together afterward. How's that sound?"

"It's not like I have anythin' else to be doin' home alone."

"Then it's settled. How 'bout you Glenn?" Carol asked the younger man when he sat down at his makeshift desk.

"Don't really celebrate Christmas...," he said with a shrug.
"Good, means you can come down and help us out," Carol smiled wide.

Rick bit back a fit of laughter as Glenn sighed and rolled his eyes. If only he had been as good at picking out a wife as he was at picking his employees. They worked hard and complimented each other well. Rick was growing quite attached to them, more as friends than just employees.

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The next morning, he picked up Carol and Sophia before heading over to Glenn's. They rode to the shelter mostly in silence after their greetings. The two younger ones in the back didn't see the point in volunteering, but Rick understood why Carol would want to. Up until a few months ago, he had everything. Maybe seeing others who literally had nothing would pull him out of the funk he had settled into.

They piled out of Rick's truck and headed in the back door of an older converted building. It had once been a church but was now transformed into a shelter after the new church was built next door. It had been awhile since Rick had been inside a church, years actually, which made him a little uncomfortable at first, but what better day to start than on Christmas.

They were immediately greeted by an older gentleman, Hershel Greene, as he came out of the kitchen carrying a huge pot of soup. He was an important elder in the church and gave everyone a warm appreciative smile before hurrying out the doors to the dinning area.

When one of his daughters, Maggie, came out to give everyone their assignments, Rick saw Glenn's back straighten out of the corner of his eye. He fought back a smile at the way her eyes lingered on Glenn a bit longer than the others. Carol gave him a slight nudge, and Rick had to wonder if she had planned that. Crafty woman!

"Carol!" Maggie said as she gave a quick hug to the older woman before repeating the motion with Sophia.

"I, uh, brought some friends. Hope you don't mind," Carol replied.

"We came to help," Glenn awkwardly mumbled.

"That is appreciated," Maggie said, slightly amused. "We could use the extra help today."

"This is my boss, Rick Grimes, and my coworker, Glenn Rhee," Carol introduced them while the men shook her hand.

"Pleasure! Okay, Carol and Sophia we could use your help in the kitchen. Rick and Glenn, my father needs help out front serving people and cleaning tables. You two can decide who does which. Sound good?"

Everyone nodded and followed her to their stations.

"I don't mind doing the tables," Rick said.

"That's fine with me," Glenn replied as Maggie pointed them to the doors that Hershel had walked out. After Maggie was out of sight, Rick shot him a knowing smile and he blushed.

"This might be a good Christmas yet!" Rick said patting him on the back. Glenn gave a shy grin as they went through the doors.

The two introduced themselves to Hershel who gave them instructions on what to do. They both
grabbed aprons and put them on. Glenn went back behind the serving line and was given control over a ladle in the soup pot Hershel had carried in. Rick was given a spray bottle filled with soapy water, some rags, and a bucket to place used dishes in to carry back to the kitchen for washing.

The morning rush went by quickly. No one really had a chance to talk or do much of anything else as they tried to feed as many hungry people as possible. By one o'clock, things had settled down a bit. Everyone was prepping for the second crowd that was set to come in an hour or so but he was able to have a few conversations.

Michonne, the woman who ran the shelter was nice, but much too busy to talk. He learned from Carol that she was homeless at one point and now tried her best to help out in the community where she could. She was also a single mother, like Carol, after her husband ran off with her best friend.

She and Rick had a lot in common and Carol obviously had something in mind for them as well when she invited him along. Not that she would push, he wasn't even divorced yet, still had his wedding ring on and everything, but he appreciated the gesture. She really cared for him and he for her and her daughter. After all, it was the thought that counted.

Beth, Hershel's younger daughter, had made sandwiches for the volunteers. He sat out back on his break with the older man while he ate. Hershel told him that this was an extremely busy year at the shelter with the economy being as bad as it was. Rick opened up and told him a little about his family situation, just the basics, and why he wasn't with his children this Christmas.

"I appreciate you helping out," Hershel said once more before walking back into the chaos.

Rick decided to hang around outside for a few more minutes. He threw back his head and finished off his bottle of water. As he was screwing the cap back on, he noticed two figures in the field behind the building walking towards him. The two figures turned into men dressed in dark clothes as they got closer to him.

He tried not to look like he was staring as they approached him. One was older with short, dirty blonde hair and a rough face. He had a black eye, probably from a bar fight if Rick had to guess, and what appeared to be a permanent scowl etched on his face.

The other man was younger with short, light brown hair and a softer almost babyface. His knuckles were bruised, perhaps he was the one that hit the other in the eye. Rick met the man's eyes and was nearly blinded by a vibrant blue that stood out on his tanned skin. The younger man looked away immediately, bowing his head submissively or uncomfortably.

Rick couldn't tell which but it stuck with him. Those eyes stuck with him.

"This where the food's at?" asked the older man.

"'Round front," Rick said motioning around the corner.

The man nodded and said, "Come on lil' brother."

Rick's eyes followed them as they walked away, followed the younger man as they trailed over his frame, followed the faded wings on his leather jacket down to the round curves of his ass as it shifted in his baggy pants with each step....

What the fuck are you doing?! Rick chided himself as he tore his eyes away.

Rick Grimes was not gay, not even bi, or curious. Not that it mattered these days. Sure, they were
in Georgia, but it wasn't 1955 anymore. He knew a few gay people from his days as a deputy sheriff. And that was just in their smallish town.

*Just been awhile is all,* he told himself. He took a deep breath and sighed. He could appreciate a male's physique—had seen quite a few hard bodies in the showers at the academy or the gym—but never in his life had he checked out a man's ass, never had he been so captivated by a man's eyes before.

Every time he blinked, he could see those eyes staring back at him. It was oddly exhilarating. He shook off his confusing reaction and stood from the step he was sitting on. Obviously, the two were here for a free meal which meant they were homeless or close to it. His chest tightened a bit at the thought; all the people he had seen today had similar stories.

He was about to go back inside when his phone rang. He glanced at the number and picked up immediately. It was Carl. He called to tell him about the fun he was having with his cousins in Atlanta and the presents he and Judith got. Rick missed him so much, but at least he was having fun.

Rick told him that he was volunteering at a shelter and couldn't talk long. Carl seemed fascinated by that. He was a good kid and Rick was proud that he showed an interest in what he was doing to help out the less fortunate. He promised to bring him around sometime to help out before having to hang up so he could get back to work.

He finally got back inside and grabbed his apron and spray bottle. He stuffed some clean rags in his pocket and went to work clearing tables. They had just reopened the doors, but there had been stragglers that hadn't finished before he went out for his break.

He was bent over a table scrubbing it down when all of the sudden, the hairs on the back of his neck pricked up. He was being watched. He stood up and slowly turned around to find the same pair of steel-blue eyes from his break studying him before they quickly darted down to the floor.

The two men he 'met' out back were holding trays of food and heading for a table nearby, the younger following his brother. He nodded to them both as they passed, the younger one not meeting his gaze. Rick put his head down and went back to work. The last thing he needed was to get distracted by a set of sparkling blues with nice eyelashes.

*Eyelashes? What the fuck, man?*

He wasn't supposed to be noticing men's eyelashes. Women's, maybe? No! It was still too soon for that. He may have been separated from Lori but he hadn't really been in the mood for checking out women, wasn't interested in finding a new one. Shit, maybe he was gay...no, no, he would've known. He was a grown ass man, he would've noticed if he had been attracted to a man before and he hadn't been.

Then why was his heart racing? Why did he get a rush of blood to interesting areas when he turned to watch the guy's ass as he walked away? Maybe it was just his blue eyes, those blue eyes that he knew he wouldn't be able to get out of his head for a long time. They were going to haunt him. Still didn't make any sense...

Carol brought his thoughts to a crashing halt. "Rick?" she called as she stood in the doorway. "Need your help in the kitchen for a sec....oh hey Daryl!" she said waving to someone behind Rick. He turned to see the young man smiling shyly at her as he gave a small wave. Their eyes met for the briefest moment before they went back to his food. "Merle," she said, a little less warmly.
"Daryl? Daryl. Daryl, his name is Daryl. So what? The man had a name. Everyone had one of those, sometimes three, sometimes more.

"Friends of your's?" Rick asked Carol as they walked through the doors to the kitchen.

"Daryl, the younger one is. Took a shining to Sophia when we stayed here for awhile after Ed passed. He's a good kid. Surprised you don't know his brother Merle Dixon, you being a former cop and all."

"Dixon?" Rick said surprised. He was familiar with the family.

"Yep. But you don't have to worry about them. Merle ain't so bad as long as he ain't been drinkin', most his troubles are from that or from protecting Daryl."

"And why is that?" he asked, trying not to appear too curious.

"Daryl's a bit shy and sensitive, doesn't like to make trouble. That can be a problem when your last name's 'Dixon' and trouble's expected of you. Daryl's got thick skin though and doesn't let things get to him too much, but if someone mouths off to him, Merle can go a little nuts. Says he's protecting Daryl, which is true I suppose, but I also think he likes to stir up the trouble Daryl refuses to. Don't think he'll be a problem today, though. Not with this crowd. Daryl can usually calm him before he gets in too deep anyway."

Rick only nodded as he went to help in the kitchen. That didn't explain whether or not the guy was checking him out. Was he supposed to be weirded out if he was? Because he wasn't. It was a tiny boast to his ego actually, the one Lori and Shane had so successfully destroyed when they ripped it out and stomped on it.

By the time he got back out to the dinning area, the brothers were gone. And he most definitely was not disappointed by that. Why would he be? That wouldn't make any sense at all; not that anything else in his life did at the moment. It wasn't like those eyes had made him all giddy and gooey inside or anything....right?

The rest of the day was uneventful as the volunteers worked to feed the masses. They went to a service at the church afterwards before heading home. Glenn spent most of the ride talking about Maggie while Carol and Rick kept giving each other sly smiles up front.

"Maybe we could do this again, make it a monthly thang. Hershel said they always need volunteers. It can be like a work bondin' exercise or somethin'," Rick suggested.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Glenn said as they pulled up to his house. "See you guys at work tomorrow."

"Nah, I think we earned ourselves a day off tomorrow. The work can wait till the next day."

"Yeah, that's a good idea too! See you guys then," Glenn said as he got out of the car.

Rick dropped Carol and Sophia off next and headed for home. His Christmas hadn't been so bad. He wasn't alone, he did some good deeds, made some friends, and he knew Carl had a good time. The day had worked to pull him out of his downward spiraling trajectory. In fact, he had a strange feeling that the coming year was going to be a good one.

Especially so when he noticed two familiar figures walking along the side of the road in the distance. It took everything he had to hide his smile as he pulled off onto the shoulder and up to those gorgeous blue eyes.
Yep, it was going to be a good year.

Chapter End Notes

If you are starting this fic a few months (or maybe even a few years) after I've published it, I assure you that comments and kudos are still very much appreciated*. <3

* Unless you're going to complain about the cliffhanger which I had every intention of getting back to in a sequel that never happened. Cause it just makes me want to delete the whole goddamn thing.
Daryl's Christmas

Chapter Summary

Rick and Daryl officially meet.

Chapter Notes

I am blown away by all your comments and kudos and things! You guys are absolutely amazing! Thank you so so much! Here is my first Daryl chapter, and hopefully I did him justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Daryl**

Daryl didn't give a damn about Christmas. It never meant anything growing up and didn't meant anything now. The only thing about it that he was looking forward to was spitting on his daddy's grave as they walked by on their way to the shelter for dinner.

He didn't even want to go, but Merle was incessant with his nagging. They had even gotten into a tussle about it the night before. Merle said he was going if he had to drag him along, mostly because he didn't like going anywhere alone. Daryl punched him in the eye when Merle charged him, but that seemed to settle it.

The only reason Daryl finally relented was because they didn't have any food in the fridge. Hell, the beer was almost gone, too. They could've went and trapped something, a rabbit maybe, cooked it out on a campfire, but Merle wanted something more. He was the one who liked Christmas even though Daryl could never figure out why.

They walked through the graveyard and he spit on his daddy's grave like he said he would. Merle just laughed at him. It was their first Christmas since he died and Daryl had been looking forward to not getting beaten. That had always been his daddy's gift to him like it was a goddamn tradition or something.

With him gone and their house condemned after the raid that took his life, the brothers were living in a dirty, rundown motel that they could barely afford. Merle had been doing some odd jobs at a friend's garage, but Daryl couldn't manage to find anything substantial.

He'd spend most mornings outside the local hardware store hoping that someone would need an assistant or something for the day. He was hardworking and good with his hands; he just needed a break. He had dropped out of high school after Merle left for the army so the pickings were slim. He wanted to get his GED but never had the time or money to afford it.

Not that he knew what he'd do after. It's not like he'd go to college or anything. That was a little too ambitious for his taste. He just wanted something to get by on, maybe make enough money so he could afford a real apartment to live in that had an actual kitchen. He loved to cook.
When they got to the shelter, there was a man sitting out back. Short curly hair and piercing blue eyes. One of Daryl's favorite things to do growing up was laying in a meadow by his childhood home staring up into the sky. The man's eyes were the same color blue, and for some reason, they warmed him from the inside out just like that memory did.

The man looked at him, and instinctively he looked away. Daryl couldn't look anyone in the eye for too long. To him, that was usually an invitation for a fight or a beating of some sort. He certainly couldn't look into his father's eyes without getting one. Meeting Merle's gaze was hit and miss. Sometimes it would end in a fight, sometimes not.

He could still feel those eyes on him as he and Merle walked around to the side of the building. Maybe that was wishful thinking. He didn't dare look back, didn't want to be disappointed.

There was no getting around it, Daryl Dixon was gay. He was pretty sure that no one knew that, not even Merle. The only exception being some of the guys he fucked in Atlanta when he snuck away a few times to have some fun, to be himself. Although, his old man accused him of being a 'fag' all the time, beating him and calling him names for it, for being sensitive and caring when there was no room for that in their family.

Merle would always be bringing girls home, one for him usually. Sometimes he would sleep with them to keep Merle and his father off his back, always thinking of some hot guy he saw on tv or something while doing so. Other times, he'd make up some lame excuse: 'not his type' or 'too drunk to get it up', stuff like that.

He checked out women before, tried to, but there was never one who interested him for long. They were too....soft. It wasn't like his circle of acquaintances produced the most desirable of them anyway. And his current situation didn't lend itself for entertaining men. He couldn't bring a man home, not with Merle always around and in his business.

He just didn't have the need for human companionship, not from anyone, he'd tell Merle when he laid into him about not wanting to pick up girls at the bar. It was true, mostly. He was good alone; no expectations, no one to let down, to let him down, no one to piss off, no one to feel sorry for him, no one to beat him.

That's all he knew about relationships. If you were in one, you got beat, you got cheated on, lied to, abused. Those were the things he associated with love, none of the bullshit and lies they fed you on tv. He never wanted that, to suffer like his mother did, to be as broken as she was at the end. He didn't need that, didn't need any of it. He'd gotten enough abuse growing up. He couldn't take anymore.

But Daryl had never seen a man as beautiful as the one standing before him now, one that made him feel warm and mushy inside just from looking at him. He wanted that feeling. He didn't know what it was, but he wanted it. He knew it couldn't be love, though; it didn't hurt, didn't feel like pain.

It must've been lust because he couldn't help but stare when that man bent over the table with a dirty rag in his hand and started scrubbing away. If his cheeks heated up, it was from the steam coming off the soup on his tray, he would've said.

*Lust, definitely lust.*

'Rick', Carol had called him. Rick. What kind of name was Rick? Short for Richard? They must've been friends. Then, this 'Rick' turned around and Daryl saw the ring on his finger, the shiny piece of gold catching the light just right to blind him.
Married...figures.

That didn't mattered. Daryl wasn't relationship material. A man like 'Rick' wouldn't go for him anyway, married or not, gay or not. He was the volunteer helping the less fortunate so he could feel better about his perfect life.

Daryl certainly didn't need that.

It was just the color of he man's eyes that were haunting him was all. He'd never seen anyone with eyes that shade of blue before, that matched the sky so flawlessly. They were intriguing. As were his lips that were the most gorgeous shade of pink he'd ever....

Just stop...

"Le's go!" he bellowed to Merle after the man left the room. "'S too hot in here."

"Then, take off you're jacket, lil' brother."

"You got your food, now le's go!"

"I wanted to talk to Carol, see how she's holdin' up. Why ya in a rush anyhow? We ain't got nothin' else ta do today."

"Carol's fine. If you think she likes you, you're a damn fool," he bit back.

"Watch your tone, Darlena," Merle threatened.

"Fuck you, I'm outta here," Daryl said as he stormed off.

He didn't want to be around when that Rick guy came back. The guy kept looking at him with those eyes of his, big and blue and unnerving like they were looking right into his soul. That didn't mean nothing. The guy was married, probably had kids. Rick wasn't checking him out, he was just curious was all. Probably never seen so many homeless people in one place in his life.

Daryl was just a fucking carnival attraction: five tickets to see the freak.

All he wanted to do was look back at him, at the color of his eyes; that wasn't weird or nothing. He wasn't checking the man out either. Rick would've punch him in the face if he was. 'Real men don't like ta be ogled by fags,' his daddy would say. He liked that hue of blue is all. But he couldn't, couldn't look him in the eye again. He had to go.

He stood outside for a few minutes before Merle came stomping out with a scowl on his face. Daryl knew that they weren't there just for the food. Merle wanted to see Carol. She was out of his league, but who wasn't. At least he had a better shot with her than Daryl did with Rick.

Fuck! He had to get that name out of his head, those eyes and lips and....and that ass. He needed to get drunk.

They left and went over to one of Merle's friend's houses where Daryl proceeded to do just that. It had been his intention anyway, but after a few beers, they didn't taste good anymore. Even the whiskey he quaffed didn't burn like it was supposed to. The alcohol left him feeling empty inside instead of just the usual numbness he was aiming for.

"Le's go. It's gettin' late," he said to Merle. He didn't like walking around town in the dark. The only place he liked to walk around after sunset was the woods. There were too many people around
in the city, too many corners for them to hide behind.

Merle grunted but gave in.

They had been walking for a few miles when a truck pulled up beside them, big noisy thing. The sun was starting to set so he couldn't make out the driver. Not until he started speaking at least.

"Ya'll need a ride?" Rick asked, rolling down the window.

"Well, aren't ya fulla good deeds," Merle said with a smile upon recognizing him.

"It's Christmas, it's cold, and it's gettin' dark. Is that a yes or should I keep on drivin'?" he asked, a grin on his face.

"We don't got much further t'go," Daryl answered, refusing to look at the man's gorgeous eyes again.

"Come on now, Daryl! My feet are startin' to hurt. I ain't about ta turn down a free ride in this cold," Merle said, pulling open the passenger door. "I'm sure he don't bite."

'S kinda the problem.... Daryl let out a huffed of defeat and jumped in the backseat. No use arguing with Merle. He was starting to feel the cold a bit anyway.

"Name's—"

"Merle Dixon," Rick interrupted. "Arrested ya a few times."

"You a cop? Thought ya looked familiar," Merle said furrowing his brow. "Officer Friendly, it seems. Can't tell ya pigs apart outta uniform."

"Used ta be....retired now. Name's Rick Grimes."

"Now what, former officer Rick Grimes? You just go around helpin' out people ya used ta arrest?"

"Nah, my friend Carol invited me ta help out today. Wife...ex-wife took the kids ta Atlanta, didn't have anythin' else ta do."

Daryl's eyes perked up at the 'ex' part. The man must of noticed because the next thing he knew, their eyes were meeting in the rearview mirror. Daryl quickly turned away to look out the window. It still didn't mean nothing. The man clearly liked women if he married one.

"Daryl, right?" Rick asked. Daryl must've been colder than he thought because when the man said his name, a shiver ran over him.

Daryl grunted his affirmative without looking. No use getting too attached. He wasn't going to see the man again. He was just doing his good deeds for the year. They'd go back to their separate lives after this. Him at the crappy motel with Merle, and Rick not with his wife and kids.

So, maybe his life wasn't perfect...unlike his curls.

"Ya know Carol?" Merle asked suspiciously.

"She works for me."

"Is that so? Turn right at the light. We're at the Inn on the corner," Merle instructed.
Even if Daryl could've looked Rick in the eye before, he couldn't after that. He was a grown ass man living with his brother in a rundown motel. He had holes in his 'good' jeans and his only possession was a beat up crossbow his grandfather gave him years ago. The knife he carried wasn't even his.

Even if Rick liked him before, no way would he after learning all that.

God, what was wrong with him? People didn't bother Daryl Dixon. Cute curly haired boys with blue eyes weren't supposed to get under his skin. So how was this guy doing it? How was this clean shaven, handsome, straight guy that he just met, that he didn't even know, turning him inside out?

He didn't need an answer, didn't want one.

As soon as the truck stopped, he jumped out and slammed the door shut. Merle called after him, but he was already at the door to their room. He jiggled the key and went inside, walking right to his bed and flopping down on it. He let out a grunt of frustration when his head hit the hard pillow. It had been a weird day.

"What was that about?" Merle asked when he got inside.

"Head hurts," he lied. "Don't like riding in the backseat of a cop's car is all."

"He wasn't that bad for an ex-piggy. Seemed nice."

"Ya just want him ta talk ya up ta Carol."

"So? Maybe he can give ya some work. Said he was a carpenter or something now. You're good with a hammer."

"I can find my own damn work," Daryl huffed.

"Yeah, 'cause that's goin' real well," he rolled his eyes sarcastically. "Next time I see him, I'll ask."

"I don't need no charity."

"Suit yourself....but we ain't in the position ta be turning it down. For fuck's sake Daryl, I can't live like this much longer!"

"You think I can? The son-of-a-bitch finally went and died on us but still managed ta screw us over from the grave, gettin' our home taken away for us. I still fucking hate him!"

"We didn't want that house anyway. It was gonna fall down sooner or later. Dale's still got that camper he offered us."

"You go live in the damn thing then!"

"Where you gonna go? Ya can't stay here on your own. Both of us together can barely afford the rate."

"I'll go ta the shelter. Michonne'll help me out."

"How's that better than here, lil' brother? It ain't."

"I'll figure it out. I always do."
"Fine, but if ya see that Rick guy at the hardware store, just think about asking him for a damn job or something."

"I ain't beggin' no one for no job."

"Ain't that what ya do there everyday?"

"Shut up!"

Merle was right, he couldn't afford to turn down charity. He had to get out of that cheap motel before he got eaten alive by bedbugs. There were ants crawling all over the place, the mini-fridge hardly worked, the heater only warmed up a three feet area around the damn thing. And most importantly, they couldn't pay for it.

The shelter wouldn't exactly be a step down.

*****

The next day, Daryl woke up with a kink in his neck from the rock hard mattress. He got dressed in the only pair of cargo pants he had and headed down to the hardware store. If he was lucky, he'd get some work today. He wasn't going to hold his breath because Daryl Dixon was anything but lucky.

Over the next week, he was proven right time and again. Not once did he get an offer of work, Merle moved into Dale's trailer, he had to move into the shelter—not that he actually had anything to 'move'—and most embarrassing of all, the bunk he had been sleeping on for the past several days had decided to fall apart in the middle of the night.

He just couldn't catch a damn break. Every single thing he touched turned to shit.

When Hershel rushed over to stitch him up, six stitches in his temple, he was ready to lay down in a ditch somewhere and be done with it all. After he fixed the bunk, that is. He promised Michonne that he would so she wouldn't kick him out, but she insisted on getting him some help.

Two hours later, when those blue eyes from days before were staring into his again, he couldn't help but think that maybe his luck was about to change. He shook off the thought because it didn't work like that. No use getting his hopes up; they'd be crushed soon enough.

"Daryl, right?" Rick asked from the doorway. He had a baby on his hip that was obviously not his and a boy that obviously was standing next to him holding a toolbox.

Daryl nodded. He had no words because all he could think about was how he was face to face with this Rick guy for the third time in a week and how he was even more sexy now than he was the first time he'd seen him, baby and all.

He was wearing dark jeans, a hunter green flannel shirt, and shiny work boots. Daryl felt underdressed and self-conscious next to him with his thirdhand jeans because there was no way in hell that he looked even half as good standing next to him. He was in bad need of a shave and a shower, and that was without mentioning the worn out clothes that were falling to pieces on his back.

"This is Judith and my son Carl. Carl, this is Daryl."

"Nice to meet you," the boy said nice and polite as he dropped the toolbox and held out his hand toward Daryl.
Daryl only grunted and nodded again. He wasn't good with kids, never really been around any since he was a kid. And he hadn't been too good with them then either.

"Hey Carl, go take Judith ta the kitchen. Carol wanted ta see her," Rick said, handing the baby over to the boy. "Daryl and I'll get started on this bunk."

The boy turned around and walked back out toward the kitchen without another word. Rick bent down and rummaged through the red toolbox until he pulled out a measuring tape and a pad and pencil.

"She ain't yours," Daryl said out of nowhere. He didn't think that it was an appropriate thing to say, but it just popped out. What else was he supposed to talk about? He couldn't exactly say, 'I'm gay and I wanna bang ya,' now could he? That seemed less than appropriate.

"I know. Wife...ex-wife says she is. Sorry, ain't used ta sayin' that yet," Rick said softly.

"What're ya gonna do about it?"

"Dunno."

"Oh," Daryl said, shifting nervously.

"Michonne and Carol said you're good with your hands. That true?"

"I ain't gonna call 'em liars."

"Nah, of course not. So, what are ya good at?"

"This 'n that."

"That's, uh, not a lot to work with, Daryl."

Daryl could only shrug while he stood there stoically even though he was melting on the inside at the sound of his name on those lips. He wasn't good with small talk, wasn't good at talking about himself, wasn't good at having conversations with cute guys that made his palms sweaty and his throat dry.

He was happy that they worked in silence for awhile. Rick took some measurements and wrote some things down on the pad he had. He would look over at Daryl every once in awhile like he wanted to say something but apparently changed his mind and went back to work.

Then, he left the room for a few minutes. Daryl didn't know whether or not he should follow so he didn't. Instead, he paced the floor a little and bit his nails. When Rick came back, he had the baby in his arms and the boy was trailing behind.

"Le's go," Rick said to him, motioning for Daryl to follow with his head.

He stared at him for a second, not quite looking him in the eye. He didn't like people telling him what to do, but Rick's tone wasn't demanding like he was used to. It was more like a suggestion. It didn't matter, if it wasn't for the kids, he would've probably cussed the guy out anyway.

"Where we goin'?" Daryl finally asked.

"To the hardware store," Carl answered. "We need some stuff to fix your bed. It is your's, right?"

"Carl?" Rick said embarrassed.
Carl gave him a look that said 'what?' and turned back to Daryl to wait for an answer.

"Yeah, 's mine."

"Then, we need to fix it," Carl said matter-of-factly as he turned to lead the way to Rick's truck.

"Guess we do," Daryl said, rolling his eyes.

Rick grinned at him and gave a soft chuckled. Damn, he could get used to that sound...and those twisty lips....Shit.

"Come on. We'll grab somethin' ta eat while we're out. Carl's probably starvin' after his mother burnt his pancakes this mornin'."

"I don't need no charity," Daryl huffed.

"Good thing it ain't charity then," Rick smirked as he turned around and walked out.

Daryl couldn't hide the smile that poured out of him as he watched Rick walk away, and he wasn't even staring at his ass...much. Even still, he was hesitant to follow. Rick seemed like a nice guy. Why would he want someone like him around his kids? He was homeless, living in a shelter, with a last name that the man knew firsthand came with a bad reputation.

Rick was just doing a job for the shelter, then he'd be gone. Probably for good this time and Daryl would never have to see him again. He wouldn't have to picture Rick Grimes and those hands of his pushing him up against the wall while silky lips worked their way....FUCK!!

He should probably enjoy it will it lasted. As long as he kept reminding himself not to get his hopes up, he'd be fine. No good could come from hope. No good could come from his little crush on Rick Fuckin' Grimes, that was for damn sure. And hope? Hope made him want to turn around and run the other way.

But in the end....he followed.

Chapter End Notes

I went back and forth with the Daryl is gay thing. I took it out then decided to put it back in. And also, I have no idea why Merle is so nice in this....might have to put him in a bar fight to up his street cred!
Rick's Perfect Day

Chapter Summary

Rick and Daryl share a moment, Judith is a cockblocker, Carl is a wingman, the Governor is still an ass.

**Rick**

When Rick picked up the Dixon brothers, he wasn't expecting for Merle to be the 'nice' one. Carol had said that Daryl was shy, but he was damn near hostile in the backseat. That was the vibe Rick got from him anyway. Maybe the younger man had noticed him staring and was uncomfortable with him.

Then, their eyes locked and he nearly ran off the road he was so distracted. Goddamn, those eyes! Whatever this man was doing to him, it hadn't been an isolated incident. He was sure of that now.

The ride was short. Soon, he pulled into the motel and stopped his truck. Daryl got out without a word, and he was sure that he jumped when the younger man slammed the door. He must've been really mad at him, and Rick felt guilt for making him feel that way. He obviously didn't want the ride he had offered.

"Sorry 'bout him. He ain't doing too good right now. First, we lost our ol' man, now we're livin' in this shithole," Merle said, motioning to the motel behind him.

"Hershel said a lot of folks are going through some hard times right now," Rick replied. "Does he have a record?"

"Nah, the first Dixon never ta have been arrested. Not for lack of tryin' on my part."

"Reason I ask is I run a carpentry business, might be able ta find him some work if he's interested. He didn't seem ta warm up ta me, though. Guess he doesn't like former cops."

"My lil brother don't like nobody. I wouldn't take it personal. I'll, uh, let ya get on your way, Office Friendly. Tell Carol I said 'hello'," Merle said as he shut the door.

Rick wasn't exactly sure what he was supposed to think about that encounter. Daryl hardly said a word to him, and after their brief moment of eye contact, he never looked his way again. It shouldn't have been a big deal. So what if some stranger didn't take to him?

Oh shit! The lightbulb went on...Daryl was ashamed. Of course he was. He lived in a fleabag motel and had to eat Christmas dinner at a shelter. Rick was such an idiot! He was the volunteer who got to walk away. Daryl had to live that nightmare everyday.

Not only that, but he rubbed it in his face a second time when he pulled up in his nice warm, shiny truck when the brothers were walking down the road in the freezing cold. But he wasn't going to feel sorry for him. A man with wounded pride didn't need pity.

The good thing about it was that he'd never have to see Daryl again, wouldn't have to rub it in his face a third time. It wasn't like he'd seen him before, even in their small town. He'd arrested his
brother three times and never met him. So, it was a safe bet that they wouldn't cross paths again.

Why did that make his heart hurt?

*****

Rick had been moping around for a week trying to figure out why Daryl's slight had rocked him so hard. Out of nowhere, he got a call from Michonne about a job that needed to be done at the shelter. It was a Saturday and he had just picked up Carl and Judith from Lori's, and for once, they didn't fight.

He was happy to be able to take the kids with him to do something to help out. Those were the values he wanted to instill in his son. Who knew what sort of things Shane was teaching him. How to steal people's wives, no doubt.

But then, he walked in the door and those steel-blue eyes that had haunted his dreams for the past week were staring right back at him. He didn't even question it when his stomach started doing cartwheels. He felt like a fucking teenager when their crush walked it, pulse skyrocketing and everything.

Oh my god!

He had a crush....on a guy...

That was....unexpected....

Bromance? Was it possible that he was just looking for a friend to fill the roll Shane had vacated? They had been inseparable for decades, joined at the hip. Two months ago, he lost more than just his wife, he lost his best friend. He'd take responsibility for the former, but Shane had no excuse. That was what hurt the most.

"Daryl, right?" That was the first AND second thing he ever said to the man. How lame was that? In his defense, he was rusty in the flirting department, he'd been with Lori since high school. He didn't have game then, why would he now? Not that he was flirting....

The guy wasn't into small talk so Rick didn't push it as they got to fixing the broken bunk. He was content to work by his side silently. It wasn't even all that awkward. He wanted to say something a few times, but he ran them through his head and they sounded even lamer than 'Daryl, right?' so he kept his mouth shut.

After he had the measurements he needed, he went to find Carl and Judith. Unsurprisingly, Carl was begging for food in the kitchen. Rick was embarrassed by that. Carl didn't quite understand that the people they were serving needed it more than he did.

"Hey Carl, le's go. We need ta get some lumber from the hardware store ta fix that bunk. Can't have him sleepin' on the floor tonight," Rick said as he took Judith from him. "And the girl needs some french fries. She's getting too thin now that she can crawl."

"I need some french fries!" Carl added.

"Okay, we'll eat before we shop. How's that?"

"I'm starving. Mom burnt pancakes this morning," the boy complained.

Rick only smiled, happy that he no longer had to suffer through every burnt meal Lori made, not
that he was any better in the kitchen. He went back to the room Daryl was still in and caught the
man pacing by the window. He wasn't cute, he wasn't cute, he absolutely was not cute!

He met a little more resistance from Daryl about lunch than he did with Carl. His exact words
were, "I don't need no charity."

Rick knew that. Of course he knew that. But it wasn't his intent to feel sorry for him, to patronize
him, or to make him feel down about himself. He just wanted to share a meal with the man, maybe
get to know him, be his friend, because those eyes were making him crazy and he didn't know
what else to do about it.

"Good thing it ain't charity then," was his reply. And he hoped that it didn't sound nearly as lame as
'Daryl, right?' But Daryl didn't laugh at him, and the next thing he knew, they were on their way to
lunch.

They pulled into a diner across the street from the hardware store. Daryl instantly tensed up. Rick
was trying not to notice the man, but it was kind of difficult when his back went ramrod straight in
his periphery.

"'S on me," Rick said. "For helpin' out," he added so Daryl wouldn't feel so bad about not having
any money.

"I don't need—"

"Charity? Yeah, we already went over that part. You're helpin' me out and I take care of my
employees."

"I ain't your employee," Daryl hissed back.

"Today ya are. So shut up and le's go eat a burger," Rick smirked.

Daryl let out the softest chuckle he'd ever heard. It was like music to his ears, but the best part was
that the chuckle was accompanied by a small smile. And damn he looked good when he smiled.
Rick had to remember how he did that because he wanted to make him do it again.

Rick got Judith out of the truck and the four of them headed inside. Carl slid into a booth, Rick
beside him, and Daryl on the other side of the table. The waitress brought Judith a highchair and
took their drink order. By the time she came back, they had all decided on cheese burgers.

"So what do ya like ta do when you're not breaking bunks, Daryl?" Rick teased. Shit, that was bad,
too!

"I ain't no city boy!" he protested.
"Sure, dad," Carl said, rolling his eyes.

"I'm not gonna win this one, am I?" Rick asked.

"Nope," Daryl assured him.

"I may be stubborn, but I know when I'm beat. Alright, subject change...what do ya hunt with?"

"Crossbow mostly."

"A crossbow? That's so cool! Can I try it?" Carl asked, wide-eyed and excited.

"It ain't no toy, kid. 'S dangerous."

"I know, but Shane let me shoot his gun before."

"HE WHAT?!" Rick yelled. "When was this?! What the hell else are they letting ya do over there? Drinkin', robbin' banks?"

"I wasn't supposed to say nothin'," Carl replied softly.

"Jesus! I told her not to let him move in," he sighed.

It wasn't until he took a calming breath that Rick noticed Daryl's laughing fit across from him. He could definitely get used to that sound. He looked at the man who quickly bowed his head but didn't stop his laughing. He did hold his hands up in apology though. All Rick could do was laugh himself.

"Who's Shane?" Daryl asked after finally settling down.

"Mom's boyfriend, dad's best friend," Carl answered.

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed again. He didn't exactly want to talk about that today, not with Daryl sitting across from him. He finally felt like they were making progress. Progress at what, he wasn't sure, but progress nonetheless.

Luckily, the food arrived at that moment and everyone was too busy eating to talk more about the elephant in the room. Rick tried his best not to stare at Daryl too much, but it was hard when he kept using that mouth of his every five seconds. Who knew some guy eating a burger could have been so erotic.

But it was, and things were happening under the table that he didn't quite understand and certainly wasn't ready to admit. Admitting that he kind of liked the guy was one thing—he could explain that away as needing a friend after his wife left him for one of his—but acknowledging that Daryl was stirring things in him that his wife hadn't been able to in years—maybe ever—was confusing as hell.

Shit, he couldn't be gay. He wasn't attracted to other guys. He tested out that theory at the grocery story and no man he 'checked out' did anything for him. Not even so much as a twitch down there. Maybe he was just gay for Daryl. Was that possible? Was that a thing?

Maybe he was lonely? He didn't feel lonely, didn't feel that in need of company, definitely didn't feel that desperate. But there he was, staring at a gorgeous man as he popped yet another fry into his gorgeous mouth.

And then, something strange happened.
Their eyes met. *That* had happened before, but this time, Daryl didn't look away, not like he had the first hundred times they made eye contact. He was staring back as the corners of his mouth started to curve upward into a small smile. Rick found his doing the same. And fuck if every drop of blood in his body didn't rush straight to his loins.

But then, Shane's progeny ruined the moment by choking on a fry. 'Li'l Cockblocker' should've been her name.

"You okay?" Rick asked with concern as he gently rubbed her back. "Think you've had enough. We should probably get goin'. I wanna get that bunk done before tonight."

"Why? Daryl can just stay with us tonight," Carl said. "We have an extra bunk, dad."

"Uh, we'll have to see about that, Carl. Even so, we need to fix it so someone else can sleep on it," Rick explained.

"Yeah, that'll help two people instead of just one!"

"I couldn't do that," Daryl said to Carl. "Ya don't even know me. What if I wanna rob ya or somethin'?"

"Do you?"

"Nah, man! I ain't like that."

"Then, it's settled. You'll be staying with us. If it's okay with you, dad, but you're always saying that when someone's in need that we have to help because it's the right thing to do."

"Who are ya and what have ya done with my son?" Rick teased. "Look Carl, if he doesn't want to stay with two noisy kids, we can't make him."

"And you."

"Okay, three noisy kids. But you're right," he said, turning back to Daryl, "And the bed's your's if ya want it."

"Maybe just for tonight.....It's supposed to be cold and that place don't have enough blankets," Daryl replied.

"We have to buy more blankets while we're out," Carl added.

"Yeah, we'll do that too. Okay, time to go. The lumber's not gonna buy itself, and she's gonna need a nap soon."

The four of them went back to the truck and piled in for the short drive across the street. Rick put Judith in a cart that Carl insisted on pushing. They were about halfway through Rick's list when things got even more interesting.

In the distance, Rick caught sight of his rival, Phillip Blake. The man was made famous by an unsuccessful bid at governor of Georgia which he horribly lost. Him and Rick first crossed paths after he set up his business. Phillip strolled in and 'kindly' demanded that he close up shop.

Well, Rick Grimes wasn't about to be pushed around by some guy who thought he could buy whoever he wanted. He stood his ground, and ever since, that asshole had been giving him trouble. He even went so far as to rope in the roofer that Rick always recommended to his customers.
Phillip made Tyreese sign some ridiculous contract that said he wouldn't do business with Rick anymore. The guy had some hotshot lawyer on retainer who made sure he couldn't get out of it. Although, Rick heard through the rumor mill that as soon as the contract was up, Tyreese wouldn't be doing business with him ever again.

Rick wasn't in the mood for that guy, never really was. He tried to steer them down an aisle right before they reached him, but that 'Li'l Cockblocker' made a loud noise and Phillip turned around and smiled devilishly at her after noticing Rick.

"Well, if it isn't Daryl Dixon! What are you doin' with this clown?" Phillip said motioning to Rick.

"Workin'," Daryl simply said.

"You needed a job? I could've given you one. Still can. You do beautiful work. Been lookin' for ya around actually."

"Nah, I'm good."

"We have one little disagreement and you're gonna throw our friendship away? Daryl, I'm hurt."

"Not how I remember things."

"Did you get that, Mr. Governor? You can go fuck off now. No one wants to hear your bullshit," Rick interjected. He didn't like to talk that way in front of the kids, but that guy was insufferable.

"Now Rick, that ain't no way to talk to your ol' pal."

"You ain't my pal! Just a rival who's business I plan on bankruptin'."

"That reminds me, thanks for sending Tyreese my way. He's real happy at Woodbury."

"You poached him."

"Not my fault you can't keep your employees, Rick. Might take that electrician you like so much. What's his name? Morgan something? Wonder what it'd cost to get him on my payroll?"

"Loyalty! Something you don't know a damn thing about!"

"That may be true," he chuckled. "What about you Mr. Dixon? What’s it gonna take to get you on my team? Business is good, I can hire you on full-time now. Sorry 'bout our last job. It was just a misunderstandin' is all."

"Ya couldn't afford me," Daryl answered hotly.

"Oh, yeah? What's he payin' ya? I'll double it."

"I ain't for sale," he said with a hard scowl that caused Phillip to swallow a little too hard.

"Your lose. If you'll excuse me gentlemen, I got a big job over on Oak that I must get back ta."

Rick rolled his eyes as he watched the man walk away. He just had to push people's buttons. He'd later find out that the 'big job' on Oak was refinishing a table. Hardly a big job.

"What'd he do ta ya?" Rick asked after he walked away.

"Cheated me out of a job. Then refused ta hire me again. That guy's a fuckin' prick!"
"Well, he was good for somethin'. That was the weirdest interview I ever conducted, but ya got the job," Rick said with a sideways grin.

"What?" Daryl asked confused.

"I was gonna wait till after we finished the bunk, ya know to see how ya did, but I can't after that. You're hired. If he wants ya that bad, then so do I." Maybe a little more...

"Ya know what, Rick Grimes? I do believe my luck is startin' ta change."

"Can't promise you won't regret it. Judith likes to cry all night and Glenn won't stop talkin' 'bout Hershel's daughter lately. Hey Carl? Go grab some more of those screws down there. The three quarter inch ones."

"Told you we didn't have enough," Carl snipped.

Rick ignored him.

"Why do ya put up with her?" Daryl asked pointing to Judith. "She ain't yours. A blind guy could see that."

"I dunno know. Carl likes her and she ain't that bad, mostly. Of course, that was the second time today she pissed me off so I'm gonna have ta reevaluate things," he joked.

"What about child support and stuff?"

"We haven't gotten into that yet. We've only been separated for two months."

"She ran off with your best friend and pins the kid on ya? That's low."

"It wasn't all her fault...just most of it. I got shot and was in a coma for three months. She thought I wouldn't notice the baby was born seven months later instead of six. Then, the way Shane looked at Lori? I just knew it was his. Things weren't perfect before, but after.....it was just too broken. Cashed in my chips."

"S fucked up."

"Why ya in the shelter?"

"Dad got killed in a drug raid gone bad. Can't say I'm sad about it. House got condemned, we couldn't afford the motel no more, Merle's stayin' in a friend's RV, but I didn't have nowhere else ta go."

"Sounds rough."

"Story of my life....Why ya being so nice ta me anyway?" Daryl asked suspiciously.

"I dunno know....guess I just like ya? That a crime?"

"I dunno know, you're the cop."

"Ex-cop," Rick smirked.

"Ex-cop," Daryl mirrored playfully.

"Come on, we gotta get back and fix that damn bunk."
The ride back to the shelter was quiet. Judith fell asleep in her carseat and nobody wanted to wake her. Beth had taken a shine to her earlier and found a place out of the way he could let her sleep. She agreed to keep an eye on her while the three boys got to work.

The job didn't take long. Rick could've finished it in an hour or so alone. With Carl helping, it took a bit longer. He was teaching him things along the way. Daryl was too. Carol and Michonne were right, he was good with his hands. Rick kept wondering what else he could do with them.

He managed to chase those thoughts away quickly. The man was going to be staying with him, and they were highly inappropriate. He couldn't go around hitting on someone who he was trying to help. He'd feel like he was taking advantage of an already vulnerable situation. And he certainly didn't want to scare him off.

It wasn't like he could act on his feelings, or whatever they were. Impulses, maybe? The guy was officially an employee now and that would've brought a whole different set of problems. Even if that wasn't the case, he had too much baggage; an almost ex-wife, a son, and a fake daughter. Daryl could do better.

He might not even like being with a man. He never thought about it before, had no experience at all. How would it work? He had a pretty good idea of the basics....no! He wasn't going to even think about going down that road. He wasn't ready, he wasn't even divorced yet.

Plus, Daryl was still a stranger and a guy.

But fuck if he wouldn't look damn good bent over his workbench!
Daryl's (Confusingly) Perfect Day

Chapter Summary

Daryl thinks way too hard about things, and a little about Rick. Okay, maybe a lot about Rick.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Never would Daryl have thought—when he was woken up by the breaking bunk tossing him in the air—that he would've had the day he did. He almost felt like human being at lunch. Good conversation, jokes, and actual food not something from a vending machine. He even laughed like a damn fool. It felt good, all of it. He would've swore he was dreaming, but even his dreams weren't that perfect.

He could feel Rick's eyes on him from across the table during lunch, heavy and unnerving. He wanted to look into them so badly, wanted to memorize them, but he didn't want to ruin their day. He didn't want Rick to get mad, to mistake the gesture for a sign of aggression, didn't want to start a fight. He didn't know how to do this, how to be normal.

It was stupid, the whole lunch was stupid. He should've told Rick that he couldn't go. He was going to mess it up like he messed up everything. The only upside was that there wasn't anything to mess up. They weren't dating, they weren't friends, the weren't even acquaintances. Not really. He was just a charity case.

So he chanced it.

He looked into those flawless crystal orbs—fragile like glass, hardened like steel—and didn't look away. He might not get another opportunity, so he took it. He tossed a fry into his mouth, greasy and salty yet blunt on his tongue, and he looked up into those eyes that he never wanted to look away from. And this time he didn't.

They were spectacular; so pure, so true, so goddamn blue.

In that amazing man's eyes, he saw something he'd never seen before. He saw kindness and compassion. He saw fire, so much heat that he felt like he was burning, that he was on the pyre above two twinkling flames of azure. Those eyes warmed him from the inside out, breath stolen as they stripped him apart piece by piece, as they laid him out bare, exposing his soul for all to see, for Rick to see, over two half-eaten burgers on a wobbly table in an rusty old diner with ugly-ass wallpaper and a broken-down jukebox.

He also saw something undefinable, uncharted, obscured to his vapid, dimwitted brain. If he didn't know better, he would've said love, but that was a concept so alien to him that he couldn't entertain the idea even subconsciously without wincing inwardly at the unwarranted stinging agitation in his chest. He didn't know a damn thing about love—wouldn't recognize it if it bit him in the ass—didn't care to.

So this? He couldn't define this, couldn't name it, couldn't look directly at it, couldn't dwell on it.
for too long without his palms getting sweaty and his pulse picking up.

What the hell was this?

What the hell was wrong with him?

What he didn't see was almost as incredible. Not one ounce of pity, no hostility, no hate. No hint that he should look away. No indication that he was going to be punished for what he was doing, that Rick was going to hurt him. Nothing and everything to be scared of all at once.

And just when he thought it was too much, that he'd have to look away or be turned to stone, into a pillar of salt, punished in the most diabolical way that the gods could think up....that damn baby started choking.

She wasn't so bad, saved him from ruining it.

Then the boy offered him a bed for the night, one not in a shelter with fifty other bodies crammed in for the night. He was lucky Michonne even had a spot in one of the rooms. They were a little more private even though he still had to share. When Carl mentioned a bed, more hope crawled into his chest at took up residence.

He knew it was dangerous. Hope had never been his friend.

But Rick didn't laugh it off or say 'hell no'. He said it was his; his to turn down or to have, and he wanted to have it. He wanted to be normal. Only for the night, he told himself. Any longer and he'd surely get spoiled. For one night though, he could be normal.

By the time he recovered his bearings, they were at the hardware store. He rarely went inside unless he needed something for a job. Most of the time he'd hang around outside begging for work with a few other guys down on their luck. Sometimes the manager would chase him off, other times he'd get bored and leave. Every once in awhile, he'd actually get some work.

More often than not, that work would come from Phillip Blake. His company, Woodbury Woodwork, was the top rated carpentry business in the area. Daryl didn't see how. He must've paid whoever gave the reviews. He overcharged his customers, underpaid his employees, and was your typical all-around asshole. That man had no integrity. No wonder he got into politics, but even they didn't want him.

Daryl had been hired to do a job on a house Phillip was remodeling. He was to strip the hardwood floors and refinish them. The owner had insisted that they not be replaced. 'Mr. Governor' tried to replace them anyway without the owner knowing because it would've been cheaper. When Daryl told the owner, Phillip tried to blame the 'confusion' on him.

Needless to say, Daryl stormed off the job. Not without telling the owner that Phillip was ripping him off. He even mentioned something about some new guy who set up shop that he heard was doing the same work for half the price. Looking back now, he knew that that was Rick. Small fucking world.

Merle had said it was a stupid thing to walk off because they needed the money at the time, but he just couldn't work with someone like that. Someone that was now walking towards them with his lawyer girlfriend on his arm while his wife was eight months pregnant at home.

How the hell did his hatred for that bastard get him a job offer? He was planning on asking Rick if he had some work he could do. Merle and the shelter talked some sense into him, but his plan was to work hard on the repairs and impress him before doing so.
Rick went and said he got the job and he wasn't quite sure what that meant. Like full-time employee with benefits? He'd never had that before. Or was it just odd jobs, something Rick could use to rub in Phillip's face? Even still, the older man didn't strike him as one to use others like pawns; that was all Phillip. Didn't matter, he'd take either at this point.

And not just so he could spend time with Rick. That thought sent up all kinds of red flags. He couldn't sleep with his boss. That was rule number one or something. He was still certain Rick was straight, the whole gooey eyes in the dinner was some sort of friendship thing. Had to be.

Although, Rick hadn't even acknowledged Andrea as she stood next to Phillip, and lots of guys thought she was hot, so he heard. In fact, he didn't even think Rick saw her. That was odd. Of course, he was kind of in the middle of a feud with Phillip and must not have been thinking clearly.

That didn't matter either. The guy was helping him out. He couldn't take advantage of him, couldn't hit on him. The last thing he wanted to do was make his saving grace uncomfortable. He had to tread lightly or risk being sent back to the shelter before he could blink. Then, everyone in town would know who he really was, a sorry piece of shit just like his old man said. At least he didn't have to worry about soiling his reputation, they'd just tack on fag at the end.

The rest of their trip was boring. They went to the store and got some blankets, at Carl's assistance, before heading back to the shelter. They made quick work of the repairs to the bunk which went faster than he thought. Rick really knew what he was doing; that wasn't a surprise to him, though.

He had a 'fleeting' thought of them testing out their handy work: Rick laying him down on the bunk all nice and gentle because that's who he was before kissing him soft and sweet with those dark pink lips that he couldn't get out of his head. Then, he'd enter him just as gently, pumping and thrusting until Daryl was—

"It looks amazing!" Michonne praised.

He nearly choked on his tongue when she pulled him out of his thoughts because he had no idea she had even come into the room. She was stealthy like that.

"Great work!"

"I helped," Carl bragged.

"Well, all three of you did a great job. Don't know how I can repay ya'll."

"Just keep up the hard work," Rick said. "And give us a call if ya need anything else."

"Won't even hesitate," she assured him.

"Well good. And I'm gonna be stealin' this one so ya don't have ta worry 'bout anymore bunks caving in," Rick teased, giving Daryl a pat on the back.

Daryl nearly choked again because that was the first time they had ever touched and he wasn't sure how else he was supposed to react.

"You okay?" Rick asked concerned.

"Fine," Daryl murmured. But he wasn't fine because Rick's hand was still on him, on his back, and it glorious, and it was lingering. And he was high, but for the first time in his life, it wasn't from the bad drugs Merle used to bring home. This was even better; he was better than fine.
"It'll free up another bed, too. My idea," Carl said smugly.

"Alright Mr. Humble, I'll go get Judith and we can all head home."

It was too much! Rick Grimes was going to take him home. To their home. It was going to be theirs, even if it was only for pretend, only for one night. Shit, his hopes were getting too high. He was going to crash hard when the bottom finally fell out.

He'd never had a home before. There where places he lived, places he slept, places that kept the rain off his head during a storm; houses, trailers, shacks in the woods, cars, crappy rundown motels, the shelter, but never a place he'd ever call home. He would now have to add Rick's place to that list, because no matter how much he hoped otherwise, to Daryl Dixon, perfect never lasted.

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When they got 'home', as Rick affectionately called it, Carl gave him the tour. It wasn't much, a small two bedroom room apartment with a surprisingly decent sized kitchen behind the living room. The bedrooms where upstairs with the living area and kitchen on the bottom floor.

Carl took his grocery bag full of ratty clothes upstairs and sat them in the kids' room. Carl's room. His room. The boy told him he could have the top bunk if he liked since he was company, but he didn't care. He was certain that the mattress would be ten times better than he was used to. That was really all that mattered. Even so, he took the bottom.

Daryl went back downstairs where Rick was. He didn't want to stray too far from him in case Rick wanted to keep an eye on him to make sure he wasn't going to do something stupid or hurt one of the kids. He wanted to keep him happy and comfortable so he wouldn't send him away.

Daryl Dixon was officially on his best behavior, and for once, he didn't even mind.

Rick handed him Judith as soon as his feet left the stairs. It was the first time he had ever held a baby. She didn't seem to mind his clumsy hands. Rick kissed her neck, putting one hand on her tiny back, and for a second, Daryl thought—wished—he'd pull away and kiss him. He'd seen that on tv or something. The husband would kiss the kid then kiss the wife.

But he wasn't no girl. He wasn't no one's wife. Maybe he could be a husband, though. It could still work: the husband could kiss the kid then kiss the other husband. Rick could kiss their kid then kiss him.

What the fuck?

Shit, he was fantasizing about being married? Well, that was a new one!

After everything he'd been through, after the monstrosities his family called relationships, after hearing Rick's sad story, after all the horrendous one-night stands that had been his only foray into the matter, after all of it, Daryl Dixon still had hope that he could be happy, that he could have the fucking fairytales they sold you on tv.

With Rick.

Hope.

That's what Rick kept feeding him, and if he didn't stop soon, Daryl was going to start believing that it wasn't the cruel mistress he had tangoed with all his life. That he could have it, hope, and it wouldn't just spin around and stomp on his foot out of spite.
"I'm gonna go take a shower, then I'll make dinner," Rick said as he started up the stairs. Halfway, he paused and turned to face him over the banister. "Welcome home, Daryl," he added with a kind smile that left the younger man swooning.

Rick had left him standing at the bottom of the stairs with not-his-baby in his arms. Oddly, Daryl was okay with that. He'd never been around a baby before, but it wasn't so bad, even if she did have a bastard for a father. It wasn't her fault. Maybe he'd have one just like her someday, maybe it'd even have the same blue eyes as Rick.

Maybe he could be happy.

He felt happy right now, content, holding the baby that Rick pretended was his own. Daryl could pretend it was his too, that it was theirs like this home was theirs. Even if it was only for the night, he could be happy.

Those were dangerous thoughts.

Carl wasn't so bad either, had eyes like Rick. They were the same exact color and everything, but he wasn't drawn to Carl's. He didn't get lost in his blue. Only Rick's. Which stood to reason that it wasn't the color at all, it was the man behind them, the man that he wanted so desperately to see him for something other than a goddamn Dixon, a homeless bum.

He had, right? Daryl wouldn't have been standing where he was if Rick hadn't seen him, seen beneath the surface. He wouldn't have left him alone in his apartment holding a baby that wasn't his, even though he claimed responsibility for it, if he hadn't trusted him a little bit.

And it wasn't because he felt sorry or obligated to. Rick was just a good man, he wasn't collecting strays.

Daryl knew that was the truth. No way could Rick have talked to Carl the way he did all day if he wasn't a good man. That's how fathers were supposed to act, to love. There were no fists involved. Even when he was frustrated with Phillip, he didn't take it out on the boy or the girl that wasn't his, didn't even take it out on Daryl.

In fact, the opposite happened, he opened up and let him in. And the weird thing was that Daryl did the same right back. It wasn't much, just a short summary of his life, but he figured he had lots of time to open up to Rick. He wasn't going anywhere, not as long as Rick would have him.

And with that, he knew he was in over his head. It wasn't right to be hoping about impossible things, hoping for straight guys with kids to fall in love with him. Fruitlessly hoping for a family, a real one, with love and acceptance, a home, no matter how kind the man happened to be.

Because that was just it, wasn't it? He was being kind, that's who Rick Grimes was. It wasn't personal. The man was giving him a warm bed to sleep in and a job so he could pull himself out of the gutter simply because he was kind. He had no right to expect anything else. Hell, friendship was even too much to ask for after the help he was receiving from him.

Daryl wasn't worthy of any of it. He just needed to keep his head down and do what needed to be done to better his current situation. He had no time for blue-eyed distractions that would do nothing but give him false hope. Because false hope was worse than no hope at all.

And that would have to be the end of it.

This time it was Carl who jolted him out of his thoughts, and he was thankful. "What's for dinner?" he asked the boy after he had bounced down the stairs.
"It's Saturday so spaghetti. We joke that mom can't cook, but either can dad. Did you know you can burn boiled eggs? We found that out the hard way," Carl groaned.

"I can cook," Daryl added after a few minutes of silence.

"Really? You mean rabbit or something?" Carl asked sarcastically.

"That too and it's damn good, but I meant real food, smartass."

"Where'd you learn to cook?" This time the boy asked with genuine curiosity and Daryl got a warmth inside of him that he was unfamiliar with. Even the boy made him feel normal. No one ever wanted to know about him.

"Had a job at a restaurant for awhile. Ya think you're ol' man'd be mad if I whipped somethin' up for us? He said he'd cook after his shower, but I ain't really interested in tryin' burnt spaghetti."

"Who cares if he'd be mad. If you can do better, you'd be doing all of us a favor! He hates to cook," Carl assured him. "Kitchen's this way."

Daryl followed Carl into the kitchen. With Carl's instruction, he put Judith in her highchair with some dry cereal that he thought tasted like cardboard but she seemed to like. Then, Carl showed him where most everything was and he gathered his ingredients.

He was going to go ahead with spaghetti because he didn't want to overstep any boundaries. He had to jazzed it up a bit, though. He even went and asked the neighbor for some spices. Maybe if he showed Rick that he was useful, he'd think about letting him stay for more than a day or two.

Dammit! There was that hope again!

Rick finally joined them at the table, a wide grin plastered on his face. His hair was wet and disheveled, tight curls sticking out randomly. He had a plain black t-shirt on and loose-fitting light blue checkered pajama pants that Daryl unwittingly noticed sat low on his hips.

"Jesus, Daryl! It smells fu-flippin' amazin' in here!" Rick stated excitedly. "If it tastes half as good as it smells, we might just have ta keep ya!"

Goddamn you Rick Grimes and your fuckin' hope! He wanted to scream that but only smiled big like a damn idiot. Because he was an idiot, he was sure of that.

"Tastes even better!" Carl told him, a ring of red coating the outside of his mouth. He looked almost as filthy as Judith and her sauce-covered face.

Rick had hurried to the table and sat down next to Carl and across from Daryl, the same configuration as lunch. He wrapped his fingers around a fork and dug into the plate Daryl had made for him. He twirled some pasta around the utensil, jabbed a homemade meatball with the prongs, and shoved the huge bite into his mouth.

Daryl would have been extremely flattered by Rick's reaction if he hadn't been so utterly turned on by the sounds that were gushing out of his mouth. The moans and slurps and groans of satisfaction nearly made him come in his pants. It wouldn't have even bothered him; the embarrassment would have been absolutely worth it.

All he could do was sit there and stare at Rick's lips as they devoured bite after bite, the rise and fall of his five o'clock shadow covered jaw, the flicker of his tongue across his lips to capture that last bit of sauce on the corner of his mouth, the feel of those blues eyes on him that he knew were
staring but he damn well couldn't look back at in the moment for fear his own eyes would betray him.

He was fucked.

And he really needed to be.

When he was finally sure that it was safe for him to leave the cover of the table, he took his plate, rinsed it in the sink, and put it in the dishwasher like he had watched Carl do right before him.

Rick told him that he would clean up, once again thanking him for the meal and assuring him that he'd bring him a change of clothes for him to sleep in. Daryl wanted to protest, but Rick wasn't having it. He was their guest and he would sleep just as comfortably as the rest of them.

He went upstairs, a crocked smile on his face, and found his way to the bathroom. The faucet wasn't too difficult to figure out, and before he knew it, he was in the middle of the longest hot shower he had taken in years. He could feel the layers and layers of built up grim and dirt from the past decade sloughing off on its way down the drain.

There was probably a metaphor in there somewhere but he didn't have the mind to care.

He used Rick's shampoo, a knowing smile on his face once he realized he would soon smell just like the man that had shown him more kindness in twelve hours than everyone he'd ever known had gave him his whole life, Merle included. After that sobering thought, there was no way he could pleasure himself in the man's shower. It was too fucking disrespectful.

He would have to wait and hope that the memory of the man's cock-hardening moans would stick with him long enough for him to be able to enjoy them. He wasn't worried, they were seared onto his neurons now. He would never be able to get them out of his head; he was sure of that.

When he finally extricated him from the shower, there was a set of clothes sitting on the counter. He hadn't even heard Rick come in. He pulled on a dark brown t-shirt and dark blue pajama pants that matched Rick's in all but color. He had almost forgotten what laundry detergent smelled like on clean clothes, but he took it all in, savoring every minute detail for when his glass house finally came crashing down.

But that wouldn't be tonight.

They watched a little tv before Carl roped him into playing some video game that he was terrible at because he didn't have any money for such luxuries. Not that he would begrudge Carl that. Before he knew it, the boy was being sent to bed and Rick was retreating to his own room to put Judith down.

There was no point staying up after that. Him and Merle were used to going to bed right before sunrise, but he didn't have anyone to shoot the shit with tonight, and it had been a long ass day, himself being woken up at six a.m. when his damn bunk broke.

He slipped into bed with a groggy 'goodnight' from Carl before getting way too comfortable on a mattress that was way to soft for someone as rough around the edges as him. Even so, he was nearly asleep before his head hit the overly soft pillows.
FYI: you can burn boiled eggs. My grandmother did it...then they exploded!
Rick's Self-Restraint

Chapter Summary

Rick has some alone time in the shower, manages not to burn breakfast, and takes his new roommate shopping all while keeping his hands to himself.

Chapter Notes

Got some NSFW fun in this chapter, just a little bit.

**Rick**

Rick was nervous when they got back to his apartment. It didn't make sense that he was nervous. It wasn't like Daryl was going to look down on his place, not after living at the shelter and the dirty motel. Shit, his place probably looked like the Four Seasons in comparison to that. He just wanted to make sure Daryl would be comfortable.

He didn't feel right making him stay in Carl's room. He was going to offer him his room, but Carl had already shot up the stairs excited that he'd get to have a 'sleepover'. Daryl didn't seem to mind. He was going to offer him his room the next night, even though he had a strong feeling the man wouldn't take it.

Maybe they could share? No, that wouldn't work either; Daryl would think he was some sort of pervert. At least tomorrow would be Sunday night and the kids would be back with Lori. Then, Daryl'd have the room all to himself. Might have to get some sheets that didn't have dinosaurs on them, though. Who knows, maybe Daryl would like the dinosaurs.

When Daryl came back down the stairs, he shoved the baby at him. He trusted the man with Judith, and even if he ran off with her, no skin off his back. No, he really did like her. She was a good baby which was surprising considering her father could be a real prick.

He told Daryl to make himself at home and then went upstairs for a shower. By the time he reached the top step, he felt guilty for leaving the baby with him. What if he didn't know what to do with her? What if she made him uncomfortable? He hoped he wouldn't think he brought him home to be his kids' nanny, manny, whatever they called it these days.

"Hey Carl? Go make sure Judith doesn't give Daryl problems while I take a shower," he said, popping into the kids' room. "I'll make spaghetti when I get out."

"Only if you promise not to burn it," the boy teased.

"I can't promise that. Maybe Daryl can cook. He was talkin' about skinnin' and eatin' rabbit. Wonder what that tastes like."

"Gross!"
"Might not be too bad," Rick said mostly to himself as he slipped into his room.

He shut the door and went to his dresser where he pulled out a pair of clean pj's before making his way into the shared bathroom. He placed his clothes on the counter and got out two clean towels, one for Daryl for later.

After turning on the water, he slipped out of his clothes and eased his way under the lukewarm water. If it hadn't been so cold out, he wouldn't have bothered with the hot water. With the way his day had went, he was definitely in need of a cold one.

His mind kept wandering back to their moment at the diner. He shampooed his hair, eyes closed, fingers massaging his scalp, while Daryl’s hesitant smile raced through his mind. The man had looked damn near perfect sitting across from him, like he belonged. Because he did, right there at the table with him and his kids. His hard, squinty scowl looked sexy as sin, pouty lips softening a bit every time their eyes met.

Daryl's hands were incredible. He found himself staring at them most of the day. After watching them clinging to his burger, that's pretty much all he could think about. How they'd feel on his skin, rough callouses scraping against his as they tickled his neck, fingers raking down his back, digging into his ass to leave tiny little bruises as Daryl marked him as his own.

_Fuck!_ He was hard from the thoughts of Daryl, harder than he'd been in a long time. Water cascaded down him, lather making him slick more so than clean. His hands moved effortlessly over his chest as he imagined they were Daryl's, falling down his body, down his abs, through coarse hair until fingers curled around his aching cock.

He stroked himself, slowly at first, hand starting at the base, soap decreasing the friction while increasing the pleasure, a little flick of his wrist over the head making his knees shaky as he sped up just a bit. The other hand moved across his pecks to pinch a nipple imagining, wanting, needing it to be Daryl's teeth instead that sunk into his flesh.

He wanted those lips on him, on his, on his neck, along the length of his shaft. He wanted those teeth nipping at his ear, grating over his collarbone, leaving love bites on every inch of his skin, reminders of their passion, their connection. He wanted those blue eyes locked onto his as Daryl sucked him off, as he returned the favor because yes, fuck yes, he wanted to return the favor.

He imagined Daryl walking in on him. He'd strip from his clothes and Rick would wash him, not because he was dirty but because he wanted to explore every inch of him. His hands would roam over the rigid muscles of his shoulders, all the way down to his firm ass, along the back of toned thighs before snaking around the front and sliding up to an eagerly waiting, pulsating cock that he'd give a few slow pulls on as he kissed his neck.

Afterwards, Daryl would drop to his knees and give him the best blowjob of his life, cool water running down overheated skin as he took him deep into his throat. It'd be the first one with someone other than Lori, but let's face it, fucking her mouth...well, he'd rather fuck a dead fish. It probably would've been more enjoyable.

He and Lori had their moments of happiness, but those were usually not in the bedroom. He had only ever been with her and had no other point of reference, so to him, mediocre was normal. He just didn't know that at the time; he didn't know that until he met Daryl. The heat in those blue eyes, the spark that ran through him when their bodies touch, if only for a millisecond, told him as much, that they would be Earth-shatteringly brilliant together.

Why Shane would even bother with Lori was beyond him. Guess you can't help who you fall in
love with. _Shit....is this what love really feels like?_ He loved Lori, he did, thought he did, but after Carl was born, it felt more like an obligation, a job he had to do rather than something natural. Maybe it always felt that way. And as with most every other aspect of their relationship, he had no other point of reference.

This was different than Lori. This was different than anything he ever felt or even heard about before. This was a deep feeling of need that radiated out from his bones, an itch that could not go unscratched, a part of him that he’d been missing all his life even though he didn't know it, deep seeded want that no one else would ever be able to make him feel. He knew that to be true; as true as the sun rising in the east, as the Earth being the third hunk of rock from the sun, as his heart beating in his chest.

_Christ, you have it bad, Grimes!_

He wanted that man with every fiber of his being. Not just for the sex, even though that was at the forefront of his mind as his fingers pumped his length. He wanted to be inside him, under him, over him, with him. He wanted to fucking scream his name, but he didn't, couldn't, not yet, not now. So, he bit his lip, choked down the moans of passion, of euphoria, as his strokes intensified, as his body quivered with his release, as elation overcame him. As _he_ came.

He wanted to fuck a man. No, he wanted to fuck _Daryl_ wanted to love him too, already did. Daryl Fucking Dixon! Wasn't that something! He'd hold him tight after and never let him go.

He wanted Daryl.

The man was downstairs right now with his kids. He was going to be sleeping twenty feet away tonight. He was going to be working in his shop on Monday. He was his employee—his roommate?—and maybe someday, his friend. His lover?

He'd known the guy a week, not even a week, more like a day. Today. Twelve perfect hours. But that was all it took to change him, to confuse him only to illuminate, reawaken, bring to life a part of him he didn't even know existed. Daryl did all that, and he probably had no idea.

He didn't want a fling or to ‘experiment’. That wasn't Rick, that's not what he wanted. Even when he was younger, he wanted something meaningful, something substantial. He wanted someone he could lean on and trust which, since Lori and Shane, didn't seem possible anymore.

But then he met Daryl. He didn't know why he trusted the man or why he was so drawn to a complete stranger. It was like an instinct that he knew he should follow, like the invisible migratory routes animals take that lead them home, that would lead him home.

It didn't matter what their genders were. That wasn't as important as what was on the inside. It might be weird and different and maybe even awkward sometimes, but he could deal with that. Because there was something about Daryl, something he couldn't put his finger on or articulate, that he was lured to, like a sailor to a siren song.

He prayed to whatever gods were out there, would hear him, that Daryl felt it too.

It was like they were magnets. Daryl had a pull on him, and no matter how hard he tried to resist, he was only getting closer. The more he struggled to get away, the stronger the grip became. And it wasn't nearly as scary as it seemed eleven hours ago.

He had connections with him, through his brother, through Carol, through Phillip, invisible strings weaving their lives together before they even met. They kept running into each other. Sure, it was a
small town and maybe he was reading into things way too much, but it just felt right.

Like it was fate.

Rick reluctantly dragged himself out of the shower. He put on his clothes and opened the door to the bathroom. Instantly, he was smacked in the face with a heavenly aroma. He knew immediately what that meant: *Daryl can cook!* His mouth was watering before he left the bathroom. He almost couldn't wait to take him to the grocery story.

His stomach was growling when he hit the stairs which he flew down like lightning. He tried to suppress the goofy smile from his excitement and his post-orgasmic bliss, but he walked into the kitchen and saw all three of them sitting at the table chowing down and he just couldn't help himself. His apartment finally felt like home.

He probably sounded like a damn fool while he ate, grunting like an animal, but he hoped Daryl would take it as a compliment. He couldn't exactly read his face but he knew he wasn't offended. Those lips were twisted up into an odd smirk, of satisfaction maybe, as he shoveled food into his mouth. It was delicious; the best thing he ever ate...so far.

He didn't say a word after he sat down. He couldn't; he was too busy scarfing down his food, flavors awakening tastebuds he never knew he had. Carl got up first to put away his plate before heading to the couch to watch tv. Daryl followed his lead and did the same.

"I put a towel on the counter for ya. I'll get ya some clothes after I finish with the dishes," Rick said between bites.

"Ya ain't gotta do that," Daryl protested.

"Ya can't sleep in that and we're similar sizes. It's the least I could do after eating the best meal I ever had. Ya deserve a long shower. Now, go on!" he insisted.

Daryl shook his head with a soft scowl that didn't quite reach his eyes but did what he was told.

Rick cleaned Judith up and set her with Carl before running upstairs to get Daryl a change of clothes. He didn't want to intrude in case he was participating in 'extracurricular actives'. Although, he kind of did. But for the sake of not being labeled as the town perv, he only opened the door enough to reach his arm in and place the clothes on the counter.

By the time he started tackling the pans, Daryl naked in the shower was all he could picture. What if he was up there right now jacking off to him? The thought was making him hard again. God, he wanted to be up there too!

He concentrated on the dishes that were done soon enough and made his way into the living room to watch tv with Carl and Judith.

Daryl eventually came back downstairs dressed in his clothes. He was in pajamas but somehow he managed to take Rick's breath away. He swallowed thickly as Daryl took a seat at the other end of the couch, one ankle crossed over the other knee and an arm stretched along the back. Rick wanted to reach out and intertwine their fingers, but he resisted.

*Self-restraint,* he told himself.

A little while later, he told Daryl he could stay up if he wanted but that the kids needed to get to bed. After shooing Carl up to his room, he went into his own. Judith was already asleep in his arms as he placed her in her crib. He climbed into bed and laid there in the dark smiling to himself until
he fell asleep.

And just like he had for the past several nights, he dreamed of Daryl's eyes.

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The next morning, Rick made his famous Sunday breakfast. Lori burned pancakes on Saturday's but Rick managed to make a decent breakfast of homemade potato hash, eggs, and bacon the day after. He was still grinning like an idiot from the dream he had as he scrambled the eggs.

"I thought you couldn't cook," Daryl said, practically sneaking up behind him.

"This is the only thing I can, so I wouldn't get used ta it. If we're gonna eat things that aren't burnt, you'll have ta do the cooking....but only if ya wanna. I'm happy with sandwiches. Can't burn them unless they're grilled cheese."

"We?"

"Yeah, we. I mean, the bed's yours for as long as ya want it." Unless ya wanna share mine.....

"I appreciate that.....Where'd ya learn this," Daryl said, motioning to the food. "Don't smell burnt yet."

Rick shot him a fake frown that morphed into a smile. "My mama taught me. Said I should know how ta cook one good meal if I wanted ta find a good woman. Ha! Funny right?"

Daryl could only chuckled.

"Since your gonna be stayin' here, we should talk about roommate stuff," Rick said.

"What kinda stuff?"

"If you're gonna bring girls home—"

"I ain't."

"Okay, well if ya are—"

"I won't."

Daryl sounded pretty adamant about that. Maybe he liked guys? Or that could've been Rick's wishful thinking. He wanted to ask, but thought twice about it. If he was wrong, he didn't want to risk running him off or offending him.

"Alright! I was just gonna say try not ta on the weekends when the kids are here. When Carl gets home, they make him tell 'em everythin' that happened. Which brings me ta another point....they might try ta bring ya into our mess. I hope it doesn't come ta that, but I can't put anything passed Shane these days. Especially if he realizes the little one's his."

"I can handle myself."

"With a brother like Merle, I don't doubt that," Rick smirked at him. "Speakin' of, that should probably apply ta him too. I don't mind the guy, but Lori's gonna freak if she finds out he has a record."

"Ya don't have ta worry 'bout that."
"Okay...next point. We're gonna go shoppin' later ta get ya some new clothes, and before ya say ya don't need my charity, I plan on takin' it outta your paycheck till it's paid off. Then, we'll go to the grocery store 'cause we're gonna need more food and I don't know what ya like. Now, I don't want ya ta feel obligated to cook or clean for me or nothin', just pick up yourself."

"What about rent and stuff?" Daryl asked skeptically.

"We'll worry 'bout that later once ya get settled," Rick assured him.

"Why are ya bein' so damn nice ta me?" he asked, pitifully ashamed, averting Rick's gaze as he looked down at the floor.

Rick was quiet for a moment as he contemplated what to say. Daryl looked like a wounded puppy, and it made him feel like he was the one who kicked him. It was obvious that he wasn't used to being cared for, liked, or probably even tolerated. Rick was just going to have to fix that.

"I told ya already, I kinda like ya....I don't know, I just feel like I know ya or somethin'. And I know your a good man. Ya just got dealt a shitty hand is all."

Daryl huffed.

"I'm well aware of how stupid that sounded but it's the truth."

"Ya don't even know me," Daryl insisted.

"Yeah, but I wanna," Rick told him, placing his hand gently on the other man's shoulder. Daryl's muscles tensed immediately under his hand and he knew he was going to have to fix that too.

Daryl finally looked at him again—through a curtain of those gorgeous lashes of his—his muscles going slack, a reluctant grin on his lips that Rick had to resist kissing.

Rick gave him a warm smile with an accompanying nod. "Now, go grab the ketchup while I wake the kids."

"Ketchup?"

"For the eggs."

"Ketchup on eggs? And you were givin' me shit about likin' rabbit?"

Rick laughed at that as he left the kitchen.

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After breakfast, they all got dressed and piled into Rick's truck heading for the center of town. Daryl tried to talk him out of the whole clothes shopping thing, but Rick insisted. He said that Daryl was now an employee and he was going to be representing his company. They didn't have to be anything fancy, just professional.

He really hoped he hadn't insulted the man or made him feel bad about not owning decent clothes. He just couldn't let him walk around in tattered rags. Not when he was in the position to do something about it.

"It's really not a big deal, Daryl. I did the same thing for Carol when she started working for me," Rick explained.
"Yeah?" Daryl asked in near disbelief.

"I told ya that I take care a my employees. Your one of those, so get used to it. Can't have ya gettin' poached up by Phillip now, can I?"

"Never gonna happen."

"I know....Truth is, I've been lookin' for someone ta help out around the shop for awhile now. After the whole Lori thing, Shane quit. He said he'd stay on till I found a replacement, but I couldn't have that."

"Ya couldn't find anyone else? I find that hard ta believe. Lots a people need jobs," Daryl said.

"I held some interviews. Guess I just couldn't find anyone who fit. Didn't know what I was lookin' for, just that I'd know it when I saw it."

"And ya think that's me?"

"Don't think, know," Rick stated matter-of-factly.

"I can't figure ya out Rick Grimes," Daryl said, almost hostile. "Can't help but wait for the catch."

"Ain't nothin' ta figure out, ain't no catch. Just lost a friend is all, and needed a new one. Who's ta say that shouldn't be you?"

"Why? We ain't got nothin' in common."

"How do ya know that? We just met, might have lots in common. And I was serious about that huntin' stuff. I wanna do that sometime," Rick said.

Daryl huffed.

"We're like magnets, you and me. Even though we may be opposites, we keep gettin' pulled together, pushed together. It's as simple as that. Ya can't deny it, can't fight it, it's just the way it is. That's just the way I feel about ya, 'bout us."

As soon as the words left Rick's mouth, he regretted them. They sounded silly and desperate, like he was trying too hard to justify whatever it was that was budding between them, if it was anything at all. He didn't want Daryl taking them the wrong way if the feeling wasn't reciprocated.

He decided to chance a glance his way, hoping that it made a little bit of sense to Daryl, that he understood what he was trying to say—even if he took it on a more cerebral, platonic level—and that maybe, under the surface somewhere, he felt the same. He would take what he could get at this point, no need to push too hard, too fast.

The next red light they stopped at, he looked over. Daryl was already staring right at him, blue eyes nearly unreadable, but he was trying and failing to hold in a quirky smile. Rick didn't bother hiding his, his heart practically seizing in his chest before thumping so hard he thought it was going to fall out.

He didn't notice the light turn green, only tearing his eyes away from Daryl's when a honk behind him forced him to.

He chuckled to himself and continued their drive to the shops. Rick didn't like shopping, but it needed to be done. He planned on picking up some things for himself while they were out. He also
planned on letting Daryl pick out whatever he wanted. He wanted him to be comfortable in whatever he decided on.

"I don't know what I'm lookin' for," Daryl confessed after they walked into one of the shops.

"Something you're comfortable working in. Maybe something to lounge around the house in. Can't image you'd wanna sleep in my pj's every night. Not that I mind," Rick smirked.

"If you're gonna be working in them, I'd go with cargo pants," Carl helpfully added. "Maybe some t-shirts and flannels. That's what dad works in."

The first twenty minutes were a little awkward. Daryl seemed kind of lost so Rick finally picked out some things for him to try on. He grabbed himself some shirts and waited while the younger man tried everything on.

When Daryl came out of the changing room, Rick's heart stopped again. He looked so sexy in a light brown, checkered button down shirt and chocolate brown cargo pants. Rick looked him up and down, tempted to send Judith and Carl to the food court so he could push him back inside the stall he came out of and ravish him.

He resisted.

He motioned for him to spin around, mostly to check out his ass, then smiled and nodded approvingly. Daryl gave him an unsure, questioning look and he nodded again, a bit more emphatically. Daryl smiled shyly before retreating back inside.

After picking out a few more outfits and something comfortable to sleep in, they completed their purchase and went to the food court for lunch. Rick had promised Carl some pizza for being patient. Since they were out, they went to the grocery store to pick up food for the week before heading back home.

The afternoon was quiet, Judith took a long nap while Carl and Daryl played his video game again. Rick had retreated to the kitchen to look over some design books in preparation for a job they had coming up. Before he knew it, it was five o'clock and time to take the kids back to Lori's.

The drive felt longer than usual. Rick kept thinking about what Carl would tell Shane and Lori about Daryl, what the hell was going to happen now that he would have Daryl alone in the house without the kids as buffers, and what he was doing there alone while he was out.

He didn't say much to Lori, just the basics before kissing the kids goodbye and rushing out the door. He drove back as fast as he could, the anticipation approaching unbearable. When he walked in the door, the smell from the kitchen was even better than the night before.

He walked in to find Daryl stirring a pot on the stove, a timer counting down next to him, and a plate of salad sitting on the table in front of his chair. If Daryl kept this up, he'd never let him go. All he wanted to do was walk up behind him, wrap his arms around his waist, and place gentle kisses on the back of his neck. He wouldn't even tease him for burning the food while they made love on the kitchen floor. After all, it would have been his fault.

But he resisted. Goddamn that self-restraint.
Daryl resists temptation and meets his new coworkers.

**Daryl***

Rick had definitely been holding out on him about breakfast. Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't had bacon in months, it was too expensive these days, but his mouth started watering before he even woke up. The smell of sizzling cured meat invaded his dreams.

He got out of bed quietly so as not to wake Carl and slinked down the stairs. He walked towards the kitchen, but before he could break the threshold, he was stopped dead in his tracks. Rick looked absolutely stunning standing over the stove, curls sticking out every which way from a hard night's sleep, those pants hugging his hips in just the right way, the hard lines of his shoulder blades jetting out of his painted on shirt.

He wanted to take it all in, memorize it, the moment, the way Rick looked, like his own person goddamned guardian angel. Because he was certain that after the perfect day he had yesterday that his luck couldn't last much longer. He wanted to savor it because he truly believed that this was a one-time thing, and the thought broke his heart.

He let out a soft sigh and stepped inside. Rick didn't hear him coming up behind him, his inner hunter making sure of that, and the man almost jumped out of his socks when he spoke. He wanted to laugh and tease him about it, but a quick look at the bacon had him biting his tongue so he wouldn't get kicked out before he got a piece.

He was almost struck speechless when Rick said he'd have to do the cooking for both of them. He didn't mind it one bit, but it implied that he'd be staying longer than one night, and he just couldn't get his hopes up. When Rick made it clear that he was welcome, he started jumping up and down on the inside.

But years of self-doubt and physical and emotional abuse squashed his excitement almost immediately. Rick kept talking though, about 'roommate' stuff, and a little more hope started to bloom within him. He wasn't sure what 'roommate' stuff meant. He'd only lived with his father and Merle, and they had been anything but roommates.

He had to suppress a laugh when Rick mentioned him bringing girls home. If he only knew....what would he say? Would he kick him out, say he didn't want someone like him around his kids, that he was a freak and a deviant? He wanted to tell him right there that he was gay, but he couldn't get the words out. He didn't think Rick would look down on him for it, he almost trusted the guy, but he just couldn't do it. Not yet.

An irrational fear hit him after Shane and Lori were mentioned. The thought of them using Carl to spy on Rick made him furious. The fact that they were pawning Judith off on him made him livid. It was probably for the child-support, but he wasn't going to let them get away with that. He'd fix it for him somehow, it was the least he could do.
He knew Shane had been Rick's partner when he was a cop. After Rick gave him and Merle a ride to the motel, Merle had told him what he remembered of the guy. With that and what Rick had told him, he hated the man. He wasn't exactly the spiteful type, not to someone he had never met, but the idea of him hurting Rick like he did made him angry.

He'd never met Lori either, but he knew he wouldn't like her. That was probably due to jealousy and his desire to protect Rick from anymore of her bullshit. He knew Rick would kick him out if she told him to. He'd have to choose Carl over him if she pushed hard enough. Those were just the facts.

He'd have to face that when it came. Until then, he was going to be Rick Grimes' roommate and his employee. They were going to go shopping for clothes and groceries which seemed foreign to him, but Rick had insisted and he wanted to appease him. Honestly, he was in need of a few clothes.

Rick didn't even make him feel bad about it, just said he needed him to look professional. He understood that, he could do that for him, for his boss, for his roommate; he could look normal. He could feel normal too, like a man who had a job and a place to live with actual food in the fridge. And a friend like Rick who cared.

"Didn't know what I was lookin' for, just that I'd know it when I saw it. " Rick had said that. The words kept rattling around in his head. He knew the man hadn't meant it in the same way that he took it—like it was something deep and meaningful and not about the job—but that's exactly how he felt about Rick. In fact, he didn't even know he was looking when he found Rick. Or when Rick found him.

How could he want someone so completely that didn't want him?

Fuck! He was being such a girl about it, about everything. Rick didn't mean anything by it, didn't mean anything when he said, "I kinda like ya," even though it nearly stopped his heart from beating in his chest.

He'd never been liked before was all. Not even as a friend. In fact, he didn't have friends. Merle had friends—more like enablers—he just tagged along behind him. Well, maybe Carol was a friend, the closest thing he had to one at least. And they were going to be working together. He was looking forward to that.

Then Rick called them magnets....

What the hell was that supposed to mean?!

He didn't care.....he cared a little....he cared a lot.

They had another moment in the truck. It was like the one in the diner only better, staring into each other's soul was what it felt like. He didn't want to look away, he wanted to stay in that moment forever, wrapped up together like two peas in a pod, but just like the first, someone had to go and ruin it. Then, all of a sudden, Rick's hand was too close to his. He wanted to reach for it, to take it and meld their fingers together never to be parted.

Fuck, he wanted to hold Rick's hand! Like a damn girl! Fuck!

Shopping for clothes was boring as hell. He didn't know what he was doing. Rick helped him out, though, grabbed some things for him. Rick always looked good so he trusted his judgement, his 'style'. When he came out of the changing room and Rick looked him over, he wanted to melt.

He did melt, into a big puddle of goo right there. He couldn't help it but Rick's approving smile
melted him, all bright and white hot like the sun melting a snowman. What he would have done for Rick to have pushed him back inside the stall and fucked him up against the mirror. God, that would've been so fucking hot! He had to make a quick retreat before he stained his new pants before they were paid for. And before Rick noticed the raging hard-on that he spent ten minutes in the changing room willing to subside.

Grocery shopping was, unsurprisingly, his favorite part of the day. Rick gave him free reign and told him to get what he liked and what he wanted to cook, what he needed. Carl pushed the buggy with Judith in the seat and followed him as he went along throwing stuff into the back.

"What do ya like, Rick?" Daryl asked him.

"I was serious Daryl, ya don't have ta cook for me. I'll just grab me some bread and lunch meat and I'm set. Maybe some pb&j for dinner, cereal for breakfast. I usually buy the crew lunch during the week," Rick explained.

"We ain't gonna live on sandwiches," he replied. He really liked saying the 'we' part.

"If your gonna insist on cooking, then I'll make sure ta do the dishes. And as far as food goes, I'll eat anything ya put in front of me. I ain't picky. Anything is better than burnt boiled eggs. Might even be willin' ta try that rabbit you've been ravin' about," he smirked.

Daryl gave a noncommittal grunt in case he was joking. He hoped he wasn't because he'd love to feed Rick rabbit and squirrel and venison and wild strawberries with whipped cream. But berries weren't in season in January. Sadly.

Judith had gotten fussy halfway through Daryl's mental grocery list. Rick had to get her out and hold her for awhile. Apparently, it was passed her nap time. The two had gone ahead of him down the next aisle while him and Carl puttered around the spices. Rick didn't have anything but salt and pepper at the house so he had to pick up the basics: garlic, oregano, cumin, things like that.

When they turned down the aisle Rick was in, his breath caught in his throat for the hundredth time that day. The man was studying something on a shelf intently, lightly bouncing a limp Judith in his arms, her baby legs dangling down as was one of her arms. He looked so damn perfect like that, like an angel, and Daryl could have sworn he saw his wings.

Daryl wanted to walk up behind him, wrap his arms around his waist, and place gentle kisses all over the back of his neck.

Either that or give the patrons a good show right there in aisle twelve. Honestly, he didn't know which one he wanted more.

When the shopping was done, they headed home. He and Carl brought in the groceries while Rick put Judith in her crib. Carl roped him into playing his video game again, he still sucked but Carl didn't rub it in his face that much. He didn't notice when Rick snuck into the kitchen to do some work, but he decided to take advantage of it.

"Your daddy always this nice?" he asked Carl when he realized Rick was gone.

"Nah, I think he likes you," he answered half distracted by the video game.

"Oh."

Hope.
"I mean, he's nice and stuff to people. Guess he's just lonely."

"Yeah, that's probably it."

_Doubt._

"Maybe not lonely...just, he just needs a friend and you need a friend, so you two should be friends."

"Never had one of those before."

"Really? It's a good thing you met my dad then 'cause he's a good one. Shane always says that. Even after....well, you know."

"You're okay with me stayin' in your room?"

"Yeah sure.....It's your room now, too."

"I appreciate ya sharing with a bum like me."

"You're not a bum," Carl chuckled.

"Not anymore! Thanks ta ya'll," he said, laughing himself.

There were a few minutes of quiet before Carl spoke again, "Hey Daryl?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"I'll be your friend, too."

"Thanks, but I don't think your momma's gonna like that. Might not even like me stayin' here when she finds out who my family is."

Carl shrugged. "Why not?"

"They ain't the best kinda role models, done some bad stuff. But I always tried ta stay outta it as much as I could. Still, might not like who I am."

"You seem alright to me...and to my dad. He's been smiling a lot since he met you. He hasn't smiled much lately...not since the accident. Maybe even before...."

That comment made him warm and fuzzy inside. He wasn't used to smiling so much either. In fact, his face was starting to hurt from all the smiling he was doing, unfamiliar muscle usage. But he wasn't going to complain, and he didn't want it to stop, didn't want Rick to stop either.

"How long do ya think he'll let me stay here?" Daryl asked.

"Hey Carl, go get your stuff. It's time ta go," Rick interrupted.

Carl let out a moan of protest at having to stop his game. He reluctantly saved it and sluggishly put away the controllers before heading up the stairs to get his things.

"I'll probably be gone for about thirty minutes. Don't rob me or nothin'," Rick teased.

"I ain't gonna do that!" Daryl snapped defensively.

"It was a joke," Rick explained, holding his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, never claimed to be a
"Oh," Daryl said uncomfortably, chastising himself for barking at Rick like that.

"You can relax, Daryl. I ain't gonna kick ya out, if that's what you're worried about. Not unless ya start cookin' crystal in my kitchen. Yes, that was a joke, too."

He watched Rick walk over to the small table by the door to grab his keys. When he turned back to him, he mumbled, "I ain't worried...." It was a complete lie, he absolutely was.

"Yeah ya are," Rick said calmly. He walked over to the coffee table and sat down in front of him. "I'm serious, Daryl, I want ya here and not just because ya wanna cook for me. It gets kinda boring here without the kids around. Never lived alone before, not sure I wanna start. I've been thinkin' about getting a roommate. Almost asked Glenn, you'll meet him tomorrow, but I'm not sure I could take Maggie talk at work and at home," he laughed, soft and raspy.

Daryl could listen to that sound forever.

He gave a shallow nod as Rick leaned closer, elbows on his knees. He had to lean back some because he knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from attacking those luscious lips of his if he stayed so close to them. A short lunge would've been all it took to ruin everything.

"Look, I don't know what all ya been through, but ya don't have ta worry 'bout me runnin' ya off. I don't know how many times ya need me ta tell ya that, but I'll do it for as many as it takes. I don't scare easily, I was a cop remember? I've seen shit, I can read people. I know when their lyin', when their scared, when their good people who just need someone ta give a damn. And I'm givin' a damn, so you're just gonna have ta get used ta that!"

Daryl stared blankly at him for a minute processing what he had said. No one had ever given a damn about him before. He searched Rick's sky colored eyes for any trace of malice but found none. "Ya really are stubborn, Grimes," he finally smirked.

"Only when I'm talkin' ta a brick wall," Rick smirked back. "Alright, well I gotta take the kids back. Don't rob me while I'm gone, Dixon," he tried again. He stood up and walked toward the stairs on his way to get Judith.

"Don't give me any ideas," he hollered after Rick when he was halfway up, unaware of the playful grin he had on his own face. His cheeks turned crimson when he got one back.

He wasn't used to playful banter, but he liked it. With Rick. It made him wonder what flirting felt like. Early thirties and he should've know by now. Maybe Rick could teach him. He could be his wingman, pick up some pointers. He'd be terrible at it, though, running all the girls off. Rick wasn't ready for that anyway, still wearing his wedding ring.

After Rick left, he went straight to the kitchen to make dinner. He really loved to cooked, and if he could impress Rick the way he did the first time, then he would love it even more. It didn't seem like the other man was gone all that long. Before he knew it, he was walking back through the door.

Dinner was quiet. Rick made highly inappropriate noises again that Daryl couldn't get enough of. They talked shop while Rick did the dishes. He told him about things that were going on at work, what he'd need help with, what Daryl could do. He even asked what Daryl didn't like to do.

They went to the laundry room after dinner so that he could wash his new clothes. The conversation wasn't all that engaging. Daryl was still worried he'd say the wrong thing and his
crush didn't help. He was too distracted by Rick's eyes to think straight, probably because he was getting used to looking into them without having to fear a punch to the face.

He had trouble sleeping that night. He was a bundle of nervous excitement. Working with Carol was going to be a huge boost to his confidence. She was always so supportive of him. Rick had already been impressed by his work, so he wasn't worried about that.

But no matter how comfortable he got with Rick, no matter what he said or how adamant he was about wanting to help and wanting Daryl to stay with him, he still had this nagging in the back of his head that said he was going to screw it up, screw everything up, that he wasn't worthy of such gratitude or kindness.

The worst part was that it sounded just like his daddy. An endless antagonization of he's character, who he was, what he was, what he'd never be. An endless loop of, 'You're gonna fuck it up', 'No one could ever love a fag like you', 'You're a pathetic piece of shit', 'You're not good enough for him or anyone and you never will be'.

Rick had said he could stay for as long as he liked, but what if he did something that crossed the line? What if his lust ran away from him and he ended up kissing him or something? What if he couldn't resist the next time he had the urge to hold Rick's hand? What would the man do when he found out the truth? That he was gay?

He knew it was going to fall apart. He just knew it. Happy endings were not meant for Dixon's. It was as simple as that.

He was torn between wanting to run away, to get away from Rick as quickly as possible—the longer he spent with him, the worse it was going to be in the end—and staying with the only person who ever gave a damn about him. Those were Rick's words not his.

He didn't know what to do. He'd never been in a situation like this before. He'd never felt this way about someone before, never—fuck it—he never loved anyone before. He was in love with Rick Fucking Grimes, but he didn't want to be. He didn't want to love him just because he bought him things and took care of him, because his eyes were brighter than the Georgia sky, because he was kind.

Why'd he have to buy him things? Why couldn't he have just left him alone? Kept driving? Why were his eyes so fucking blue? Why was his heart so big? Why did his kid like him so much? Why did Rick like him so much?

The good news was that Rick didn't, not the way that counted, because he was straight. And because of that, all his stupid pathetic musings were for naught. He'd get over Rick soon, and everything would be fine. They would be great friends.

He let out a sigh of defeat and started to drift off to sleep. Right when he was on the edge of consciousness, one thought popped into his mind:

*What the hell is up with all those lingering looks?*

Because even if his brain wouldn't let him see it, somewhere deep down he knew that Rick looked at him like nothing else mattered. And that was just too much for his broken soul to hope for.

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The next morning, Daryl decided to go with the outfit that he showed Rick at the store. He liked the color brown, and maybe Rick did too because his eyes lit up when he came down the stairs. He
shook any possible misinterpretations of that right off as they went to the kitchen for a bowl of sugary cereal before heading to work.

Carol was the first to greet them when they got there. "Daryl? What are you doing here?" she asked with surprise as she got up from her desk to hug him.

"Rick gave me a job, said he liked my work at the shelter," he answered shyly.

"I'm not surprised about that. You're really good with your hands. Rick, why didn't ya tell me we had a new hire coming in this morning?" she teased.

"I gotta have some secrets," Rick teased back. "I take it you can show him the ropes and things? I have a meeting with a new client in about an hour or so. And you're the one who knows where all the paperwork and stuff is."

"I can do that."

"Tell Glenn I want to speak to him when he gets—"

They all turned when the door opened.

"Sorry, I'm late," Glenn said. He took off his scarf as he studied Daryl, "Who's this?"

"This is Daryl Dixon. He's our new guy. Daryl, this is Glenn Rhee."

"Nice ta meet ya," Daryl replied.

"You too, Daryl. Thank god, Rick! We needed someone else weeks ago," Glenn chided.

"I told ya I had ta find the right person. He's it," Rick said motioning to Daryl. "He's good, too. I'm sure ya can find him somethin' ta do for now. When I get back from my meetin', we'll talk about how things are gonna be divided up."

Rick went into his small office in the back and left Daryl in Carol's hands. She had already gotten a stack of papers ready for him to fill out by the time he had taken a seat by her desk. She handed him the papers and a pen and let him get to work on them.

"Full-time, right?" she asked.

He only shrugged, biting at his thumb nervously.

Carol smiled at him kindly and picked up the phone. She punched in a few numbers and called Rick through the phone system. "Hey Rick, he's full-time, right?.....Uh huh....yeah, okay." She laughed before hanging up the phone. "He said whatever you want. I imagine that's full-time and benefits and such?"

"Yeah, sure...I guess." Daryl was happy with whatever Rick was willing to give him, but he couldn't deny that the idea of a full-time job was exhilarating after barely scraping by for so long.

He continued filling out the paperwork until he got to the part about the address. Carol must have noticed his hesitation because she gave him a worried look. "What is it?" she asked sympathetically.

"I don't know the address."

"To the shelter?"
"Nah...I, uh, I guess I'm stayin' with Rick for now," his tone was almost questioning.

"Is that right? How did I miss that too?" She took a sip of her coffee, deep in thought.

"Just kinda happened," he shrugged.

"Well, you're in good hands with him. He's the best boss and he really is a good friend," she assured him. "I can tell you that first hand."

"Too good," Daryl corrected, shifting uncomfortably. Guess he wasn't so special after all. Was he jealous?

"No such thing. And don't you go questioning his intentions. He really is a nice guy who likes to help people. He helped me, still helps. And I can assure you, there are no ulterior motives there. I thought there were at first too, but there aren't. The world needs a few more of him in it."

He knew she was right; Rick was one of a kind. It was him that wasn't. He was just another Dixon, just another good deed, a fucking damsel in distress. "His boy ain't bad," he said, changing the subject.

"Carl's a good kid. Him and Sophia get along great. Just try to steer clear of Lori and Shane." Her eyes went a little dark when she said their names, just like Rick's did, probably just like his did.

"Ya don't like 'em either?" he asked.

"You've met 'em?"

"Don't need ta have met 'em ta know I don't."

"Consider yourself lucky," she snickered.

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse," Rick snickered as he came up beside them. "Okay, I'm leavin'. Carol, you're in charge. Daryl, don't let her boss ya around too much," he smirked, bringing a hand down to squeeze his shoulder. Daryl cursed himself for hours for flinching at that. "Sorry," Rick said apologetically, pulling his hand back immediately.

"'S okay, just slept on it wrong is all. Not used ta soft beds," he lied. He sure as hell didn't want to scare Rick off from touching him.

"You could sleep in mine," Rick said before his big blue eyes got even bigger. "I, uh, I mean we could switch, not that we'd sleep there together 'cause that might be weird. Not that you and me sleepin' in the same bed'd be weird. 'Cause why, uh, would it be? It wouldn't, so we could, uh, ya know, sleep together...in my bed I mean, 'cause it's big. And it's hard. Shit! Firm! And, uh, lumpy and ya might prefer it ta the, ya know, the soft bunk, is what I'm sayin'! Goddamn, I need some fuckin' coffee," he muttered, avoiding Daryl's eyes. He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "I, uh, should be back by lunch. If not, go ahead and order my usual," he said to Carol, clearly embarrassed by his longwinded offer is his red ears were anything to go by.

"Sure thing, Rick. Good luck!" Carol waved as he turned and quickly started to walk away.

"Oh hey Rick, uh, what's our address?" Daryl called after him softly, not sure what to make of Rick's little rant. The man just needed some fucking coffee. He was really trying not to read into anything passed that, but it was the first time he heard Rick sound anything but poised. And what
had him flustered was him talking about them sleeping together....in the same bed....just sleeping....because he couldn't possible have been talking about anything else. Dixon's were just not that lucky.

Rick gave a nervous chuckled, took the pen from his hand, and jotted it down on the paperwork. Daryl nearly squealed when their fingers brushed against each other's. The older man was so close he could feel the heat escaping his orbit, smell his cheap cologne, their shampoo. Rick handed the pen back to him, patted him on the back, and headed for the door. At least he didn't flinch that time. In fact, he kind of melted into Rick's hand like putty, rejoicing inwardly because he hadn't been afraid to touch him again.

"You're gonna like it here," Carol smirked, flashing him a knowing smile before letting him get back to the paperwork. There was an unidentifiable glint in her eye that he couldn't figure out. Well, he probably would've if his mind hadn't been elsewhere.

Mainly, on the perfect ass that he was too busy watching walk out the door.
**Rick's Bed**

Chapter Summary

Rick fights very hard to keep Daryl from distracting him during his first two weeks on the job and in his home. Rick and his employees, plus Merle, celebrate Daryl's first paycheck.

**Rick**

When Rick left for the meeting, he drove half a block to the nearest gas station. After calmly setting the break, he started to laugh. But it wasn't a laugh full of mirth, it was one full of frustration and groans that trailed off into a yell as his head fell to the steering wheel. He felt like such an idiot for putting his foot into his mouth so horrendously.

"Really? Really? 'We can sleep together'? Did ya really have ta say 'It's hard'? Way ta be smooth ya damn fool!" he berated to himself.

He took several deep breaths and lifted his head only to see two patrons pumping gas and staring right at him like he was the lunatic that he was. He quickly released the brake and peeled out of the parking lot, not needing to add any more bodies to the 'Rick Grimes is a crazy bastard' club.

He truly hoped that Daryl wouldn't freak out at the idea of them sharing a bed because, regardless of his backtracking, that was exactly what he was suggesting. He wasn't able to make eye contact with him so he couldn't gage his reaction, and Carol just stood by watching him sink with a goofy smirk on her face. He didn't dare look at Glenn.

He also felt guilty for leaving Daryl like that. What if he decided not to stay after his ramblings on sleeping arrangements? That was roommate talk and he needed to keep that separate in the future. He knew Carol would take care of him—convince him not to file a sexual harassment suit maybe?—but he couldn't help but feel bad about not showing him the ropes himself. He was the boss, that was his job, his responsibility.

He spent most of the meeting obviously distracted. He hoped Daryl was settling in well. He wanted to call but didn't want to hover or make him feel like he didn't trust him. The meeting went quicker than he anticipated, and before he knew it, he was back in the office.

Daryl had just started working on a shelving unit that was being commissioned, Glenn was in the back getting frustrated with a desk that he had been working on for the past few days, Carol was filing Daryl's paperwork, and the office cat was laying lazily on her desk.

They all looked up when Rick came through the door. His attention immediately went to Daryl. The man looked him right in the eye and gave a little nod which he took as a good sign.

"How'd it go?" Carol asked, blue eyes bright and shiny.

"Not too bad. It's just one room they want remodeled right now. It shouldn't be too big of a job. They wanna move some things around though, so I'll need ta call Morgan and probably T-Dog," he replied.
"Why ya call the cat T-Dog and why ya gonna take him on a job?" Daryl asked confused, walking over to the fur ball.

"The cat's named after my friend T-Dog. He's the floor guy. He gave me the cat and I'm not good with names...obviously," he replied, relieved that Daryl was still talking to him. Hopefully no one would ever mention his little speech.

"He's a cat, Rick. Ya really think he likes being called a dog?" he asked teasingly, scratching the orange tabby right behind the ears.

"I think he kinda likes it. Makes him sound tough. You're not allergic are ya? Didn't even think about that," he asked with concern. He liked the cat but he'd send him home with Carol in a heartbeat if it caused Daryl any problems.

"Nah, I'm good....Poor thing," he cooed, stroking T-Dog's back as he shot a fake scowl at Rick.

"He likes it, Daryl," Rick assured him before heading back to his office, thankful that his huge grin was concealed from them all. Playful Daryl did weird things to his insides. And his outsides if he was being honest.

Rick had been in his office working on design plans for forty-five minutes before Carol came back to take his lunch order. He had already told her that he wanted his Monday usual, so he was a bit confused as to why she had walked back. She stood there silently for a minute or two before Rick finally acknowledged her.

"What?" he asked nervously.

"Just wanted to tell you how he's doing," she said, grinning from ear to ear like a proud mother. Or someone who knew something he didn't.

"And how is that?"

"He's a good fit. You did good, Rick."

"Kinda just fell into my lap," he smirked, he wished. "You knew him, why didn't ya suggested him or somethin'?"

"I really have no idea how I could've overlooked him. He's perfect really," she said as she sat down in the chair in front of him. "He's staying with you?" There was that grin of hers. Definitely the one that said she knew all your darkest secrets.

"I couldn't let him stay in the shelter, not after I gave him a job. It just didn't feel right. I would've done the same for you and Sophia," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I know.....Lori's gonna flip that he's a Dixon. Shane too." That time her grin was more of mischievous amusement.

"Is it wrong that I can't wait?" he quipped, most likely matching her expression.

"Not as long as I get front row seats," she laughed.

"That'd be a good way to make some extra money!"

"I think you're good for him, Rick. I don't know that much about him, to be honest, but I know he's had it rough," she said, her eyes sincere.
"I kinda picked up on that, Carol."

"I know he's a good guy, though."

"You're preachin' to the choir here....I just, I don't know what it is but I just like him, ya know, like being around him. Carl does too. He is a good guy, I wholeheartedly believe that. I know he doesn't, but maybe I can help with that, maybe we can help with that."

"I feel the same way, I really do. And I'm glad he's here," she said as she stood, her smile smug like she got confirmation on whatever it was she had been looking for the whole time. He studied her with suspicion and was about to ask her what she was up to when Glenn popped his head in the door.

"Hey Carol?" Glenn interrupted. "I'm going out for lunch so don't order anything for me."

Carol and Rick exchanged a knowing look.

"Having lunch with Maggie?" she teased.

"Yeah," he blushed. "I'll be back in about an hour," he waved, heading for the door.

"Tell her, we said 'hi'," Rick hollered after him.

"Anything I need ta know about?" Daryl said peeking his head in the door.

"Glenn's got a date!" Carol told him on her way out of Rick's office.

Her light squeeze on Daryl's bicep did not go unnoticed. He wasn't sure if he was jealous or not. That was a lie, he was. Daryl had flinched when he touched him. He didn't when Carol did. Maybe that was just because he had known her longer. Or maybe he didn't like pervy middle-aged men doing it....

"Is it with that Maggie girl that I seem ta know everythin' about after only knowing him for three hours?" Daryl continued.

"That's the one," Rick answered. "How's your first day goin', Daryl?"

"I'm about halfway through that shelf thing. Thought I'd give Glenn a hand with the desk from hell as he calls it when I'm done."

"I meant how ya settlin' in? I can't imagine you've had any problems. Glenn and Carol are good people, and I know you know what you're doin'."

"It's a little weird is all. I haven't had a real job since....well, since ever. It just doesn't feel real, I suppose," Daryl said, looking down at the floor and shuffling his feet.

"'Fraid it's all gonna fall apart any minute?"

Daryl grunted and looked back up, eyes narrow, lips pursed to one side. Fucking gorgeous. Shy Daryl did weird things to him, too.

"I get that. Ya know if ya need anythin', any one of us'll be glad ta help ya out," Rick said reassuringly.

"I know."
'And it's not gonna fall apart.'

Daryl shrugged, looking away.

"Now, who's stubborn," Rick teased.

Daryl grinned, looking back.

That didn't do weird things to him, set him on fire. "Okay, well let me know if ya'll need help with that desk."

"Sure thing...boss," Daryl smirked as he exited, leaving Rick mesmerized by every step he took, wishing he wasn't going the other way, that he was coming back to him instead. Then, he'd slam the door behind him and sweep everything off his desk and onto the floor so they could—

"Hey Rick?" For a split second, Daryl's voice sounded so real that he could hardly stand it....Shit, because it was.

"Fuck!" he cursed under his breath as he looked up. And not for the first time that day, he was glad to be sitting behind the cover of his desk. He had to clear the lump in his dry throat before he could speak, "Need somethin'?"

"You okay?" Daryl asked with concern.

"Yeah, just....thinkin' 'bout the remodel. Whatcha need?" he asked, hoping his pokerface was somewhat intact.

"Wood glue. Glenn told me ya'd be buyin' some this afternoon, but said ya might have some extra layin' around."

"Yeah," Rick said as he leaned over to rifle through a bottom drawer. He pulled out a mostly full bottle and tossed it to Daryl, too mindful of the erection in his jeans to chance letting him get too close.

"Thanks," said Daryl.

Rick nodded and gave him a small forced smile, not trusting his voice to stay even or his brain from telling the younger man—his goddamn employee—to shut the door and sweep everything off his desk so they could fuck.

Rick didn't realize how distracting it was going to be working with him. He was going to smell like sawdust all the time which was one of Rick's favorite smells. He was going to be using those hands of his all the time, teasing him without knowing it. He was going to be smiling at him all the time because he was happy to have a job and a warm bed to sleep in every night.

Not that Rick was going to complain.

Rick wanted to be out there helping him, watching him work. Instead, he was trying to be the boss. He spent twice as long on the design plans for the remodel than he should have and now he was distracted again by those twisty lips that he wanted nothing more than to kiss. Even his desk was taunting him, whispering for him to lay Daryl down and fuck him right there on it.

And for the first time, he thought he wouldn't mind letting Daryl fuck him because he just needed him that much. Every tense muscle in his body, every sensitive nerve ending, every hardened bone begged to be close to him, on him, in him, around him. He really didn't know how much longer he
could bend before he finally broke.

That was pretty much how the rest of the week went. Daryl smirking at him, him trying not to pull him into his office to bang him all over it, and spending way too much time on administrative things because he'd get carried away with thoughts of those steel-blue eyes and soft pink, pouty lips.

At home, things were even worse. He'd practically orgasm at the things Daryl fed him, he couldn't stop imagining Daryl's hands all over him when he was in the shower, and the things he fantasized about Daryl doing when he was in there were getting more and more graphic.

Without the kids as a buffer, as a distraction, he'd have to think about baseball, which he hated, to keep from walking around the apartment with a perpetual hard-on. It was starting to become torturous.

He tried, he really tried, to keep his hands off the man, but he found himself finding excuses to touch him; a nice pat on the back for a job well done, a gentle brush of their fingers when Daryl handed him his plate at dinner, a well-placed bump against him as they passed each other in the shop. If he didn't get a hold of himself—figuratively, because he had no problem with the literal—he really was going to have a sexual harassment suit on his hands.

Regardless, he had to start patting Glenn on the back too for a job well done. He didn't want Daryl getting the wrong idea. Or under the circumstances, the right idea. His hands never lingered on Glenn, though, not like they did on the hard muscles of Daryl's back and shoulders.

The second week had gone much like the first. He somehow had the mind to take Glenn with him to work on the remodel; otherwise, he might have lost a few fingers to a table saw due to the distraction that was Daryl. Even still, he couldn't concentrate. He wondered how he was doing, how him and Carol were getting along—not too well, he jealously hoped—if he needed something from the hardware store.

The worse part about it was that he couldn't read the man. He didn't know if he hated it, if he just tolerated the 'innocent' touches because he needed a place to stay and a job, or if maybe he liked them. He really didn't want to make him uncomfortable, and it certainly wasn't his intention to make the man feel like he had to put up with things like that for the sake of not going back to the shelter.

If he did make him feel that way, like he was obligated to put up with him because of the job and the kindness Rick had showed him, then he was a bigger asshole than Shane was. And that was saying something. He wouldn't be able to live with himself.

If something did happen between them at some point or another, he didn't want it to be because Daryl felt like he had no choice. That was wishful thinking, though. He was a straight man pining for another straight man, because Daryl gave no indication that he wasn't. And nothing good could come from a confession to the man about his feelings.

Either way, he was screwed, and not the good kind. It was more like the I'm-gonna-sue-you-and-take-your-business-kind. If he confessed, Daryl would either run screaming the other way and his reputation would be ruined for hitting on an employee or worse. Or, Daryl could possibly blackmail him into doing whatever he wanted. Not that he would, Daryl was a good man. But it was still a possibility.

He couldn't even entertain the third option: that Daryl would reciprocate and they'd fall madly in love and get married or something because that was never going to happen. That wasn't even
wishful thinking, that was delusional thinking. He wasn't even divorced from Lori yet and he was contemplating marrying a man he just met which, the last he heard, wasn't even legal in the state of Georgia.

He was either going mad and having some sort of midlife crises with hints of a psychotic break or Daryl was his soul mate. And since he didn't believe in the latter, he was thinking that he might need to find a shrink.

*****

It was payday and Daryl had been working for him for two weeks. He didn't take any money out of his paycheck for his clothes even though he told him he did. Daryl didn't seem to notice. If he had, he would've said something.

They were ten minutes out from closing the shop when Glenn started off their usual pre-weekend chitchat. "What are your plans for the weekend, guys?" he asked.

"Sophia and I are volunteering. You know, the usual," Carol shrugged.

"If ya'll are up for it, we could volunteer next weekend. That company bondin' thing we were talkin' about," Rick said.

"Yeah! Maggie'll probably be there, too," Glenn replied, excitedly using the same tone that Rick had often found himself trying hard to suppress when talking about Daryl.

"I'll let Hershel and Michonne know. They can find us a few things to do," Carol said.

"What about you, Daryl? Have any plans for your first paycheck?" Glenn asked him.

"Gonna take my brother out tonight. He wants ta celebrate," he answered, tone nearly void of enthusiasm.

"I gotta get the kids in the morning, so if you're gonna bring any women home, make sure they're gone before that," Rick told him kindly, apparently successful in hiding his completely inappropriate jealousy.

"Rick, I already told ya I ain't gonna do that!" Daryl countered forcefully, a faint blush painting his skin pink.

"Just sayin'. I don't mind, is all." I do mind....shit, way too much.

They all turned toward the door when it swung open with a swoosh.

"Hey baby brother!" Merle said as he rushed over to hug Daryl.

"Christ, Merle! Put me down!" Daryl demanded when he picked him up and spun him around.

"Just a bit excited!" he said, slapping him on the back. "Hey Carol! You're looking good today!" he added, only the tiniest hint of something salacious in his voice.

"Thanks, Merle," she practically grimaced, a faint blush creeping up the neck of a woman obviously more used to fists than compliments.

"Rick, he ain't givin' ya any trouble, is he? Don't hesitate ta slap him around a bit if he is. It's how we keep 'im in line," Merle said, smacking Daryl upside the back of his head.
"Shut the hell up, Merle!" Daryl said, pushing him away.

"He ain't no trouble at all. This is Glenn. Don't know if ya know him," Rick said.

"Nice ta meet ya 'Short Round!'"

"Goddammit, Merle! Shut the hell up, will ya!" Daryl pleaded.

"Come on, Darlena. Ya know I give everyone nicknames."

"I've heard worse," Glenn assure him.

"Still ain't right," Daryl told him.

"Why don't ya'll go on and get a head start. It's only ten till," Rick said.

"Great!" Merle said. "Ya'll wanna join us for a drink or two ta celebrate? It'll be on Daryl a course."

"I could go for a drink," Carol answered, turning to Rick with a look that said something like 'don't make me go alone.'

"Why not? But how 'bout I get the first round? Ya in Glenn? Ya can even bring Maggie," Rick said.

"I could drink," he replied.

They decided on a place to go, a bar right down the road that they would go to sometimes after work, and headed out. Rick and Carol rode over in his truck, the Dixon brothers in a car Merle was borrowing, and Glenn went to pick up Maggie.

Daryl and Merle were already at the bar when Rick and Carol walked in. They ordered a pitcher of beer and some shots as they scoped out a table. It was still early so they had their pick. Carol sat down first at a round table with Merle taking one of the seats beside her. Rick sat on the other side of her and Daryl on the other side of Merle, leaving Rick and Daryl facing on opposite sides.

Merle dominated the conversation as he gushed about how proud he was of his little brother. They drank a few toasts to the younger man that made him turn a bright red. He was rescued from his embarrassment when Glenn and Maggie walked in holding hands.

The reprieve was short-lived when Merle raised his glass for another round of toasts when the rest of their party arrived. Luckily for Daryl, that proved to be the last one of the night as Merle turned his attention to wooing Carol.

Halfway through their second pitcher, a firm hand landed on Rick's back. He turned around to find Tyreese standing behind him with a friendly grin on his face.

"Hey man, how's it going?" Rick said as he reached out his hand. Tyreese took it and pulled him in for a half hug.

"I can't lie, business has been a little slow lately," he said ducking his head with a small bit of shame.

"I'm sorry ta hear that," Rick said. He didn't want to make him feel any worse than he already did for falling for 'the Governor's' fake smile.
Tyrese leaned in and whispered, "Might have some for you, though." He may not be legally allowed to take work that Rick sent his way and vis versa, but if some bit of gossip slipped through their lips in a bar...opps.

"How 'bout I buy ya a beer," he said, patting Tyreese on the back.

They went over to the bar where Rick bought him a drink. Tyreese told him about a big job Phillip was aching for. He said the owner wasn't too keen on giving it to Woodbury because they had heard some things about their shoddy work. If Rick somehow managed to 'run' into the client, he could probably get the contract.

Rick was about to head back to their table when the two were interrupted by Tyreese's sister, Sasha. She gave Rick a big hug and a kiss on his cheek before doing the same to her brother. She had walked in with Bob, her boyfriend and the owner of the bar. Rick thought it was strange that a recovering alcoholic owned a bar, but he hadn't had a drink in two years. Not since he met Sasha.

When he got back to the table, he took Merle's seat. It had been vacated when him and Carol went to dance. Glenn and Maggie had joined them, leaving Daryl sitting quietly, nursing a whiskey by himself until Rick rejoined him.

"What was that about?" Daryl asked, his tone a tad hard.

"Tyreese, my roofer friend that Phillip poached. Just gossipin'....we, uh, might be gettin' real busy soon," he winked, squeezing Daryl on the shoulder before taking a swig of beer. So what if his hand lingered a little or their thighs kept brushed together? He'd blame it on the alcohol. At least the flinching had mostly subsided. Progress.

A few minutes later, Tyreese walked over with Sasha and Bob. Rick introduced them, but Bob left almost immediately heading behind the bar to help the bartender. Sasha followed him back over. The three men talked shop for a while until Tyreese said his goodbye's and left.

"I'd, uh, ask ya ta dance, but I have two left feet," Rick joked, once him and Daryl were alone again. He kind of wanted to actually.

"Just as well, I got two right ones," Daryl said, giving him a sideways smirk that had Rick getting all warm and gooey inside. Daryl's face was flushed, eyes a little more glossy—and a little more blue? From the alcohol, he reminded himself.

"Well, there's a blonde over there that keeps staring at ya. She probably wouldn't mind ya steppin' on her feet." Rick subtly motioned over to the woman in question, attempting to be a good wingman and feeling sick about it. From the alcohol, he lied to himself.

"Ain't my type," Daryl said without looking.

He wanted to asked what was his type, but Merle and Carol returned to the table and reached for their beers. The bar had filled in after about an hour and the dance floor had gotten a little too crowded. Merle convinced Daryl to go with him to get another round, and they trekked off to the bar.

"What's that about?" Rick teased Carol about Merle after the brothers left.

"I have no idea," she said, blushing. "I know he's got a record a mile long, but he's been nothing but nice to me. It doesn't have to mean anything yet. I'm not even sure I want something like that after what I went through with Ed."
"They both got dealt shitty hands. I never thought I'd have a Dixon livin' with me. But I understand, and you're right, it don't have ta mean a thing."

The brothers returned—Daryl first with a hardened scowl—and a deep sense of dread washed over Rick. Whatever was said between them was not well received by Daryl leaving him to silently stew, not making eye contact with anyone. Rick seemed to be the only one who noticed, and he thought it best not to pry with the crowd around.

The other three talked for awhile as they drank, Rick eventually cutting himself off so he could drive anyone home who needed a ride. Glenn and Maggie came back for another beer before leaving. Maggie had an early morning shift at the shelter. After a breather, Carol convinced Daryl to dance with her. He resisted, but Merle got onto him and he relented.

"How long ya plan on lettin' my brother stay with ya?" Merle asked when they were alone.

"As long as he wants. Or until he finds something better," Rick replied.

"Doubt he'd find better. Carol just raves about ya. Anythin' there?" he asked. His jealous tone was not lost on Rick.

"Nah, just friends. I'm not even divorced yet."

"Ah, that makes sense. I was wonderin' why ya hadn't noticed that hot redhead makin' eyes at ya all night," he grinned with that same 'I know your darkest secrets' smile Carol kept flashing him.

"Where?" Rick asked, more amused than interested.

Merle nodded in the direction of a woman who looked away when Rick looked over.

"Thought she was starin' at Daryl," he admitted with relief. "I was with my wife since tenth grade. Don't really have any game, never had ta pick up anyone before, never been picked up either. Just took off my ring last week."

The only reason he did that was because Daryl kept staring at it. He didn't want him to think he was still hung up on Lori because that couldn't have been further from the truth. It also felt nice not to have the reminder of their failed marriage on his finger. He kind of felt naked without it. The only reason he still wore it was out of comfort. But Daryl could be his comfort.

"Look Rick, man ta man, my brother is sensitive, he's been through shit, and he deserves ta be taken care of, ta be happy. He's never had that before and I have ta take some blame on that. But I'm tryin' ta get my shit together now."

"I wish ya luck with that," Rick said sincerely.

"Now, I'd hate ta have ta hurt a nice guy like you fer jerkin' around my li'l brother with yer ideas and false hope. So if that's your game here, then ya need ta leave him the hell alone and find someone else ta fuck, 'cause it ain't gonna be him."

Merle's piercing eyes were enough to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. If it had been anyone else, they would've been scared of a Dixon threatening them, but Rick knew Merle was trying to protect Daryl and he couldn't begrudge him for that. It was sweet actually. *Wait, did the man just imply me and Daryl were....nah.*

"That's not what this is. I'm tryin' ta help him, but he's stubborn. He's just now starting to relax a bit, let his guard down. And I ain't gonna do anythin' ta hurt him. Not if I can help it. Ya have my
word on that. I'm sure ya took care of him the best ya could, but now, ya got help: me, Carol, Michonne, Glenn. We'll help 'cause we like the man, care for him....I like the man, I care for him. So does my son, Carl."

"Ya just met him," Merle said skeptically.

"Don't make anythin' I said any less true. There's just somethin' about him....We've all seen it. He's a good man, and I'll do whatever I can ta help him see that. I believe you are too, just bad circumstances is all."

There was a long pause as they stared each other down. Eventually, Merle gave him a genuine smile when he was obviously satisfied with what Rick had said and was convinced it was the truth. "Well then, Officer Friendly, you should probably know he's in l—"

"Hey Rick, I'm about ready to go," Carol interrupted as her and Daryl rejoined the table. "Sophia and I are volunteering tomorrow. She's staying at a friend's tonight, but that means I have to get up even earlier to pick her up."

"I'm about done, too," Rick replied. "See ya at home?" he asked Daryl.

"Think I'm ready ta go, too," Daryl admitted, still not making eye contact.

"Come on now baby brother! You're gonna leave me hanging like that on a Friday night? Surely, you can stay out a little later. Ya ain't got no curfew, do ya?"

"Nah, Merle, but I'm respectable now. Got up early and worked all day and everythin'."

"What am I supposed ta do for the rest of the night?" he frowned.

"Go home, go ta bed, get up early, and come down to volunteer at the shelter," Carol suggested. "Ya gonna be there, huh?"

She nodded.

"Hmmm, maybe I will."

"That I'd like ta see, the great Merle Dixon volunteerin' at a shelter," Daryl mocked.

"Oh yeah, Darlena? Well, why don't ya come down tomorrow and see it for yourself?" Merle bit back.

"Maybe we will," Rick said for him. "We'll even bring our kids," he teased, nudging Daryl. Finally the man smiled a fraction and it was like the sun breaking through the clouds after days and days of stormy weather. "M sure Glenn and Maggie'll be there, too."

"Guess we're doing our company bonding tomorrow then," Carol said as she stood to leave.

"We'll see ya then, Mr. Dixon," Rick said shaking Merle's hand.

"Yes, ya will," he smirked.

It was half past eleven when him and Daryl got home. Not too terribly late, but he hoped he wouldn't be hung over when he went to pick up the kids. Rick tried to ask Daryl what was wrong on the ride home, but the more he pressed, the more Daryl shut down, so he gave up for the night. The two traipsed up the stairs in silence where they went their separate ways.
As he lay alone in bed waiting for sleep to take him, all he could think of was how the last two weeks had been pretty great. He could only hope that whatever the brothers had talked about that set Daryl off would blow over and not set everything back. Daryl was starting to feel comfortable living with him, and they had established a nice routine. The only thing that could have made it better was Daryl in his bed.

Even so, he wasn't sure what to think when he woke up the next morning in Daryl's.
Daryl's Bed

Chapter Summary

Daryl and Merle have a heart to heart; Daryl confesses; Rick offers comfort.

Chapter Notes

*Warning* This chapter contains a brief yet graphic depiction of abuse/borderline torture. If that's a trigger or you don't like that sort of thing, skip the italics after the first jump.

**Daryl**

Daryl couldn't believe his eyes when Rick handed him his first paycheck. It was surreal, like he was in a dream, in someone else's body, living someone else's life. It was something so normal to others but not to him. He wanted to frame it, but he knew he'd now be expected to contribute. Rick had taken care of everything since they met. Sure, he cooked most of their meals but that was with the other man's food. He'd definitely have to come up with some way to thank him. Some way that did not involve getting on his knees and wrapping his lips around his cock, even though that's the only idea that he could think of at the moment. Or just about any other moment.

He was shocked when Rick said he'd go out with them. He was hoping that he wouldn't because he just knew Merle was going to embarrass him. Having Carol along was going to be bad enough. But before it could sink in, they were all filing out the door and heading to a nearby bar.

The place wasn't so bad. It was a little more classy than his usual hangouts, but they had beer and whiskey, so he couldn't ask for more. They got a table, and just like he had thought, Merle started in on him. They kept making toasts and making him the center of attention. It was humiliating.

When Glenn and Maggie walked in, he slid down in his chair a bit. He recognized her from the shelter and felt more embarrassed by that than he had by Merle. If she recognized him, she didn't say anything about it. For that, he was grateful. Not that she would have noticed anyone with her eyes glued to Glenn. He hoped that he wasn't that ridiculous and obvious when he looked at Rick.

His nerves stood on end when some big burly guy walked up behind Rick. He was too far away to hear their conversation; he only saw the smile on Rick's face and the hug they shared. Both of which sent a twinge of jealousy churning in his gut. Rick had never hugged him like that before.
Rick only patted him on the back when he did something worthy of praise. He'd do it to Glenn too, so it's not like it meant anything. He tried not to let it bother him at his own celebration, but his eyes kept wandering over to them when the two went to the bar.

The girl kissing on Rick didn't get to him as much. That was probably because he knew Rick was straight. Of course he'd be into women. But if Rick Grimes wanted a guy, wanted to be gay or bi, then dammit the man was going to be gay for him! He was his straight guy to turn.

He didn't know how he felt when he found out that was the Tyreese the Governor legally trapped. Part of him wanted to hate the guy for turning his back on Rick, but at the same time, working with Phillip Blake was probably punishment enough. And the guy was going to get them some work. He couldn't be all that bad.

Then, Rick had to go and say something stupid about dancing. Of course he wanted to dance with the man, to be close to him. Who wouldn't? He was gorgeous. Daryl wasn't much of a dancer but he would've made an exception. When Rick mentioned the blonde checking him out, he wanted to tell him right then that he was gay, if only to get it out of the way.

Merle screwed that up when he pulled him off to the side. He thought he was going to mouth off some more about how proud he was, but he didn't. Instead, he did something unexpected, so unMerle-like that he was nearly left speechless.

"What's up with you and Officer Friendly?" Merle asked, his voice strained with concern that Daryl had never heard from him before.

"Whatcha mean? He's my boss and roommate," Daryl said, bewildered at what the hell he was getting at. He turned and leaned his hip against the bar to face him, arms crossed waiting for an explanation. Merle mirrored him and did the same.

"Why ya keep lookin' at him like that? All lovey dovey! You fuckin' him? 'S 'at why he's lettin' ya stay with 'im? 'Cause I ain't gonna let no one use my li'l brother like that!" His expression was stern, hard, serious....protective.

"We ain't fuckin'! Rick ain't like that. He's a good guy is all. Ask Carol, she'll tell ya."

"But ya wanna?" Merle asked softly.

"What?! FUCK NO!" Daryl yelled defensively, straightening his body, fists clenched and ready to throw a punch if need be. How the fuck had he figured that out?

"Come on baby brother! Daddy's dead, ya ain't gotta lie no more. I know....," he looked around and moved closer before whispering, "I know we ain't exactly on the same team here."

"Ya don't know shit!"

"Christ, Daryl, I ain't that stupid. It wasn't hard ta figure out. Look, I don't care who ya fuck. Just wanna make sure he's good enough is all. That's what big brothers are for," he said with as much sincerity as Merle Dixon could muster.

Daryl didn't know what else to say. Overprotective Merle had him scratching his head. He had no idea that Merle knew he was gay or that he approved. Or at the very least, didn't hate him. He had never said a word about it before. The worst part was that his brother could see the way he felt about Rick. What if others could tell, too? What if Rick could tell? What the hell was he supposed to do now?
"You can tell?" Daryl asked nervously, biting at the cuticle of his thumb, shifting back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"I can 'cause I know ya. Doubt anyone else does, though....Ya gonna tell him?"

"He's fuckin' straight, Merle! He's got a kid!"

"Straight? Maybe, but then why does he look at you all lovey dovey and shit?"

"Shut your damn mouth! Ya don't know what the hell you're talkin' bout!" Daryl snapped, shaking his head. He grabbed the pitcher that Bob placed on the bar for them and stormed back to their table.

He really wasn't in the mood for anymore of Merle's bullshit. He was wrong about Rick. He only looked at him like his employee, his roommate. That was all. And Daryl was okay with that, he was trying to be okay with that. The last thing he needed was to get his hopes up any higher. The fall from where he was at already was going to hurt bad enough.

How the hell had Merle figured him out anyway? If it was as obvious as he made it sound, then maybe their daddy had known as well. Maybe that's why he hated him so much, tore his back to shreds every chance he got, called him names, abused him, and downright despised him.

One thing was certain, he couldn't enjoy himself after that bombshell. And Rick's stolen glances with those goddamned puppy-dog eyes of his only made it worse.

He knew Merle was wanting him to stay out with him for the night, but he was getting tired. Working all day wore him out. He wasn't used to it, not that he was going to complain, it was just something that he'd have to get used to. He didn't like going out with Merle much to begin with. He preferred to be home where no one would bother him.

Luckily, Carol got him out of it by telling Merle to volunteer at the shelter the next day. He almost had a stroke when he agreed. Merle must've really liked her. He could understand why, Carol was an amazing woman, strong and hardened. He knew about her dead husband and the abuse she suffered at his hand. He was glad when he finally drank himself to death.

He wasn't sure how he felt about her and Merle getting together. She was still fragile after what she went through with Ed, and he didn't want Merle's abrasive nature to rough her up anymore than she already was. No doubt, Rick would knock him on his ass if he did. Probably worse. So would he.

But Merle was different around her. He liked that version of his brother, a man pulling himself together after the curse that was their father had been lifted. Daryl was doing the same thing, and he hoped they could both stay with it, stay that way, bettering themselves after being stuck under the thumb of a drunk tyrant their whole loves.

When he got to bed, a million things were running through his head. He thought about the past two weeks, about how lucky he had been that Rick took a shine to him. He mulled over the things that Merle had said about him knowing he was gay, about Rick looking at him the same way he looked at the other man.

He just couldn't let that get to him, he couldn't get his hopes up. Merle had been mistaken. It was probably the beer that had him confused. Why would Rick want him anyhow? He was a broken man with nothing to offer. The clothes on his back weren't even his, not really.

It was with that hellish reality check and thoughts of how his father had been so right about him that he fell asleep. But tonight, when he dreamed, it wasn't of sky blue that warmed him from the
inside out like it had done since Christmas.

"What the hell is wrong with ya, boy? Ya think I don't know what ya are? The depraved things that run through that empty skull of yours?" Will Dixon bellowed as a hard fist landed in the center of Daryl's torso.

Daryl doubled over, the air expelled from his lungs so fast that he thought they would never be filled again, pain flaring out from the point of contact like a bursting supernova ripping a hole right through him.

"Nothin' runs through my head," Daryl said, trying to find some way to appease the drunk bastard before the other fist hit him somewhere else.

"Can't lie ta me, boy!" he yelled, pulling Daryl's hair and bringing them face to face so he could spit in his. "I seen tha way yous was eye my friend! Thinkin' 'bout having his dick in ya, wasn't ya?"

Will ran him over to the closest wall and slammed his head right into it, the metal trailer not giving as much as it would've if it had been lined with paneling or drywall. Blood gushed from his forehead instantly, turing his vision cloudy as it oozed into his eyes.

"I didn't look at no one like that, daddy! I promise!" Daryl whimpered.

"You're pathetic. I bet ya ain't even mine," he taunted, pulling Daryl's head away from the wall so he could slam him back into it again. "That whore of a mother of yours pro'ly fucked a closet fag. That's how ya got this way!"

Will refused to loosen the grip he had on his hair. He yanked it hard and walked him over to the coffee table where he forced Daryl onto his knees. He pulled Daryl's shirt up over his head and grabbed the cigarette he had been smoking. He took a satisfying drag that he blew in Daryl's face as he grinned manically.

He slammed Daryl's head into the hard oak coffee table and pressed the lit end of his cigarette into one of his previous inflicted wounds. That one Will liked particularly well—right above his left shoulder blade—never quite letting it heal right before going at it again with his newest torture technique.

"Daddy, p-please s-s-stop!" Daryl begged.

"Don't worry boy, I'll beat it outta ya. We ain't gonna have no Dixon's who are fags around here!" he snickered as he finally let go of Daryl's hair. He threw him to the floor and started kicking him relentlessly.

All Daryl could do was coil in on himself, hands over his blood-soaked head trying to ward off as much damage as he could. Whimpers and rough 'stop's and 'please don't's escaping his bruised and puffy lips but going unnoticed.

Right before he was about to black out from the pain and suffering, he heard a voice in the distance.

"Daryl?" it said, warm and kind. Nothing like the bitter tone of his father. He thought it was an angel ready to take him away, to rescue him from hell.
"Daryl? Wake up!" Rick said, a light hand giving his shoulder a gentle nudge. "It's just a bad dream. Everythin's gonna be alright."

"R-Rick?" he whimpered, soft and helpless as he came out of his nightmare. The nightmare that used to be his reality.

His angel was on his knees by his bed, one hand so light on his forearm that he didn't notice at first, or the thumb that ghosted over his skin. Bright blue eyes were staring down at him with nothing but worry and concern as the dim lights pouring through the window from the street lamps reflected in them.

"It was just a bad dream. It's over now. You're safe, I got ya," Rick said, his voice smooth like honey—sweet like it too—pooling in his eardrums, flowing over every inch of him and enveloping his body in a protective cocoon.

Rick hesitantly raised his fingers to wipe away the tears that fell down his cheeks. Daryl wanted to pull away, wanted to hide his face, his embarrassment, his shame, but he couldn't. He swallowed hard and tried to squash any more tears from falling, but that proved harder than he would've liked.

Rick's hand moved up to rake through his hair which sent goosebumps breaking out all over his skin. No one had ever done that to him before. It felt good, so damn good, but he didn't want the man to see him like that, blubbering and vulnerable. He didn't want anyone to ever have to see him like that.

He went to push him away, lash out—his coping mechanism for so long—but Rick wasn't having any of it. "I ain't leavin', Daryl. I ain't ever leavin'," he said, so sure, that for a second, Daryl believed him.

Before he knew what happened, Rick had climbed into his bed, strong arms wrapping around him, holding him, one hand ranking effortlessly through his sweaty hair. He tucked Daryl's head under his chin, soft coos and shushes relaxing him more than they should have, more than he should have let them, as their breathing fell into sync.

Daryl couldn't touch him back; he didn't know what was safe, what wouldn't make the other man uncomfortable, where to put his hands, whether or not he was even supposed to touch him back. He had never been held before, probably not even as a baby. It was foreign, but it felt nice with Rick. He felt safe for the first time in his life, like that was where he belonged. And for the night, maybe he did.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that before he fell back to sleep, Rick curled around him, a warm body protecting him, his own hands stiff by their side. A low voice lulled him to sleep as a hand rubbed circles on his back, right over the spot his daddy liked so much. But it didn't hurt; Rick would never hurt him. Rick had only ever made him feel good.

Maybe Merle was right after all....

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When he woke up, he didn't dare move. Rick was still there, holding him, their limbs tangled together in the sheets more than they were when he drifted off to sleep. He was laying on his back, Rick on his side curved into him, his left thigh pressed into Daryl's, left arm thrown over his chest, steady breath wafting over his skin.

Daryl craned his neck to look at him. He was so beautiful that he didn't have the heart to wake him.
He also wanted a little time to study him, to take him in, to be this so sinfully close without making Rick uneasy. There was too much fear for him to risk trying to memorize his face when the man was awake, but he could do it now.

The faint lines around Rick's eyes were smoothed by relaxing sleep. His soft lips were parted slightly, a barely noticeable yet raspy snore escaping from deep in his throat. Daryl could feel the rumble in his chest that was reverberating into him from his side. Rick's hair was unkempt, usually perfect corkscrews squished a tad from the pillow, or from Daryl's head as theirs rested together in the night.

He winced when he heard Rick's alarm go off. It signaled the end to one of the best night's he'd ever had. Nightmare be damned! It was faint from the other room, and he was glad that Rick hadn't stirred. Daryl didn't want to wake him, he wanted more of this. He wanted those hands that were on him now, that he had ached for, on him every night.

He knew they had to get up soon. They had both been looking forward to seeing Carl, and Judith even. He didn't want Rick getting into trouble with Lori for being late either, having learned a bit more about her manipulate ways in the past few weeks that did nothing to endear her to him. With a heavy sigh of frustration, he started to wake him.

"Rick?" he said quietly, relishing the feel of his name on his tongue, on his low voice sandpapery from sleep. "Rick, it's time to get up. We gotta go get the kids, gotta go ta the shelter."

Rick only grunted, arms snaking around him more, reaffirming their grip and tightening it further, thigh creeping up his slowly. Cold toes were drawn over his bare skin as his pant leg was hiked up in the process. He tried not to smile, but it was a hopeless endeavor. If he had to be honest, it was paradise.

"Gotta get up, Rick. Gotta get movin'."

"Too early," Rick mumbled onto his neck, the man's stubble leaving a faint, yet welcomed, burn on his shoulder as he burrowed deeper into him.

God, he was in heaven! Those lips right under his ear! He went dizzy at the sensation, at the feel of them on his skin. It was even better than he dreamed. But he didn't want it like this, with Rick half asleep and most likely confused, thinking he was with Lori or some other woman. Maybe the redhead that kept staring at him at the bar the night before.

"Uh, Rick?" he said, his tone guarded and hesitant.

"Jesus!" Rick hollered, swiftly removing his hands from Daryl. "God, I'm sorry," he said, blushing as he got out of bed. "I'm sorry, Daryl, I didn't mean...fuck, I'm sorry, man," he said as he turned and practically ran out of the room.

Daryl laid there for a few minutes trying to catch his breath. He didn't know when it picked up only that it had. That could've went better, he told himself before dragging himself out of bed. After getting dressed, he went downstairs. He flipped on the coffee machine, got out two bowls, the cereal and milk, and went to the table to sit down.

"Sorry, I didn't mean ta fall asleep," Rick said when he came into the kitchen a few minutes later: dressed, hair wrangled, hand drawing down one side of his face.

"Rick, it's—"

"Nah, Daryl. It was highly inappropriate and ya don't have ta worry 'bout it happenin' again," he
explained.

Daryl didn't like that idea one bit!

"Rick, I appreciate what ya did for me last night. Ain't nobody ever cared enough ta comfort me like that. Ya got nothin' ta be sorry about," he said firmly.

"Either do you," Rick nodded as he poured himself some cereal. "Ya wanna talk about it? About the dream. Ya don't have ta, just thought it might help or somethin'. I used to have nightmares when I caught a bad case. It helped me ta talk about 'em, even though Lori didn't like ta listen."

"No surprise there," he scoffed. "Just shit with my daddy was all. He's dead now so it don't matter."

"Okay, but if ya ever need ta talk, ya know where I sleep. And if ya can't talk ta me, there's always Carol, Glenn if your desperate," he quipped.

"I know....Merle just told me some stuff last night that had me thinkin' 'bout him. Musta carried over or somethin'"

"What kinda stuff?"

"Rick, I....ya don't know me!" he said hotly. He couldn't keep the doubts out of his mind that as soon as Rick found out what he really was that his bubble would burst and he'd surely die from either Rick's fists or his rejection.

"Daryl, we've been over this. It doesn't matter, and I wanna. The past is the past."

Daryl huffed and stood from the table. He walked over to the sink and rinsed out his bowl, resisting the slight urge to throw it across the room. He turned around and ran a hand through his hair releasing a deep sigh. *Man the fuck up!*

"It ain't the past....Shit, Rick! I'm gay, okay....I ain't never told anyone, but Merle said he knew which means my daddy knew, and all the times he called me a fag or a fuckin' homo while he beat me wasn't just him bein' an asshole, it was him hating who I was! Who I am!" he roared.

It felt good to come clean, to confess the only secret he'd kept from Rick, and to air his frustrations with his father. The only thing that was left was to hope he could get out before Rick started laying into him, and while he truly thought that Rick wouldn't hurt him, he couldn't be sure that he wouldn't hurt a fucking fag who lied to him about who he was, especially if he had been able to pick up on his true feelings about him.

"Daryl, I—"

"It ain't your problem, Rick," he said turning towards the sink to hide the hurt on his face even though he knew he couldn't hide it in his voice. "If ya want me ta go, I will. If ya don't want me around Carl, then just tell me ta get the fuck out. Ya can fire me too. I'll be alright, won't hold it against ya or nothin'. I just ask that ya don't tell anyone 'cause....Hell, it don't matter anyhow, I ain't got anyone else ta disappoint but Merle anyway, and that fucker already knows."

He couldn't hold in the tears when those hands wrapped around him again, around his chest, warmth spreading over his back, over his whole body. He didn't even have the mind to flinch because he was crying like a damn girl, being held like one too, but he didn't care. Rick didn't care who he was, wasn't afraid of him like his old man was. Wouldn't hurt him like he did either.

How had he ever doubted him? Now he really felt like a piece of shit. Rick wasn't like that, wasn't
like anyone he'd ever met, and he felt guilty for thinking otherwise. He felt weak for falling apart for the second time in less than five hours, but Rick was holding him up now, and maybe, just maybe, he could let him.

"I told ya last night, I ain't goin' anywhere," Rick whispered in his ear after Daryl was able to pull himself together a bit.

"Would ya stop bein' so damn nice ta me all the time!" He was thankful that his tone came out more playful than accusatory, because he was tried of pushing Rick away, fighting against the tide of his eternal kindness. He just wanted to let go, lay back, and enjoy wherever the current took him, took them.

"Can't help it, I like ya," he chuckled, his nose nuzzling into Daryl's neck.

For a minute, he thought he was still dreaming. His breath stopped, his heart too, when Rick's lips started kissing his neck, soft flutters that tickled his skin, set his nerves on fire, every inch of him. He'd never been kissed like that before, tender and loving. He wasn't sure he was being kissed like that now. Could've been his demented, lust-struck mind playing tricks on him.

"Rick?" he said, voice as shaky as his knees. "Ya keep doin' that and I'm bound ta get the wrong idea." Fuck, he wanted the wrong idea.

"It's not the wrong idea. I can't keep my hands off you any longer. I'm sorry, Daryl, but I need you, need this, need everythin'. Since the second I laid eyes on you in that field, you dominate my thoughts and invade my dreams, and you have no idea how much I want it to stay that way."

"Shit, Rick....I do, want that too....But I ain't really done nothin' like this before," Daryl managed to say, voice rough but no longer from sleep. He'd never been in a relationship, if that's what this was, was going to be. He couldn't imagine Rick wanting it to be anything else. He knew he wouldn't use him either. If he knew anything, it was that that wasn't who Rick was. But he didn't know how to do that, be with someone like that, to be affectionate and intimate, to let someone in. But if there'd ever been anyone he'd want to try it with, it was Rick. He just didn't want to mess it up or disappoint him. He was scared shitless, and it was more terrifying than anything his daddy ever instilled in him. Because this...this he wanted.

"Me neither, Daryl, not with anyone but Lori and we know how that turned out. I'm sorry, Daryl, but I need you, need everythin'. Since the second I laid eyes on you in that field, you dominate my thoughts and invade my dreams, and you have no idea how much I want it to stay that way."

Daryl gave a slight nod. If it had been anyone's words but Rick he wouldn't have believed them. They were so close to his own thoughts that he was sure Rick had read his mind, and for some reason, that was a calming thought.

"We should, uh, probably get goin'. Lori's gonna be bitchin' that we messed up her day. We can talk about this...," Rick said, placing another kiss on Daryl's neck, "...later....if ya want."

Daryl gave a grunt of satisfaction, no longer trusting his voice to come out in anything other than a high-pitched squeal.

His back was cold as soon as Rick pulled away. He tried to concentrate on that, something tangible, because everything else was too blurry, too hazy, his knees too weak to risk letting go of the sink. Was that what love felt like? Was it supposed to leave his stomach twisty and his chest
tight? Leave him feeling higher than a kite, like one of Merle's junky buddies that'd do anything for a fix?

Rick reached around him and put his bowl in the sink after having already put away the cereal and milk. He filled their travel mugs with coffee and fixed them up, then put his hand on Daryl's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You okay? Did I freak ya out? Was that too fast?" Rick asked, stringing the words along so fast that they ran together into one, wearing a mask of heavy concern on his face.

"Nah, just wasn't expectin' it is all. Thought ya were straight." He decided to keep the fact that he thought Rick was going to kick his ass to himself.

"So did I," he chuckled. "Kinda sudden, I know. I just, fuck Daryl, ya just make me crazy. I, I don't know why, but ya do and I like it, I like ya."

He looked over at him, into those sincere blue eyes, and he knew it was the truth. Rick wouldn't lie to him like that, wouldn't give him false hope. Rick had been feeling the same way he'd been feeling since they met. Fighting his instincts, fighting whatever forces kept pushing them together, pulling them to each other like, well, like magnets, like fate.

"Now, I don't want ya ta think you have ta, that your obligated ta reciprocate, ta feel the same, 'cause ya don't. I'm not gonna fire ya or kick ya out if ya don't want me too. I just needed ya ta know because holdin' you last night, I just felt like I was home. And I know that sounds—"

Daryl shut him up when he smashed their mouths together hard with the force of two freight trains crashing head on, the collision of teeth sending a jolt of pain shooting through his jaw, but he pushed through it. He'd only known rough: a girl drunk or high out of her mind, an asshole he picked up in a bar in Atlanta and the shame that came along with it. He needed the pain then, the punishment. That was his normal, fists and agony.

When Rick pulled away, he knew he had ruined the whole thing. He blew it before it even started. Rick wasn't hardened like him, didn't have it rough, wasn't a broken man because of it. The horrified look on his face told him so, that it would never work between them. Maybe he misread the whole thing. Did Rick even say all that stuff? Did he imagine everything? Was this where the bruises and bloodshed that he was so accustomed to were going to come in?

"No, not like that," Rick said, his brow furrowed, dark eyes unreadable, "Like this..."

Daryl didn't know what to think, didn't know what was coming because that tone was surprising; sultry and brazen.

Rick softly curled his hands around the base of Daryl's skull, fingertips infiltrating his hairline, the curve of his thumbs cupping his ears. His eyes flickered down to Rick's mouth and watched his tongue dart out to wet puffy lips, and rather unconsciously, Daryl did the same. They were being pulled together—*Goddammit!*—like magnets, hands gently guiding him into place as Rick slowly brought their lips together with the force of two falling leaves gingerly brushing one another in the chilly fall breeze on their descent to Earth.

Daryl's heart jumped into his throat and he couldn't breathe; fireworks behind his eyelids, butterflies in his belly, skin buzzing like a current from a live wire was dancing under it. Plump lips stained with sugar and coffee had his head swimming as they kneaded his, the faint trace of tongue lost to attentive lips, Rick's lips, just Rick. It was an eternity, a split second, time had fallen away, the universe along with it.
And he was whole.

"W-wow," Daryl stuttered when they parted. There were no other words, no other thoughts.

"Yeah...shit, Daryl, wow!" Rick pressed his forehead into Daryl's, his breath jagged as he spoke. "I didn't know that was how incredible it was supposed ta feel....Never was with Lori."

"No?" he asked, voice as course as gravel. He could see Rick's shoulders rise and fall in his periphery as his chest heaved, could feel the puffs of air from his spent lungs on his lips. And talk about a boost to his nearly nonexistent ego! Lori could go to hell.

"Maybe it's just you."

"Maybe it's just us," Daryl said with all the conviction he could conjure up.

Rick gave him a heated grin followed by a brief chaste kiss before a hand fell down Daryl's arm to interlock their fingers. He handed Daryl his coffee with his free hand before picking up his own. With a small tug, he led Daryl out of the kitchen and into the living room only letting go when he had to pick up the keys and open the door. Before walking out, Rick turned around and flashed him a lustful smile that had him blushing. His cheeks were singed from the heat in those blue eyes.

Perhaps it wasn't hope he'd been clinging to these past few weeks. Hope had never given him a thing, never brought him happiness or whatever he felt when Rick was close by, when Rick was kissing him. He didn't want to think it was luck because luck could run out. Didn't even want to think it was love because the only thing he knew of that was misery: a slap to the face, a scar on his back, a punch to the stomach after getting fucked and robbed in an ally.

But he was starting to understand that that wasn't love.

That was not how Rick loved Carl. That was not how Carol loved Sophia or Michonne loved Andre or Glenn loved Maggie. That was not how Rick liked him. That would not be how Rick loved him. And that was not how he loved Rick.

The more he thought about it and the closer they got, the more the whole thing started to feel like fate. Fate that Rick went into a coma, that Lori left him, that Carol worked for him, that Merle was arrested by him, that they both hated Phillip, that they kept meeting like they did. Fate that they had fit into each other's lives so flawlessly, that their bodies slotted together so seamlessly.

And unlike hope, fate was something he could work with.
**Rick's Day After**

Chapter Summary

Rick deals with the aftermath of Daryl's nightmare, has a confrontation with Lori, does work around the shelter, has beers with the gang, and is left puzzled by Daryl.

****Rick**

Indiscernible screams roused Rick from sleep. He was almost panicked as he threw the covers off and jumped out of bed. His first thought was that Carl was having a nightmare. He used to have terrible ones a few years ago after a car accident and would still have one on occasion.

He ran across the hall and swung open the door to the other bedroom. He couldn't make out any features, only the faint outline of Daryl's body as he squirmed on the bottom bunk. Rick rushed closer to him, his thrashing more apparent with every step, strangled whimpers breaking his heart as they blared between shrill screams of the word 'stop'.

Now, he really was panicked. He'd only ever had to wake Carl from bad dreams, and sometimes he would wake up punching and kicking. It was hard to manage a twelve year old during such an episode. He couldn't imagine what a frightened, threatened Daryl would do when he came out of such a fitful state.

He knew the man had been through hell. They hadn't talked much about it, Rick deducing on his own that Daryl was abused at the hands of his father. He'd worked enough domestic abuse cases to be able to identify victims. That, and the fact Daryl spent the last two weeks learning not to flinch when Rick touched him made it blatantly obvious, but he wasn't about to push.

So how was he supposed to wake him? And how many episodes had the man had that Rick hadn't been aware of? The thought made his stomach turn. He was glad the bastard that tortured this amazing man was dead. Otherwise, he might've ended up in lockup himself. That, or him and Daryl'd be making a trip to a secluded wooded area. And not just for the hunting.

"Daryl?" he called softly as he dropped to his knees beside the bed. He thought it best not to be standing over him in a way that could've been perceived as menacing. Also, less chance for him to take a punch to the face. But he didn't care about getting hit. He could endure it. The only problem would be dealing with Daryl's guilt after. That was a worse case scenario.

He repeated Daryl's name a little louder and added the gentlest shake of his shoulder that he could. The man finally stirred, tears rolling down his cheeks as he said his name back with confusion. He lightly placed a hand on his arm to ground him, a technique Carl's therapist had taught him. The other he used to wipe away Daryl's tears.

He didn't care that Daryl was crying. He would never hold it against him or think less of him for it. He'd spilt his fair share of tears after his life went to shit. But he knew Daryl, knew he had to be tough, act tough, to survive the childhood he had. It was okay if he cried, but Rick was there to soothe him now. And that was what he was going to do.

He ran his fingers through Daryl's sun-bleached hair before he hoisted himself up and slid between
the sheets next to him. Daryl didn't protest. Whether that was from shock or the fact that he didn't mind, Rick couldn't say. It seemed to work on Carl, so he was willing to give it a try. If it didn't work, next time he could try something else.

He wrapped his arms around the younger man and pulled him flush against his body, both lying on their sides face to face. Daryl felt solid in his hands, his taut muscles an odd yet welcomed change from the soft curves that were Lori. He didn't feel right enjoying the moment, savoring it, under the circumstances. His one focus needed to be on calming Daryl, comforting him. This wasn't for him, no time to be selfish.

Still, he couldn't keep from running a hand through his soft hair. That was also a welcomed change from the long, dark, silken strands Lori had. He liked her long hair, but Daryl's was simple. And Rick was a simple man. It was an odd thing to discover a preference for, short hair, but it seemed that Daryl was teaching him a lot of things he didn't know about himself. It was thrilling to wonder what would be next.

But that would have to wait.

He positioned Daryl's head under his chin and delicately drew his free hand up and down his back, tracing random patterns on the fabric of his thin shirt. He could feel the play of muscles underneath as they let go of what Rick thought had to have been years of built up tension.

Daryl's hands laid limp beside them, but that was okay. He wasn't going to be angry if he wasn't comfortable holding him back, if he never was. Daryl hadn't pushed him away—his shoulders were going slack—so he figured that he was okay with what was going on. The only thought that came to mind was that he hoped he hadn't crossed a line that would drive him away after sunrise.

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Rick didn't remember falling asleep or who did first, only that he was being woken up. The faint sound of his alarm was heard in the distance, but he wasn't interested in getting up anytime soon. He was draped around a warm body, a hard body, a masculine body, Daryl's body, and he was content to stay that way forever, or for as long as Daryl would let him.

But the questioning tone in Daryl's voice sent a chill up his spine. He was thrown back into panic mode at the thought that he fucked everything up and at the possibility that he offended the man somehow. He fell asleep in Daryl's arms, or rather he made Daryl fall asleep in his, with little regard for the consequences. He was going to have to face them, but for now, he ran out of the room mumbling an apology, an excuse, that he didn't comprehend but that he hoped Daryl would and accept.

He was expecting breakfast to be awkward, but it wasn't. Daryl was almost finished when he sat down and filled his cereal bowl. He looked across the table at him and met his eyes. He wasn't pissed like he thought he would be. He even thanked him for comforting him, and Rick had to thank the stars that he wasn't going to cut and run at his forward behavior.

But Daryl's confession, as he poured his soul out to him, that he was gay, that his daddy beat him for it, had absolutely floored him. His emotions were running wild, oscillating between pure hatred at a father who could be so heinous to their child to complete exultation at the fact that maybe him and Daryl could be something more than friends, more than roommates.

Three little letters changed everything. As soon as the word came out of Daryl's mouth, a light switched on in Rick's head. He knew exactly what was happening here. Unless he horribly misconstrued everything—which his old cop instincts were telling him he wasn't—they were
falling for each other. Hell, he'd already fallen...hard. He thought he had somehow misread Daryl's gratitude for something more, but there was little doubt about it now. There was no mistaking the fire in those steel-blue eyes.

His feet were moving forward without a thought; his arms were snaking around Daryl before he knew what he was doing. He just had to hold him, to let him know he was there and that what he said last night—that he wasn't leaving, wasn't pushing him away—was the truth. Then, Daryl was leaning into him, pressing back without even realizing it, and he had his answer, that he wasn't leaving either.

He wasn't surprised when Daryl kissed him the way he did, violent and brutal. He had already guessed that that was all he knew; pained, guilty, chaotic encounters with people who could never see him like Rick saw him, as the perfectly imperfect being he knew he was. He would show him the way, show him how to be loved, how he loved him.

But even he was blown away by the next one. The electric shock that tore through his body when their lips met was indescribable; the sparks, the heat, the aching need to never let him go. It was fate, they were fate. He knew it to be true, felt it like he could feel the blood running through his veins, like he could feel the warmth from the streaks of gold raining down from the sun through the window, like he could feel Daryl's hands fisted in his shirt at his hips holding on with everything he had.

And that was just a kiss!

Daryl had a piece of him, a part of his soul he didn't know he was missing but that he knew he finally had back. And he felt whole.

*****

The drive to Lori's was quiet, but they were both quiet people. Daryl stared out the window for most of the ride, but he would shoot a glance Rick's way with a questioning smile on his lips. He would smile back and the question would disappear. He supposed Daryl was checking to make sure he hadn't imagined everything.

Carl was waiting impatiently on the front porch when they pulled up. Shane's squad car was gone; it usually was when he dropped by. Rick wasn't sure if he was at work or just avoiding him. He hoped it was the latter just to inconvenience him. They hadn't spoken a word since he moved out, and Rick didn't mind keeping it that way. Maybe not forever, but definitely for the foreseeable future.

Rick reached over and squeezed Daryl's hand. Daryl turned toward him and fixed him with a squinty gaze before giving him a slight nod and pulling his hand away just as Carl ran up, Judith's overnight bag over his shoulder and the carseat halfway in before Rick even got out.

When did they start communicating without words? He was pretty sure his squeeze 'said,' "Gonna have ta knock this off around the kids."

And he was pretty sure Daryl's eyes replied, "Yeah, I know."

He met Lori halfway between the truck and the house. He was hoping she would've stayed in the house, he wasn't ready for her to meet Daryl. Unfortunately, it had taken him a minute to get the carseat situated. Lori hardly came out, but she must have wanted to bitch at him about being five minutes late. It was worth it, though.
"What took ya so long? I'm late for my Pilates class," she snarled. She had Judith on her hip who lit up when she saw him.

"Overslept," he answered shortly, reaching out to grab the squirming baby who nearly leaped out of Lori's arms. *Don't blame ya,* he thought.

"We need ta figure out the child support, Rick. We're halfway into the month and she's already low on diapers and formula. She's also outgrown most of her winter clothes."

"Thought you were late," he sneered. He tried his best to keep his voice calm and not to let her get a rise out of him. It was like she went out of her way not to be civil when he was the one who had more right to be angry.

"I didn't mean right now. Sometime this week. I have Monday afternoon free. I'll stop by the shop."

"Would prefer ya didn't," he said calm but firm. She had already caused a scene more than once at his place of business. Probably out of spite.

"Well, I would've preferred that ya were here five minutes ago," she snapped. "And who the hell is that?" she bellowed upon noticing Daryl sitting in the truck. Rick had been trying to block her view, but that woman was crafty.

"Does Carl need anything?" he asked, trying to steer the conversation back to the kids.

"No, the baby's the expensive one."

He had to bite his tongue on that one. He didn't know why, he should've just told her right there that he knew she wasn't his. Might have saved a lot of trouble for him and his wallet.

"Is that the homeless guy ya brought home from the shelter? Dan? Darren?" Her words were laced with contempt.

"Daryl," he all but growled.

"Well, I don't like that ya didn't consult me on this when our kids are gonna be sleeping under the same roof as a vagrant. What kinda influence is he gonna have on Carl? Is he a druggie?"

"NO! And leave him outta this!" he yelled, finally raising his voice. She could bitch at him all she wanted, but he refused to allow her to insult Daryl. He'd gotten enough of that growing up. "And ya didn't consult me when ya started playin' house with the vagrant formerly known as my best friend! Did it occur to ya that I wouldn't want his influence around my kids?" He turned around and stormed back to the truck.

"It's not the same thing. We know Shane!" she insisted, rushing after him.

He put Judith in her carseat, "Carl, fasten her in," he said as he shut the door softly. "I thought I knew Shane. Thought I knew ya, too. I was wrong on both counts!" he yelled, yanking open his door. "Now, if you'll excuse us, unlike you, we actually have somewhere important ta be....And don't come by the shop!" he hissed, getting into the truck and slamming the door hard.

He turned the keys immediately and shifted into reverse. Lori stood rooted to the spot, both arms wide on her hips, a darkened glare attempting to burn a hole right through Daryl. To his credit, the man smiled wide at her and waved. How he didn't flip her off, Rick would never now, but he figured that was even better because she turned on a dime and stomped toward the house, long,
dark locks swaying with her fury.

Rick couldn't help but laugh. He flashed Daryl a smile and a wink, his eyes darting down to the smugly satisfying grin on thin lips. Daryl knew he was looking too because he swiped his tongue along his bottom lip and chuckled as Rick's chest gave a flutter and his breath stopped momentarily. Rick faced front shaking his head trying to will the tightness in his jeans to abate.

His life just got a lot more interesting.

*****

Not surprisingly, everyone had beaten them to the shelter. Even Merle, which was almost sad. Rick got Judith out of the truck while Carl grabbed her diaper bag and ran inside looking for Sophia. Rick stopped abruptly, just because he could, to open the door and Daryl crashed right into him, the brush of lips on his neck sent a shiver over his whole body.

He cleared his throat—steeling his composure and ignoring a chuckle coming from behind him—before reaching for the handle. Rick never had a good pokerface, he hoped him and Daryl would be put on separate jobs so the distance would make him behave himself and keep his mind on the fact that they were here to do some good.

Michonne had other plans. As soon as Beth stole Judith from his arms, she was there with a laundry list of chores for them to do together around the place. Luckily, they were all out in the open in plain view of the crowd because the last thing he needed was to get caught making out with a hot guy while he was supposed to be volunteering his time.

Before he knew it, they had worked well into the afternoon, and he had only been distracted twice by the look in Daryl's blue eyes leading to smashing his thumb with a hammer. So worth the pain. It wasn't his fault that it felt like Daryl was undressing him with his eyes every time he looked at him. Now that he knew he was allowed, it seemed he couldn't stop. And Rick never wanted him to.

"How's it goin' over here?" Michonne asked, bringing them both a bottle of water.

"'Bout finished for the day, I'd say," Rick said.

"Some of us are gonna head ta Bob's for a drink if ya'll wanna join us."

"We got the kids," Daryl said, and Rick's heart nearly burst with joy at how right that sounded coming out of his mouth.

"It's only a few rounds and it's tradition. Hershel and Beth usually watch the kids and I'm sure Carl and Judith won't be any trouble. Ya worked hard so let's go relax," Michonne insisted.

Daryl shrugged at Rick who shrugged back.

"Okay, two beers then we're gone," Rick said.

She smiled big and went to tell the others.

Rick tried really hard not to watch Daryl's lips wrap around his bottle of water when he took a drink, or the bob of his Adam's apple when he swallowed. He didn't know how slow the other man would want to take things, but he knew the wait would be worth it. However, he didn't know how much of this torture he could take without needing to rip the man's clothes off.

He wasn't looking forward to going out. He wanted to get Daryl home as quickly as he could to
figure out a way to steal another kiss from him while the kids played obliviously in the other room. Instead, he'd have to spend most of his concentration at the bar trying to quell the raging hard-on he'd been trying to tame all day and hoped no one noticed.

After taking the kids next door to play in the church nursery, they got in Rick's truck for the ride to the bar. Daryl had shotgun, Merle was sprawled out in the back flanked on either side by Carol and Michonne. Glenn and Maggie were in another full car following behind. The shelter was centrally located so the drive was fairly short.

They all followed Michonne to a booth in the corner—Daryl wiggling in beside him, their thighs pressed together—and situated themselves while Bob brought them a couple of pitchers that were practically waiting for them. They filled their glasses and drank a toast to a successful day.

The conversation was jovial. Everyone ribbed Merle good for both showing up and not running away. The older Dixon had all eyes on him as he recounted the particularly harrowing tail of how he and Officer Friendly had met for the first time. Merle was high at the time, and their account of the facts varied wildly, but Rick let him have his moment.

He couldn't be bothered with the truth anyway because under the table, a firm hand crept up his thigh to palm the rapidly swelling bulge in his overly restrictive jeans. And he had to bite his tongue hard—a familiar metal taste apparent—to hold back a keening moan of pleasure. He shot a glance to Daryl whose eyes was focused hard on his brother, the only thing giving him away was a twitch of his lips when Rick turned his head.

Rick swallowed hard and cleared his throat twice so, when he spoke, his voice wouldn't falter. "We should be getting back. Gotta get the kids home and fed." Daryl's hand made a quick retreat with his words, and Rick didn't miss the disappointed look that flickered across his face briefly.

"Tha's why ol' Merle here don't have no kids," Merle smirked.

"Ya sure about that?" Michonne teased.

"Me and my li'l brother are smarter than ta get tied down with any ankle biters. 'Sides, babies don't like us."

"Judith would disagree," Rick countered. "She likes Daryl more than she likes me. And don't think I didn't see her giggling at ya plenty today."

Merle scoffed good-naturedly, "Well then, I suppose we need ta be getting ya two lovebirds back ta yer nest."

Daryl shot him a deep scowl, but Rick only laughed because he couldn't argue with that.

They said their goodbyes and piled back into Rick's truck minus Michonne who decided to stay a little while longer. Carol and Merle were talking quietly in the back to themselves. Daryl was staring out the window bitting his thumb, his nervous habit as Rick had noticed, and he wondered what he'd done to cause him to clam up like that.

"See ya'll around. Take care Carol," Merle said before walking to his borrowed car.

Daryl stayed in the truck while Rick went and got the kids. It was dark by the time they came back out. He made sure Carol and Sophia got off okay before strapping Judith in and driving them all home.

"What shall we have for dinner?" Rick asked as they walked in the door. "Don't know if ya two
would want me ta try spaghetti. It'd be crap in comparison to yours, Daryl."

"I'll find somethin'," he replied as he sulking into the kitchen.

Rick took Judith upstairs to get her ready for bed as he racked his brain for clues as to what was eating at the younger man. All he had said was that he was ready to go home. He hoped Daryl hadn't taken that as a rejection of some sort for rubbing his dick under the table. It was the opposite in fact. He was very close to coming undone—the man had him wound tighter than the string on his crossbow, and it wouldn't've taken much at all—which was why they had to get out of there. And while he didn't expect it, it was very, very welcomed.

What the hell went wrong?

He tried not to let it worry him over dinner. Daryl did a good job avoiding his eyes. His own body tensed with ever missed connection at the thought that he might have compromised the progress Daryl had made with trusting him over the last few weeks. He wasn't sure he could bear the thought of losing his friendship over his selfish feelings. Or losing him for being too forward. Maybe kissing him had been a bad idea. What if Daryl wasn't ready for it?

But then again, Daryl kissed him first.

They had had a good day up to that point, a great day even. Perhaps he was overreacting. Maybe Daryl just needed some room to figure things out. He could understand that. He would give him all the time and space he needed. And if there was a problem, Rick was sure he could find it and fix it. Either way, his sleuthing skills would have to wait till Carl was in bed so they could talk.

Which meant two more hours of awkward tension as both men stewed in their heavy thoughts.
Daryl overreacts; Rick talks some sense into him.

**Daryl**

Daryl was pretty much in a daze after Rick pulled away from him. The kiss—if you could call it that, to him it was more like the Heavens opening up and embracing him—sent his head so far into the clouds that he wasn't sure he'd ever come down or even if he wanted to. He faintly remembered Rick leading him to the truck so they could start their day.

When he finally came down enough from his high to think even somewhat coherently, he couldn't help but stare at the man. He thought that perhaps he had imagined the whole thing, hallucinated from the combination of alcohol and nightmares. But then Rick would look back with a lustful grin and Daryl's blood would boil as he remembered the feel of those lips on his.

They pulled up to a quant little house in a quiet neighborhood that he would never have even dreamed of visiting. Carl was buzzing on the porch in excitement, and he wondered if the boy always acted like that when his dad picked him up. He couldn't blame him if he did.

His thoughts were interrupted when Rick's hand closed over his, and he knew that that was probably the last touch he'd get from him until at least tomorrow evening which might as well have been decades into the future. He was going to relish it now, commit it to memory, the warmth of his fingers, the callouses on his palms, the tingling that shot up his arm when Rick gave his hand one final squeeze.

The moment was interrupted when Carl flung open the door and climbing into the backseat. Rick pulled his hand away and got out as soon as he did, heading for Lori as she stormed out of the house. Carl leaned forward over Daryl's seat and gave him an awkward hug that he wasn't sure what to do with.

"Hey, Daryl!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Did you play my game while I was gone? You definitely need the practice."

"Nah, didn't have much time," Daryl answered.

Both of their attention was drawn out the window when Lori rose her voice to Rick. He wrapped his fingers around the door handle so that he would be ready at a moment's notice to jump out if he needed to cover his back. It was like an instinct, wanting to protect him like Rick always did for him.

A sentimental smile flooded his lips when he noticed baby Judith's hand fisted in Rick's shirt. His nerves calmed a little hoping that Lori wouldn't do anything stupid while the baby was in his arms. Judy looked good on his hip. He wondered briefly if Rick would ever want to have a baby with him some day. Probably not, he already had Carl. Then, there were logistics, but that was just wishful thinking, no point getting ahead of himself.
"What's she yellin' 'bout?" he asked the boy.

"Dunno...she's always yelling at him about something. I thought she'd stop after dad moved out. She said she only yelled because she wasn't happy. Thought that's why Shane moved in, but...."

Daryl watched as Rick's body language went from defensive to aggressive in the blink of an eye, and when he noticed Lori glaring passed Rick, he knew that they were talking about him. He figured that was the moment when Lori would give Rick the ultimatum to kick him out or never see the kids, Carl, ever again.

His first instinct was to get out and run away while Rick was preoccupied because he knew his heart couldn't take having to listen to Rick telling him to leave. Sure, Rick kissed him and said all those wonderful things in his ear, but he couldn't've possibly meant them. He was just a goddamned Dixon, and Rick was just confused. He'd figure it out soon enough that Daryl wasn't good enough for him, wasn't worth the trouble.

He was probably just Rick's mid-life crisis brought on by his nasty divorce. The man was just lonely and latched onto the first person he came across. Rick was probably just using him. He must've thought a guy, a Dixon, would really push her and Shane's buttons. He made his point to them and now he'd send Daryl on his way.

But that wasn't Rick.

He wasn't like that, like the people Daryl had grown up with, manipulative and conniving. Rick didn't take him in, let him in, just to be a pawn. He knew that, knew Rick. He'd never met anyone like him before, a man with integrity that made him want to be a better person. That sounded so cliché but it was the truth. Maybe he wasn't good enough for Rick right now, but maybe he could be. He wanted to be.

Him and Carl both flinched when Rick suddenly started hollering back at her.

"Dad doesn't usually yell, must be pissed," Carl said softly.

*Or defendin' my honor,* a tiny voice in the back of his mind said as his heart skipped a beat. He pushed it away.

Whatever she said must've been bad to push him that far. The crimson creeping up Rick's neck from under his collar was unmistakable; he was furious. Daryl couldn't stand the idea of being the reason of his outrage. He brought his hand to his mouth and started anxiously bitting on his thumb. His feet were getting restless as they started to twitch and his stomach was getting queasy. He should just go, get out and leave and never look back.

But the hand on the door handle wouldn't move.

Why couldn't he leave?

Rick's voice rung in his ears, "*I ain't ever leavin'."*

Why wouldn't Rick leave?

They watched as Rick spun on a dime and headed back to the truck.

"...not the same thing. We know Shane,*" he heard Lori say, voice shrill and cold, when Rick opened the door to put Judith in her carseat.
Whatever point she was trying to make about him was immediately shut down by Rick. The only other time he had seen Rick upset was when he was facing off with Phillip, but this was ten times worse, voice like pure napalm crackling in the cold morning air. The look of utter shock on her face told a story no words ever could: Rick had never stood up to her like that before. Ever.

He thought Rick would cave to whatever she said and bend to her will like wood putty; he had probably done so since before they were married. But he felt wanted knowing that Rick wouldn't turn him out without a fight. It made his heart swell with pride, acceptance, and maybe something like love. Okay, definitely something like love.

Shit, you're such a damn girl!

In that moment, he knew that when Rick said he wasn't leaving he also meant he wouldn't let Daryl go either. That was why he couldn't leave, couldn't open the door, even if he had really wanted to. He couldn't do that to the man. If Rick said he wouldn't leave, then Daryl sure as shit wasn't going to. Two stubborn ass magnets that's what they were.

He had already given up on fighting the fact that he was in love with the older man. But that was the first time he let himself believe that fucking Rick Grimes might feel the same way about him. So when Lori glared at him like he was the devil incarnate as they pulled out of the driveway, he couldn't find it in his heart to glare back. In that moment, he was filled to capacity with too much love.

He wasn't worried. He had a feeling he'd get a chance to tell her off soon enough. The idea of sticking his tongue down the throat of the amazing man she let get away while he did it had him smirking almost as much as the look of sex on Rick's face when he watched Daryl licked his lips.

That picture stayed with him all day. It didn't help that Michonne had them practically joined at the hip with every task she could think of at the shelter. If he hadn't known better, he would've thought she had alterer motives by the way she kept sneaking looks at them when she thought they weren't looking.

He tried to shake the thought. It was likely that she was staring at Rick because she liked him. Rick was a great father, anyone could see that, and he was hot as hell. Why wouldn't she be interested in him, in a good role model for her son? Not to mention the fact that he invited a stranger into his home that he met at her shelter. A big heart that man had.

He would've almost had himself convinced of that if it hadn't been for the fact that she was staring at the both of them, not just Rick. What if she could tell? She was a smart woman, it was possible that she picked up on the looks he tried desperately not to send Rick's way. But anyone who saw the man's ass had to know that was impossible.

She wasn't jealous, her eyes were too kind and soft for that. Then she'd whisper something to Carol and they'd both be staring at them with looks of mischief terribly hidden on their faces. It would've been funny if it wasn't making him so paranoid.

He didn't know whether or not Rick would ever be comfortable with anyone finding out about them. Even with everything Rick had said to him, he might be scared or ashamed of anyone knowing about their whatever it was they had. It would make sense because Daryl was scared and ashamed of it, too. That wasn't surprising considering what his daddy drilled into him his entire life, though.

Luckily, the day went by quickly as they jumped from task to task. He kind of missed spending time with the kids. Carl would come by every so often to 'supervise' as he called it. Then, he was
off again chasing Sophia, Beth and Judith. Hershel came by and lent them a hand with a few things. He teased Daryl about how he should've been a plastic surgeon with the way his head wound healed so nicely. There were a whole lot of scars on his body that he wished he could say the same for.

He worried what Rick would say about those when he saw them, if Daryl could ever let him see them. Perhaps that's what would send Rick heading for the hills, when he found out just how ugly he really was. Daryl could hardly bear to look at the marks his daddy gave him without vitriol and disgust. Rick would probably pity him and somehow that seemed worse.

It had only be two weeks, but it felt like a lifetime had passed since he moved in with Rick. He almost didn't feel like the same person anymore. It's amazing what a nice set of clothes and a good job had done to his confidence. Or how a simple man could've change his life so completely, built him up when he'd only ever been beaten down.

And now, he loved the man. It was much too soon for that, for confessions, but it didn't make the feeling any less true. At first, he had tried to tell himself that it was gratitude that he was feeling when the flutters kicked up in his chest or his throat closed up when Rick looked at him kindly. But it was more than that, and he didn't know how to explain it, he just knew that it was true.

When they made it to the bar, he couldn't help be feel like him and Rick were strategically corralled to sit next to each other. He was going to slide in the booth opposite him as he had done weeks ago at the diner, but Carol steered him to the other side and he couldn't complain.

That was when the evening veered off course. Maybe it was the alcohol or the endless pining he'd done for Rick all day, or their morning encounter with Lori, but he had a moment of bravery and he took it before he could change his mind. Everyone was engrossed with the story Merle was telling so he slowly snaked his hand up Rick's firm thigh to cup his manhood through his jeans.

He had no idea what had possessed him to do so. He'd never done anything like that before, never had anyone to do it for. It was like an out of body experience at first until he felt Rick's cock hardening in his grasp. The reaction both excited and terrified him. When Rick said they had to get going, he knew it was his fault. They had their first kiss twelve hours ago and he'd already freaked him out and sent him scattering!

He was pretty livid with himself for the rest of the night and stayed quiet for the evening, coiling in on himself, not wanting to say something stupid that would make the whole thing worse. He knew Rick kept staring at him, he just couldn't find the strength to look into his disappointed eyes, no matter how gorgeous they were, so he refused to look back.

He was so relieved that Rick hadn't kicked him out after the whole terrible first kiss fiasco, but feeling him up in a crowded bar was an entirely different ballgame. He had essentially molested his boss in a goddamned bar. He was mortified, furious with himself, and he could hardly eat his food because his stomach was so twisted in nervous knots.

For once, they weren't the good kind he had around Rick.

So there he sat, quietly on the couch, simmering in his putrid self-loathing as he waiting for Carl to get sent to bed so he could have a chance to apologize. And he just hoped he wouldn't fuck that up too.

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His pulse shot up as soon as he heard Rick hit the top of the stairs. He had went up to tuck Carl in
and lay Judith down. When he reached the bottom, he walked over to the coffee table in front of him and sat down. Daryl still couldn't bring himself to look him in the eye. So he waited, for the hammer to fall, for Rick to snap at him like he had done with Lori, to tell him he had to leave—

"Daryl, did I do somethin' wrong?" Rick asked, his voice low and unsure.

*What the fuck?*

"What? No! I-I did, I shouldn't've touch ya like that. Christ, I'm sorry Rick, I didn't know what I was doin'. Shit, I told ya I've never did nothin' like this before and I already fucked it up. Just please give me another chance! I won't touch ya again, I promise," he rambled. He was sure his words had run together into one, but he hoped his point still got across. He felt like a coward because he couldn't even look at him to find out.

Rick chuckled fondly and kneeled down on the floor in front of him. When Rick rested his hands on Daryl's knees, he couldn't help but look down at him, into those hopelessly blue eyes that were filled with the exact opposite of whatever it was he was expecting to find.

"Ya didn't do anythin' wrong, Daryl. I liked every bit of what you did. Shit, ya almost had me comin' in my pants! And I can't say I would've minded. Why do ya think I wanted ta get outta there so fast? You were drivin' me crazy and I didn't want anyone finding out about us until we had a chance ta figure it out ourselves," Rick said.

Daryl had to turn his head as he blinked away a bucket of tears threatening to rain down on him. God, he was such an idiot! He overreacted monumentally. Why did Rick like him anyhow?

When he didn't say anything, Rick continued, "We just hadn't had time ta talk yet is all. I don't know how slow ya wanna go or where your boundaries are, don't know how much ya want me ta touch ya or where, and ya don't know mine. But I told ya that we'll figure it out, and it's gonna take time."

After a minute of silence, he found the nerve to look back at him. "I don't wanna fuck it up, Rick, like I fuck everythin' up."

"Ya haven't fucked anythin' up since I've known you. And even if ya did, and when ya do, 'cause everyone makes mistakes, we'll fix it...together. I'll mess things up too, I have no doubt about that, and I hope ya'll be there ta help me fix 'em when the time comes. 'Cause that's what friends are for. That's what people do when they care about each other, and I care about you...a lot."

"I care 'bout ya, too. But I told ya I don't know how ta do this." He was well aware of how pathetic his whimpering, wavering voice sounded, but he was too emotionally drained to care.

Rick moved his hands away and swallowed hard, something like hurt in his eyes. "Do...do you not want this? Because I told ya that it's alright. I'll understand," he said calmly, his eyes betraying the turmoil in his head that his voice masked.

Daryl froze as panic washed over him. *This* was all he wanted, all he'd ever wanted, and if he didn't get his shit together it was going to slip right through his fingers. But there was a lump in his throat that refused to budge. His breathing picked up and nothing would stay in focus. He was drowning.

His eyes must've given Rick his answer because before he knew what had happened, the man had hauled him off the couch and into his arms. Rick had spun himself around and sat with his back to the couch. Daryl was sitting between his parted legs leaning his back against his chest. Rick's hands wrapped around him in a firm grip.
"I'm gonna need to hear the words, Daryl, because there can't be any room for doubt about this. It's too important," he whispered into his ear.

"I want ya, Rick. I-I want this, but...but I don't know why ya want me. Christ, I ain't good enough for ya! Why can't your stubborn ass see that?" came Daryl's heated reply as he tried to sit up. He wasn't trying that hard.

Rick gave a low chuckle. "It's not a matter of you being good enough or not. Ya are, but it's about how we fit together, like this, how we were made to fit like puzzle pieces. How I feel content and, shit, I don't know, complete when I'm with you. And I hope that's not too forward, but that's just the way it is, how I feel, like you're my fate. Daryl, you can't fight fate, and I'm tired of tryin'. It's as simple as that," he said matter-of-factly.

Daryl was tired of fighting, too, but that didn't mean he could just stop. "Rick, I got nothing ta give ya but this scarred up body and bad dreams," he grumbled.

"Well, you're in luck 'cause that's all I'm askin' for."

Why couldn't Rick just leave him alone? Why'd he keep making him feel like he was worth something? He wasn't...was he? Rick thought he was, maybe that could be enough. Maybe that was all he needed to be, worth something to Rick. He wanted to be, he wanted to try to be.

But now, he kind of felt like a kid being coddled, not like he knew what that actually felt like with his upbringing. Weird part was, he didn't mind it, didn't mind Rick's hands wrapped around him, holding him, or his words making him feel good about himself, about being with him. He never, ever, thought he'd like it so much.

"Rick, I—"

"I know...I do. You're scared, ya don't know how ta do this, but ain't I enough for you ta wanna try?"

"Course you're enough," Daryl insisted. He was more than enough, he was everything.

"Alright then, I don't wanna hear another word about ya messin' up 'cause I can't imagine ya doin' anythin' that'd drive me away. As long as ya never get knocked up by my best friend while I'm in a coma, you'll be a step up from my last relationship."

"Her damn loss," he scoffed. He felt the rumbled against his back when Rick laughed in agreement.

"If somethin' upsets you, trust that we can work it out, okay? It ate me up inside havin' ta watch ya suffer like ya have since the bar when I didn't know what was wrong or how ta help you."

Daryl gave a curt nod. He could do that, he could trust Rick. He was the only person other than Merle that he could say that about. And he certainly didn't want to make Rick upset because he was being stupid.

"Now then, down to the serious stuff...," Rick said firmly.

Daryl tensed, having no idea what that was supposed to mean.

"Don't you ever think that your hands on me are not welcome," Rick said with a playful sternness as he nuzzled his nose into the crook of his neck.

The tension drained from Daryl's body as they both laughed.
He'd never been good talking about his feeling, about what he wanted, what was wrong, what he was afraid of. In his house, it was violently discouraged. But he wanted to do right by Rick, so he was going to try to push back all his instincts for self-preservation from years of abuse and neglect and let him inside the walls he'd maintained all his life. He owed the man that much. And if he ever trusted anyone with his soul, it was Rick.

They sat there for awhile, Daryl melding into Rick's body. It was the closest he'd ever been to anyone before, most at peace he'd ever been. He had to wonder if relationships were always supposed to make people feel like that—safe and protected—and he'd just had shitty luck with other people he had encountered, or if it was all because of Rick. He settled on the latter because he was certain no one else could ever make him feel the way he felt in that moment or any other moment they'd shared.

Rick seemed just as content to hold him, steady breathe flowing in and out over Daryl's shoulder as their breathing pattern synchronized. He wouldn't have been surprised if their heart beats had done the same, like they were syncing their bodies like you would watches. Rick was holding both his hands, palms to backs, as their arms crisscrossed over his chest, their thumbs engaging in a thumb war to see who could caress more skin.

Every single one of his senses were heightened. Stubble like sandpaper stripping layers of his skin away every time they moved their heads. Rick's cold feet seeking his out for both more contact and warmth. The heat radiating out of Rick's chest and into his back was sure to be making their shirts sweaty. He knew it'd be cold as soon as they peeled themselves apart.

He could hear the clock ticking in the kitchen, a random car driving by, even a neighbor bumping around next door who he knew he'd knock out if they woke the baby—that was more for his sake than Judith's. His eyes were mostly transfixed on their feet. That was only because some dumb bimbo Merle brought home one night kept going on and on about how feet position was tied to attraction and was a good unconscious tell in a person's body language.

He took it as a good sign that Rick's were rubbing up against his. He probably should've remembered that tidbit earlier, it might've saved him some unnecessary worry. He definitely had to keep an eye on them from now on to make sure they were pointing in his direction or were closer to him than to anyone else.

Of course, all of those hyperaware senses crumbled into nothing but want when Rick started kissing his neck. He tilted his head to the side, their breaths no longer steady but erratic, goosebumps breaking out over every inch of him. He pivoted his body until their lips met, his need to taste him so overwhelming that his skin had started to crawl.

One of Rick's hand rose to cradle the back of his head, his own draping over the older man's shoulders. It was a little sloppy and lazy compared to the one from that morning, but it was every bit as good. He had no idea that a kiss could convey some much emotion, but it was as if he could feeling everything Rick wanted to say to him, or perhaps everything he wanted him to say.

"I've been waitin' for that all day!" Rick happily stated, when they broke away for a breather. His darkened eyes shifted back and forth between Daryl's eyes and kiss-swollen lips.

"Me too," he replied.

"You taste incredible." Rick's voice was sultry and smooth when he spoke.

"What do I taste like?" Daryl's own voice was so rough he hardly recognized it.
"Shit, I don't know, manna from Heaven or somethin'," he chuckled.

"What the fuck is that?" Daryl asked, brow furrowed.

"No idea, somethin' good. Carl raved about it after church one Sunday. Along with milk and honey. Wouldn't mind coverin' you in some," Rick snickered.

"Milk or honey?" he smirked.

"You're already sweet enough but the milk would probably be messier. Ya don't mind bein' sticky, do ya?"

"Thought ya said ya didn't have game, Grimes," Daryl said feigning suspicion.

"Honey's definitely goin' on the grocery list."

"Whatever ya say, honey," Daryl said, his lips curved up into a flirty smile.

"That what ya gonna call me, darlin'?" Rick teased back.

"Shit...," Daryl mumbled shyly. He heard Maggie and Glenn use pet names all the time, but he never thought him and Rick would do the same. Not that he minded, it was kind of adorable. Was he allowed to think that?

"How 'bout 'sugar'?" Rick smirked.

Daryl's eyes narrowed. He was not a fan of 'sugar'. That's what Merle called all his 'dates'.

Rick bit his lip, obviously studying his expression, "Definitely not 'sugar'...."

Rick smiled and leaned toward him for another round of kisses. Just as their lips met, they heard Judith start crying upstairs and movement which had to be Carl going to her rescue. They jumped apart and stumbled to their feet, one last peck on the lips signaling the end of their alone time for the night. He may have been a little upset about it, but at least him and Rick were able to talk things out.

"Guess that's all for tonight...," Rick said reluctantly as they started up the stairs, flipping off the light switch as they passed. They went their separate ways at the top, him going to his bed in Carl's room, Rick going to his room to calm Judith.

And while he wasn't worried about having another nightmare tonight, he prayed that he wouldn't have a wet dream with Carl sleeping on the top bunk.
**Rick**

There had been several times in Rick's adult life where he felt truly afraid. Being a former deputy, most of those instances occurred on the job. A call gone bad, the day he was shot, just about every time he had to stare down the barrel of a criminal's gun. There were a few of those times when he was out of uniform: the day Carl was born, the day his father died, the moment he realized Judith wasn't his.

None of them compared to the sheer terror that flooded his heart at the thought that Daryl might not want him. He could live without Lori, that's what made it so easy to push her away. He could live without being a cop, the only other thing he'd ever wanted to do besides build things.

But he wasn't sure he could say the same about Daryl.

That was a lie. He knew—deep down at the core of his very being—that he couldn't live without him. And he never wanted to. As irrational as those feelings were three months out of a broken marriage towards a guy, a guy, he just met, he was surprisingly okay with them. Now, he might lose him.

His anxiety had been steadily increasing since they returned from the bar, crippling in its intensity. He took a little longer than usual to tuck Carl in and rock Judith to sleep because he was both trying to steel his nerves and delay the inevitable. He just knew that Daryl was going to tell him he had changed his mind, that their kiss was a mistake.

He finally bit the bullet and sulked downstairs. He didn't want to waste anymore time, he just needed to get it over with if that's what Daryl wanted. Why was him leaving more horrifying a thought than Lori actually doing the same thing? What Lori did made his heart ache, but Daryl leaving would be too much to bear. His heart wouldn't just break, it'd burn up and scatter on the wind in less than a second.

Daryl was sitting where he had left him, arms crossed over his chest, one leg bouncing nervously. He crossed the living room and sat down in front of him. Leaning forward, he rested his forearms on his knees, working up the courage to say something, but what? He had a feeling that Daryl wouldn't know where to start. Not that he did, but he figured he was the more experienced of the two with relationships.

He took a deep breath and asked what he had done wrong because he was sure it was on him that Daryl went spiraling out of control. Maybe the man decided that he couldn't deal with his baggage: with Lori, with dating someone with children, someone who'd never been with a man before. Perhaps Daryl realized that he wasn't worth the trouble.

He could understand that, and he wouldn't hold it against him if it was too much too soon.
When Daryl started stuttering out his reply, Rick knew he had read the whole thing wrong. Daryl had been afraid, just as much as he was about messing up and driving him away. He was just as terrified as Rick was, maybe even more so, about losing him. That's when he knew that everything he felt about Daryl—the passion and belonging that he'd never felt with anyone else—Daryl had felt about him, too.

He knew that he'd never wanted anything or anyone as much as he wanted Daryl in that moment, needed even, and he knew that it was going to take time to build back up what Daryl's father had so successful tore asunder, but fuck if he wasn't going to try. Daryl didn't need to be fixed, he just needed to be nurtured, and Rick was going to do that.

Their talk went well, he thought. He wasn't sure how much got through to the younger man, but he tried his best to encourage him to give them a chance, to explain why he wanted to be with him even though his feelings were hard for him to articulate. His words were the god honest truth, though. He needed him, and if he had to reassure Daryl of that everyday, he happily would.

He wasn't sure how long they sat there in silence afterwards, Daryl's soft breathing the only thing he could concentrate on, the heat and weight of his body pressed back into his. He wanted to hold him forever and keep him safe, wanted to protect him from everything that had ever hurt him in the past, to bear the suffering that he'd probably only ever handled alone.

He wanted to chase the nightmares away and heal the scars that Daryl had alluded to.

How had this man, this shy, timid man, bewitched him so completely? Why the fuck had the universe kept them apart for so long? It didn't make sense for him to feel so utterly complete with someone he hadn't known a month. But Daryl wasn't someone, he was everything. He was solid in his arms but liquid in his veins, quiet with his lips but expressive with his eyes, rough on the outside while soft at heart, so simply complex, so painfully euphoric, so goddamn beautiful.

He couldn't expect Daryl to keep his hands to himself—didn't want him to—when all he wanted to do was put his lips all over his body and never take them off. And for awhile there, he thought he'd never have to. That was until Judith started crying.

There was no denying it now, she was absolutely a Li'l Cockblocker!

*****

Rick woke up happy for the first time in months, maybe years, genuinely happy. And it was pretty fantastic. He got up and made his way into the kitchen to make their usual Sunday breakfast. Right after he poured the eggs into the skillet to scramble, two strong hands slithered across his abs, and he felt the soft flutter of lips on the back of his neck. God, he could get used to that.

That was followed by a gruff voice in his ear that nearly buckled his knees. "Mornin'," was all Daryl said, needed to say.

He couldn't say anything in response. His mind had been effectively turned into mush, and at the risk of blubbery like an idiot, he kept his mouth shut. He was certain that the eggs were going to burn but he really couldn't find it in himself to care. Especially so when those hot fingers crept under his shirt. He found himself pressing back into Daryl's body and—

_Holy fuck! He's hard!_

Then, _he_ was hard.

Daryl worked his way around from Rick's neck to his jaw. He turned his head to meet the younger
man's lips, his hand releasing the spatula to thread through sun-kissed hair. That got him up quicker than coffee. It was soft and hot with a nibble at the end because who doesn't like that.

When Daryl pulled away, he was left breathless looking into deep blue eyes pooling with want and overflowing with arousal. For him. He was truly at a loss for words because he never expected for the quiet, jumpy man he'd lived with for two weeks to be so handsy and affectionate, and he wasn't sure if that was a testament to himself, a compliment he should take. But he was not going to complain about it. Not in the slightest.

"You are so damn beautiful," Rick finally managed to spit out.

Daryl studied him for a moment, searching for the lie that he obviously wouldn't find. He looked away and blushed before turning back to Rick and flashing him a smug albeit brief grin. It didn't last long because Rick just had to kiss it off his face, or rather, he needed those lips on him again or he would've gone crazy. Perhaps he already was.

"Burnin' the eggs," Daryl mumbled between kisses.

"For once, it's not my fault," Rick chuckled. "Go wake the kids, I'll start batch two."

Daryl gave a grunt of disapproval but released his grip and left the kitchen. Rick had breakfast on the table, new eggs and all, by the time he came back in with Judith on his hip. When did that man not look sexy? Carl was a minute behind him, and they all settled in to eat.

"Can we go to the park after breakfast, dad? It's not gonna be that cold out today, is it?" Carl asked.

"I could use some fresh air. Whatcha say Judy?" Rick said to the squawking baby beside him. "I think she's in. How 'bout you Daryl? Wanna go play on the swings with us?" he teased.

"Yeah, Daryl! You gotta come with us!" Carl insisted.

"Gonna show me how? 'Cause I ain't been on a swing in awhile," Daryl said, messing up Carl's hair.

"I'll teach you! It's just like riding a bike," Carl assured him.

"Le's get a move on then," Rick said as he got up and put his and Judith's plate away. "We gotta go ta the store after, and I wanna get back before she gets fussy. Also, we need more eggs." He flashed Daryl a knowing smirk, and nearly giggled out loud when he got one back.

Rick put the pans in the sink to soak and took Judith upstairs to get ready. They spent an hour at the park before the wind picked up and almost froze them all to death. After that, they went to the grocery store. Carl pushed Judith in the cart while Rick watched Daryl run back and forth picking out things for their dinner for the week. Rick felt guilty for not helping much, but Daryl didn't seem to mind.

The rest of the afternoon went on like normal. Judith was put down for a nap and the three boys went to play a board game before Rick released Carl from his mandatory father/son/Daryl bonding time to play video games. Daryl was getting pretty good he'd notice when he would glance up from the book Carol was making him read.

After Judith woke up, Rick would always ply them with sugar so they would be wired when he took them home. He couldn't decide if that was a bad thing or not. It scored him points from the kids—because who doesn't like sugar?—while simultaneously driving Lori and Shane up the wall for a few hours. He probably shouldn't use his kids as weapons but Judith eating a cupcake was
Lori was a health nut so it was only natural that he had to be the cool dad who added artificial flavors to their diet on the weekends. He was pretty sure that was part of the divorced dad's club. At least Daryl fed them well, better than he could do, better than Lori and Shane. That's what Carl would say. He only hoped he told his mother the same thing. That wasn't vindictive, that was him being proud of Daryl and wanting to brag.

Before he knew it, it was time to go. That wasn't true, he had been watching the clock willing time to speed up so he could finally have Daryl alone. He wasn't sure what was going to happen when he got home. He'd settle for another hot make out session, but he'd gladly take whatever Daryl was willing to give him.

"Time to go, little man. Go get your things," he said to Carl. Like always, he huffed and drug his feet like the teenager he wasn't yet.

Rick followed him up to get the baby's things, a little too wired himself to keep his hands off Daryl if they were alone at the moment. It didn't take long before they trekked back downstairs. Carl said his goodbyes to Daryl and went out to load the truck.

"Hey, I don't know when I'll be back," Rick said to Daryl as he hovered by the door. "Lori's gonna be pissed about yesterday so it might be awhile."

"Want me to go with ya?" Daryl asked concerned as he walked over to him.

"Think that might make it worse," Rick said honestly.

He didn't want Lori taking out their troubles on the other man. If Shane was there, it'd only be worse. Sunday's weren't Lori's best days to talk, though. She usually had a bible group over, so with any luck, she wouldn't make a scene. No use adding to the fire at this point. She was already pissed about Daryl. It would be worse when Shane realized he was a Dixon.

"Ya'll were fightin' over me, huh? She wants me gone, right? Just another strung out Dixon to her," Daryl said, hanging his head shamefully.

"Don't matter what she wants. Or thinks," Rick replied firmly with a squeeze on a bicep that had no right being as ripped as it was. Couldn't complain about that either. "She kinda forfeited her claim to have any say over my life a year and a half ago."

"What if...," Daryl trailed off and starting biting at his thumb like he did when he was nervous. Rick couldn't help but laugh a little at how damn cute he was. He was just begging to be kissed, but Rick had to get the kids home first.

"What if what?" He was absolutely incapable of removing his eyes from Daryl's mouth, entranced by soft pink lips and teeth he really needed sinking their way into his flesh. The younger man noticed him staring, removing his thumb as his smile went dark with lust. It was gone way too soon.

"....she makes ya kick me out," Daryl finally finished.

"She can try, but she ain't gonna win that one. She might even threaten ta take Carl away, but that ain't gonna work either. I got the best lawyer in town and Carl's old enough ta have a say in things, so I ain't worried," he said calmly as he looked Daryl in the eye in an attempt to ease his nerves.

Daryl gave a nod of understanding from under those unnaturally gorgeous lashes, and Rick just
couldn't help but grab him and kiss him, baby in one arm, Daryl in the other. They both jumped back guiltily when Carl shut the truck door outside. They had been just out of his line of sight.

"Now, that don't mean she's ain't gonna bitch and moan about it, especially when she finds out all the things I plan on doin' to ya, but I don't have a say in who she lives with so she doesn't get the luxury ta do the same ta me. Okay?"

Daryl grunted sharply.

"Okay, I'll be back as soon as I can. But since I don't know when that'll be, ya might not wanna start dinner just yet," Rick said turning towards the door.

Daryl stood in the threshold and waved to Carl as they pulled away. The drive was quick like usual and soon they were pulling up to the crowded curb. Carl grabbed the bags and flung them over his shoulder while Rick held baby Judith and carried the carseat to the door.

Lori scowled at him, hands on her boney hips, when she opened the door. "You're late," she hissed quietly. "Second time this weekend, Rick. Is it too much to ask of you not to disrupt my schedule?" She reached for Judith who hesitantly went to her. She was rather perceptive for a baby, probably picked up on Lori's anger.

"I apologize. I know how much you hate when things disrupt your routine," he replied as sincerely as possible. He really didn't like arguing with her. She seemed to love picking fights with him, though.

"How long's that Darren guy gonna be livin' with you?" Her screeching tone was even more hostile than yesterday. She scrunched up her face into an ugly array of lines that he had never been more happy to have gotten rid of. At least Daryl was cute when he scowled.


He took great joy in watching her face pale as she registered the name that fell from his lips like molasses, smooth and silken. He could've sworn there was a flash of jealousy mixed in with the hatred and fear on her face, but it was gone before she probably even recognized it.

For a second, he wondered what she would think about them. Most likely she would turn it around on her. She'd claim he was trying to get back at her, to hurt her. Or that he was so heartbroken over losing her that he had to give up women altogether. Or probably that he lost his mind without her. Little did she know that her cheating was the second best thing that ever happened to him, Daryl being the first. Well, maybe it was a tie between him and Carl.

"I have ta be headin' home. He'll be worryin' if I'm not back soon for dinner," Rick said with a carefree smile. The next look she gave him was definitely one of jealousy. Carl must've told her how good of a chef Daryl was. Or maybe it was because of how big his grin was when he spoke so fondly of someone who wasn't her or the glint in his eye he couldn't hold back when he called his apartment 'home' for the first time and truly meant it.

He didn't have time to dwell on it because Daryl was in fact at home waiting for him. He spun on a dime, ignoring her calling his name, clearly irritated when the man she had ruled over for so long had finally grown enough of a spine to walk away from her instead of putting up with her shit. He smiled all the way back. After making one necessary stop, that is.

*****
Rick knew something wasn't right the second he stepped inside their apartment. He was hoping Daryl would be waiting at the door, naked on the couch, bent over the stove as he stirred dinner like usual, something, anything other than walking into an empty house. But the first floor was deserted.

"Daryl?" he called out as headed towards the stairs. It was possible that the man was waiting for him in bed or using the bathroom. Regardless, no amount of assurance from their conversation last night could drive away the nagging fear that was threatening to cripple him at the possibility that Daryl had left him. He was more than afraid.

"Daryl?" he repeated a little louder as he checked the rooms upstairs.

The apartment was empty and he was alone.

He was two seconds away from panic. Flopping down on Daryl's bed, he buried his face in his hands and tried to steady his breathing and racing pulse. He tried to think of places Daryl might have gone: to a bar, to Merle's, another country maybe. Everything had been going well. He was serious when he said that he wasn't going to let Lori force him to give up either him or Carl, but what if that scared him off?

When he was sure his shaky legs would hold him up, he peeked in Daryl's drawers. His clothes were all still there. Maybe he ran to the store for something? Lube or condoms like he had done on his way home? There was a small gas station at the corner they bought milk from a few days ago so it was possible. Perhaps he thought he'd take a walk while he waited for Rick to come home.

What if he felt pressured? It would be a lie if Rick said he hadn't been looking forward to moving their relationship forward a bit, but he was content to let Daryl lead. He had never been with a man before, and even though he wasn't sure, he could only assume that Daryl had a little more experience in that area than he did.

He moped down the stairs heading for the discrete bag he brought home. It was placed on the small table by the door that he always threw his keys on. He picked up the bag and immediately saw the small slip of paper underneath. Scribbled in Daryl's chicken scratch writing was a four word note:

*Merle's hurt. County hospital.*

He grabbed his keys and ran right out the door without a second thought.

The drive to the hospital felt longer than it actually was. He had no idea what 'hurt' meant. Bar fight gone bad? Overdose? Mugging? The message was too vague to offer any sort of comfort. Knuckles white on the steering wheel, he broke a few posted speed limits, but all he cared about was getting to Daryl, to comfort him. He really missed his cruiser right about now.

He pulled into the hospital and barely had the mind to put the brake on and pull the keys out of the ignition before he was racing through the ER doors. He spotted the information desk and made his way over. He was halfway there when he heard Daryl call to him.

"Rick?"

It was heart breaking; that voice, that tone, scared and feeble on the verge of tears, unsteady, a question like he wasn't sure if Rick would be coming or not. Like his eyes were playing tricks on him. Then Rick spun around, and the face accompanying it was even worse; swollen, tear-stained eyes laced with worry. Afraid of what to do, of losing his only kin, of being alone, of having a need
for something Rick knew Daryl didn't know how to ask for.

He rushed to him, huge strides carrying him across hard, sterile tiles until his body engulfed its shivering counterpart, its other half. Daryl's hands were pinned between them, clutching his shirt for dear life, face buried into his chest, shoulders heaving from sobs Rick felt more than heard.

"Shhh, Sweetheart, it's alright," Rick cooed. He didn't have the slightest clue what to say, and he was certain that his grip was too tight but he couldn't let go. "I got ya. I'm right here, whatever ya need, I got ya," he said softly, his hands calmly stroking his rigid back, trying to will away the tension in him.

They stayed like that for awhile, in the middle of the sparse waiting room, Rick holding him up and damn happy to do so. Breathing in his scent brought him peace, and he hoped Daryl found the same thing in his. He shushed him gently and whispered comforting words into his hair with the occasional kiss on the top of his head that he knew the woman at the desk found odd from her weird smirk but that he didn't care.

Daryl caught his breath and raised his head slightly, lips pressed firmly into Rick's skin right above the neck of his shirt. Only then did they loosen their hold, a light kiss on Daryl's temple had the younger man pulling back. Rick cupped his face and wiped his tears away with his thumbs.

He kissed Daryl's forehead before kissing his lips, trying his best to pour into it every bit of comfort and support that he had to give. Daryl let out a low whimper, a strangled laugh when they parted, Rick leaning his forehead onto his because he couldn't stand not to be that close.

"You okay?" Rick finally asked, breaking the silence. He knew the answer was 'no' considering the circumstances, but he didn't know what else to say in the moment.

"Better," Daryl replied, letting out a more coherent, yet still low, laugh. "Just needed ya."

"I know. I'm here, ya got me," Rick assured him. He kissed him again before hugging him tightly to his chest once more. Daryl's hands released their death grip on the front of his shirt and wrapped around his back.

"'S the doctor," he said, suddenly pulling back from Rick.

Rick turned and saw a familiar man in scrubs talking to the nurse who was pointing to them. Rick let him go and intertwined their fingers, letting Daryl take the lead to the desk.

He gave a sigh of relief as they passed a woman with her face too close to her book not to have been suspicious. They made brief eye contact and she grinned warmly at him. He didn't dare turn back to the other handful of people no doubt staring at them after their make out session. If even one had been looking at them funny, he might've sent them to the ER if they hadn't been there already.

He didn't care about intolerance or homophobia being directed at him—now or in the future—but Daryl didn't need that right now, not when he was hurting. Maybe it was something they'd have to get used to, the occasional snicker or scowl, but nothing and no one would ever be able to keep him from Daryl, from something so beautiful. Especially not bigotry or hate.

"Hey Rick! It's been a while," Dr. Jenner said as he held out his hand.

"Yeah, a few months, Doc. Good ta see ya," Rick replied as he shook his hand. "Daryl, this is Dr. Jenner. He was one of my doctors while I was in a coma."
Daryl grunted but shook his hand when the doctor offered it.

"Are you assigned ta Merle's case?" Rick continued.

"Mr. Dixon's? Yes, I was. He's being transferred upstairs as we speak," he said turning to Daryl. "I'm not sure what you've been told—"

"Nothin'," Daryl snipped.

"Right, well, your brother was caught up in an accident on the interstate, ten car pileup, and he was thrown from his motorcycle into the middle of it. There was a transport truck carrying some corrosive chemicals and Merle was unfortunately exposed to them."

"Whatcha mean exposed?" Daryl hissed, clearly agitated at the doctor's longwinded explanation.

"How bad is it?" Rick asked, with a squeeze of Daryl's hand to reassure him that he wasn't alone.

"He has some acid burns in places that will heal with time, a few broken bones from the crash, and a mild concussion. However...," Jenner hesitated slightly, "...the damage to his right arm was extensive."

"And that means?" Rick continued for them as he felt Daryl's hand start to shake in his.

"We had to amputate it. There was just nothing else we could've done, no other option. I'm sorry," he said, a solemn expression on his face that he'd probably had to use a million times in his career. "They are taking him to a room, shortly. Someone will come and get you to take you to him."

"Thank you, Doc," Rick said, shaking the man's hand before turning back to Daryl and wrapping his arm around him to rub his back soothingly.

"How's, uh, how's Judith, was it?" asked a slightly confused Jenner looking expectantly between them.

"She's good, healthy. Carl too. My wife and I are separated. Well, in the middle of a divorce actually," he explained.

"Sorry to here that."

"Don't be. It was for the best," Rick assured him.

"I'm sure...I'll send an orderly out to escort you up. Take care, Rick. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Dixon," Jenner said as he headed back into the in ER.

Rick turned all his attention back to Daryl and wrapped his other arm around him. "You okay, Sweetheart?"

"They took his hand?" Daryl muttered in shock, leaning into him. "It's gone?"

"He's gonna be alright, Daryl. He'll get through this. You'll help him do that, we'll help him." Rick tried to sound as optimistic as possible, giving him another kiss on the temple for good measure. "Ya wanna sit down?"

Daryl shook his head.

"Okay...when they show us to his room, I'll find a vending machine and cook us dinner. How's that sound?" he quipped trying to lighten the mood a little as he released the hug.
"Bet ya'd find a way ta burn that too," Daryl said, the tiniest hint of smile on his face.

"I'm sorry if it was weird that I didn't introduce ya as my, uh, my boyfriend," Rick chuckled nervously. "Didn't know if you'd be okay with that. We hadn't talked about it. Didn't wanna make ya uncomfortable. Although, I'm sure everyone else in the waitin' room probably figured it out."

"I'm okay with it...if ya are."

"I'm very much okay with it. My boyfriend's really hot," Rick drawled in his ear. He smiled fondly when Daryl blushed. "How'd ya get here?" he asked, a little confused.

"Carol came and got me. Made me leave ya a note. She had ta get back to Sophia, though. Said Dale called Hershel when the cops showed up lookin' for kin and he called Michonne and she called Carol."

"We should probably get some cell phones. I cut mine off after I threw it across the room 'cause I was tired of Lori houndin' me all the time," he sighed.

"Well, I ain't gonna let that happen anymore," Daryl said sternly. Rick smiled because he knew he meant it.

"That was the smallest note ever, by the way. Almost missed it the second time, too," Rick smirked.

"Second what?"

"Second time I scoured the house looking for ya. Thought I scared ya off," he admitted bashfully.

"Never gonna happen," Daryl said, hooking his arm around Rick's waist under his jacket.

"Then, I was scared shitless on the drive over 'cause I didn't know what the hell was goin' on," he explained, resting his head on Daryl's. "But he's alive and you're okay and we're okay. And everythin' gonna be fine."

"Mr. Dixon?" asked a deep voice from behind them.

"Yeah?" Daryl answered as they turned around.

"I can take you to your brother's room. If you'll follow me," said the orderly. They did and soon came to a private room on the third floor. "A nurse will be in soon to answer any questions," the man said, ushering them in the door.

"Thanks," Rick replied. "Do ya want some time alone?" he asked Daryl.

"No," he answered, shaking his head.

The curtain was pulled in front of the door for privacy and when they peered around it, they saw a sleeping Merle. He was hooked up to an iv and a few monitors, several bandages on his body where Rick assumed the chemical burns were, and his now severed limb wrapped in a thick layer of gauze.

Daryl walked around to his good hand and took it in his. Rick brought both of the chairs in the room up close to the bed so they could sit. He rubbed Daryl's back and shoulders soothingly, unsure of what else he could do to help make him feel better.

He leaned over, kissed Daryl right underneath his ear, and whispered, "Gonna get some chips and
"coffee, whatcha want, babe?"

"You," he answered simply.

"Ya already have that. I meant ta eat."

"You," Daryl said again with a sideways grin.

"That had been my intention for the evening, but we're gonna have ta take a raincheck," Rick smirked as he got up and stretched. Almost immediately, he felt a warm hand creep under the back of his shirt to softly caress his skin. He turned to Daryl, ran his fingers through his hair, and bent down to kiss him. Needy this time as opposed to comforting.

Before he could ask him again what he wanted from the vending machine, he heard an all too familiar voice in the hallway. His whole body tensed as he straighten his back.

"What is it?" Daryl ask, brow crinkling as he noticed his change in demeanor.

Rick swallowed hard before he spoke the name that was now like bitter vinegar on his tongue, "Shane."
**Daryl's Afraid**

Chapter Summary

Daryl meets Shane and has a sleepover at the hospital.

**Daryl**

Daryl didn't like being touched, didn'tlike touching others. Most human contact he received as a child was aimed to hurt and maim not comfort or protect, so he learned to avoid it all costs. As a teenager, that went double. As an adult, it went triple. He spent a lot of his time going out of his way to avoid situations in which he'd have to touch or be touched. Being a shy loner with a feared last name seemed to help.

When Merle started bringing girls home for him when he was fifteen, he retreated into the woods more than he did before. He couldn't always avoid such things, learning quickly that it was better to put on a show with a groping woman than face his father's belt. But he never enjoyed it, any of it. It made his skin crawl even to be in close proximity to anyone but Merle, and that was only in small doses.

Sometimes he'd drink beforehand to build up his nerve, other times Merle would pump him full of something questionable that, in hindsight, he most likely did to help. His favorite were the girls so whacked out of their minds that they'd pass out as soon as they got to his room. He would make a few muffled noises and be done with them without any contact. That didn't happen often enough.

When they weren't blacking out, he'd just lay there thinking of some random person's ass to get it up, denying to himself that the ass in question belonged to a guy. He did that a lot. The one time he didn't, that he refused to pretend he was with someone else, his daddy broke two of his ribs for being a pussy when the girl complained. Fucking bitch!

He went a lot of years after that avoiding women as much as he could. The idea of just shaking one's hand was enough to turn his stomach. That didn't stop a few random drunken encounters from continuing into adulthood, his half-assed attempt at appeasing his father. Thank god he was done with all that now.

In hindsight, he had known he was gay since he was twelve after his first crush was on a male teacher. He fought the truth for a long time, blaming his lack of interest in women on his fear of human touch. But by his mid-twenties, his curiosity got the better of him and he couldn't lie to himself anymore.

After saving up a little money, he took a weekend trip to Atlanta. He had no idea what he was doing, just rented a cheap motel room and hit the closest bar. He didn't remember much because he was drunk, but he did pick someone up. He woke up sore, swinging his fists when the guy tried to touch him the next morning.

The next guy was worse. He was rough and domineering and sent him cowering in the bathroom when he started yelling slurs at him. Daryl was reminded too much of his father, and it sent him scattering for a sanctuary that he wouldn't find for another decade. He never remembered the sex with any of them really, it was always just the lead up and the aftermath which were never pretty.
He didn't know why he even bothered.

That was how it went for years, though. He'd steal a weekend a couple times of year to pick up drunk guys in bars to have dirty sex with in a dirty motel or bathroom only to flinch at them again when the alcohol wore off, if they were even around when it did. Getting jumped and fucked in an alley by a guy he picked up in a cheap bar finally ended that cycle.

He never had sober sex in his life, and he wasn't exactly sure that that was a bad thing considering the 'partners' he'd had. He didn't want to remember those encounters, the touches that burned like acid on his skin, like magma in his throat. They were meaningless, hollow, his attempt at being somewhat normal when he knew better, that he wasn't. Squelching a biological need.

With Rick, he wanted to remember. He liked when Rick touched him, he craved it really. It was different with Rick, and at first that scared him, sent him flinching like he did when anyone else tried to touch him simply because it was strange. Rick's fingers calmed him, gave him peace, and those were feelings he'd never experienced before. He didn't know what to do with them.

After he got over his initial fears and blunders, everything with Rick seemed natural. The man could read him, understand him, or maybe they just shared the same soul because nothing else seemed to make sense as to why they fit so well, why he felt safe in Rick's arms with Rick's lips on him when he'd never felt that way with anyone else since birth.

He wanted more with Rick, wanted to be sober, to remember, to enjoy it, to be happy instead of just quenching an urge as fast as he could so he could get the hell out of Dodge, out of Atlanta. That was what he wanted, and as soon as Rick got back from dropping off the kids, he was going to ask for it. Or maybe just wait naked on the couch and hope Rick would get the hint.

That didn't mean he wasn't nervous about it. Rick had been more than gentle with him up to that point, but he understood that the sex would be different. All he had ever known were quick, dirty, ugly fucks. That was all sex was to him, so he assumed that's how it was supposed to be, how it was going to be with Rick. The thought made him a little sad. Rick was going to be rough and it was probably going to hurt because that's just how it fucking worked.

He probably could've put it off, but there was no point in that. It was going to happen, and he didn't want Rick thinking that he didn't want him. If he had to put up with the pain to get the gentle kisses before and after, then he would. And he would take whatever Rick wanted to give him, however he wanted to give it.

A knock on the door had him scrambling for his clothes. "Just a sec," he hollered as he zipped up his jeans. He looked out the peephole and saw a worried Carol on the front step. His whole body tensed.

"Oh thank god you're here!" Carol said as she moved to throw her arms around his neck. He was a little stunned at first, but Carol was one of two women he felt comfortable touching, the other being Michonne. Okay, three if you counted Judith.

"What's wrong?" he asked, not really sure he wanted an answer considering her demeanor.

"There was an accident involving Merle. I don't know the details only that he's at County Hospital and we need to get you there quick," she explained.


"A few deputies were sent to Dale's to look for ya. That was the address he gave the last time he
was arrested. Dale told them ya lived somewhere else and told them to call the shelter because Michonne would know where to find you. They did, and then she called me. You and Rick really need cell phones. Anyway, here I am, now let's go." She took a deep breath and turned to leave.

"Okay," was all he could manage as he tried to rifle through the wall of information she just supplied him with.

She spun back quickly, "Where's Rick?"

"Took the kids to Lori's, just left," he replied.

"Leave him a note so he doesn't worry," she instructed.

"He ain't gonna worry...Will he?" He really wanted her to answer because all of a sudden he wasn't sure. But there was no time to think or argue because Merle was hurt. They had to go.

"Course he will. Now, hurry up."

He scribbled a note on the closest scrap of paper he could find and followed her out. They drove in near silence to the hospital, him chewing his thumb raw as a nervous thigh bounced like crazy. "He dead?" he asked when he finally worked up the courage.

"They wouldn't've taken him to the hospital if he was. I'm sure they'll get 'im fixed up in no time. I'm sorry that I just have to drop you off and run, but I have ta get back to Sophia. She doesn't like hospitals and I can't leave her home alone," she said, flashing him a sympathetic yet slightly guilty smile.

"'S'right," he mumbled. He was used to dealing with things alone, preferred it. Besides, she wasn't really the one he wanted with him. He wanted Rick and the peace he got from him, from his touch when anyone else's would scorch his skin and send his soul into turmoil.

Then, he was pacing in the waiting room, needing that peace, waiting for it to walk through the sliding glass doors, but he wasn't sure it would be coming. It was like a test to him, to them, to see if Rick really would be there when he needed him. And while he didn't doubt that he would, those nagging thoughts that seemed to fade when Rick was around were raging in his ear like a hurricane.

He wasn't expecting the embrace or the kisses or the comfort Rick brought as he warmed him like a shot of whiskey. Rick was better than alcohol, he was solid and sturdy, his rock when his other was in a hospital bed out of sight. He never thought he'd have someone holding him up when he was falling down, but he knew he didn't want anyone else but Rick doing just that.

Rick had turned him into an addict for his touch. And that really should've scared him.

It didn't.

Rick was mostly the one who talked to Dr. Jenner, and he was thankful because he would've had no idea what questions to ask. Rick did. Rick was taking care of it, of him. The doctors were taking care of Merle, and Rick was taking care of him, like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he wanted to, not just had to because he was kind.

He wasn't sure if he liked the doctor, though. Maybe he was jealous because Rick knew him, looked happy to see him, or maybe it was because the guy took his brother's hand. He wasn't sure what it was, but the guy looked shifty, like he had secrets, knew something you didn't.
He was nearly stunned speechless when Rick asked if he wanted to be his boyfriend. He didn't use those exact words, but Daryl got the message loud and clear. He was sure he'd never get tired of Rick calling him that.

"Where'd he get a fuckin' motorcycle's what I wanna know," Daryl said in the elevator on the ride to the third floor. He was clinging to Rick with both hands; one holding Rick's, the other gripping his wrist.

"We'll have ta ask 'im when he wakes up," Rick said, kissing his temple.

Daryl thought he must've liked that spot because he kept kissing him there. He wasn't going to complain, he'd just have to find one of his own on Rick.

The orderly leading them to Merle's room shot them a look after. He wasn't sure what it was, but that bigotry shit was not going to fly right now. He just needed some goddamned peace! What the fuck was it to anyone else where or who he got it from?

The orderly must've sensed him tense. "Wish my boyfriend would hold my hand in public. You're lucky," he sighed.

"For the first time in my life, I ain't ashamed of who I am or who I'm with. He's the reason for that, so if I wanna hold his damn hand, I'm gonna. Everyone else can go ta hell. Don't much care if they think that's where I'm goin'," Daryl replied matter-of-factly, hands tightening their grip on Rick.

"We'll be in good company," Rick smirked to the orderly. Daryl loosened his grip but refused to let go. He had a feeling Rick wouldn't have let him anyway. He needed to be grounded somehow, and Rick probably knew that better than he did.

They followed the man down the hall to Merle's room. He was afraid of what he was going to find on the other side of the privacy curtain, but that was his brother and he needed him. Rick was with him, and at the risk of sounding cliché, he felt like he could do anything because of it.

He didn't know how long he sat there holding Merle's hand. It felt a bit weird because they weren't exactly the kind of brothers who usually showed any kind of affectionate toward one another, but he figured that if Merle wanted to pull away then he'd have to wake the fuck up and do so.

Rick must've heard his stomach rumble because he got up and said he was going to the vending machine for something to eat. He heard some mumbling in the hall and watched as Rick's spine straightened almost painfully so. That made the hair on the back of his own neck stand on end. Something wasn't right.

"What is it?" he asked, tone uneasy.

Rick hesitated for a second before answering. One word, one name, and his blood ran cold, "Shane."

He stood from his chair as the voice accompanied by another drew closer. He grabbed Rick's hand and gave it a squeeze. His muscles relaxed the tiniest bit when Rick squeezed back.

"I-I don't know what ta do," Rick muttered.

"You're just helpin' out an employee, Rick," Daryl replied pulling his hand away; Rick very reluctantly let him. "'Cause that's who ya are." Sure, he would've like to have made a scene about them being together in front of Rick's ex-partner/best friend, but now was probably not the best time for that.
Footsteps approached from the other side of the curtain as they both held their breath. Two sheriff's deputies rounded the bed and Shane's face went pale as he stopped mid-sentence upon seeing Rick. Rick's face was stone as he stared back not saying a word.

"Daryl Dixon?" the younger officer said, finally breaking the godawful silence.

"Mhmm," Daryl replied with a nod, eye's not leaving Shane.

"I'm Officer Jones and this is my partner, Officer Walsh. We worked the accident your brother was in. We were just dropping by to get his statement, but I see he's still unconscious. We'll have to come back when he's awake," the man politely said.

Daryl gave him a cursory glance and another grunt before turning back to Shane and Rick, neither of which took their eyes off the other or said a word.

"Anything going on here that I should know about?" Jones asked bewildered at the mood in the room.

"All I know is that if you're married, ya might wanna keep your wife away from your partner here," Daryl answered harshly.

That broke the stalemate as Shane turned to glare at him in response. "Yeah? And what would ya know about it?" Shane challenged him.

"Enough ta know what ya do ta your so called friends when their on their deathbed," he bit back. "If Merle, here had a wife, I'd o' thought you were here ta pick her up. Since trowlin' hospitals seems ta be yer thing."

"You shut the fuck up or I'll knock your damn teeth in, Dixon. And I'm sure my captain would pat me on the back after," he growled.

"You just threaten a civilian, Shane, for statin' a fact?" Rick asked, although it wasn't much of a question.

Shane just huffed, refusing to look at the man. His dark brown eyes were still on Daryl as he glared right back.

"Here's another fact for ya Shane, just in case you forgot. Ya threaten any of my friends and there won't be a back for Captain Moore ta pat."

"Daryl Dixon's your friend?" Shane asked incredulously. "Ya gotta be shittin' me!"

Daryl saw the shame written all over Shane's face. The man couldn't even face Rick anymore. The bastard didn't deserve to have a friend like Rick. He would've loved nothing more than to have corrected him and said 'boyfriend', but he was able to bite his tongue.

"You threatenin' my partner now, mister?" Jones butted in.

"Grimes, Rick Grimes and no sir, Officer Jones. Like I said, just statin' a fact. Here's a few more for ya. I was Shane's partner for twelve years, his friend for twenty-six. That's over now 'cause he fucked my wife while I was in a coma after gettin' shot on the job. Doubt he told ya 'bout that," Rick said, eyes narrowing on the young officer. "Now, judgin' by the ring on your finger, I'd say you'd be wise to follow Daryl's advice, don't you?"

Daryl grinned wide at Shane after noticing Jones nodding slightly at Rick's words.
"Well, okay then. Merle ain't awake now, so I suggest ya get back ta work before I have ta call in a harassment complaint. Daryl has never been in trouble and only has a reputation because of a last name he did not choose. Ol' Merle here is tryin' hard ta turn his life around and me and our friends are helpin' him do it. The last thing he needs is an old police grudge settin' 'im back," Rick said calmly.

"That's good to hear. We'll just get going then. Someone else'll probably be back in the morning to try again," Jones said.

Shane let out a low grunt and turned to leave careful not to look at Rick who was trying hard to kill him with his eyes.

"Ya'll have a good evening," Jones said as he gave a slight nod and turned to follow Shane out the door.

"Be seein' ya around, Dixon," Shane snarled over his shoulder.

Daryl and Rick followed them to the door. "He works for me if ya need ta find 'im, Shane. Lives with me too," Rick said.

Shane spun around, eyes wide. He opened his mouth to say something, but Rick just smirked and swung the door shut in his face. Then, he leaned his back against the door and covered his face with his hands, his chest heaving.

Daryl was confused when he moved his hands away because Rick was grinning like a maniac and laughing low, not sobbing like he first thought. "What?" he asked Rick.

"I think we just declared war," Rick chuckled. "Come here you," he said reaching his hands out toward him.

Daryl wasn't going to say no to that. He closed the already short distance between them, his hands clutching Rick's sides, Rick's wrapped around his shoulders. Chills broke out all over his body when Rick started lightly kissing his neck all the way up his jawline to his lips then back down.

"I hate ta drag you into this," Rick said, nuzzling his nose into Daryl's neck.

"Ain't no where else I wanna be," he said, kissing Rick's temple for a change, a hand lifting to play with thick, dark curls at the nape of his neck.

"That was the first time I talked ta him since I confronted them. Went a little better than I thought, but I know when him and Lori are both goin' at me—"

"At us," Daryl corrected. He wasn't about to let Rick go through that alone. They were friends now, roommates, coworkers, boyfriends. He couldn't send him to the slaughter alone.

"At us," Rick smiled, eyes crinkling and twinkling, "...it'll be a lot worse. I think we'll be okay, though."

Daryl nodded back, one corner of his mouth tweaking up into a satisfying grin. It was gone quickly as Rick brushed their lips together, so soft and delicate that it turned his legs to the jello Merle would soon be complaining about. Rick pulled back and looked at him, bright blue eyes getting darker by the second as his breathing noticeably shallowed. Then those lips were on him again, more determined and impassioned.

Rick's hand cupped the back of his head as he tilted his own to richen the kiss, lips parting so that
searing tongues could meet to twirl and twist around the other. Daryl had no idea if he was doing it right; Rick had been the only person he kissed like that, sweet and deep. The only person that didn't leave him nauseated or bloody afterward.

Judging by the smothered moan that died in the back of Rick's throat, he figured it wasn't too terrible for the older man. It was like fireworks for him, colorfully beautiful, explosive lights on the black canvas of his heavy eyelids, over his entire body. He needed more of that man.

"Rick?" he whispered on swollen lips when he pulled back just a tad. He loved saying his name, loved Rick saying his.

Four letters light in the air but filled with some much emotion. And he wanted to say more like how he wanted him, needed really, that he loved him or liked him at least, and that Rick was too damn perfect for someone like him but that it would only make him work extra hard to keep him happy.

And that he could never ever repay him for his kindness, but he wanted to try. That Lori was the biggest idiot on the planet for letting him go, Shane too, but that he can't really complain about their mistake. That he wanted to be his partner, his best friend, and everything Lori and Shane turned out not to be and so much more, so much better.

But all he could fucking spit out was his name.

"I know, Daryl. I do," Rick replied. And Daryl knew that he did. "This night was supposed ta go a lot differently. I was gonna, I just wanted to...just wanted ya. Whatever you'll give me, I want. And we can go as fast or as slow as ya want. I'll wait forever if I have to."

"Please don't let it take that long 'cause I want ya too," Daryl said.

Before either could say anything else, a painful groan came from the other side of the room. They looked at each other wide-eyed as Daryl pulled away to peek around curtain. Merle's eyes were shut tight, a twisted grimace on his face.

"Daryl?" Merle called.

"Right here, Merle," he replied and the older Dixon's eyes shot open like he wasn't expecting him to actually be there.

"What the fuck happened ta me? Feel like shit!"

"There was an accident on the highway. Ya crashed. Who's bike was that?" Daryl asked with hesitant curiosity. When he saw the cops walk in, his first thought was that they were coming to place Merle under arrest for stealing it.

"S mine. Some guy traded it in for work at the garage. Boss didn't want it, said I could make payments. Shit my arm hurts like hell," he said raising his stub.

"Did they...do ya...fuck, Merle! They had ta take your damn hand. It was too fucked up in the accident," Daryl blurted out as sympathetic as he could.

"The fuck?!" he hollered as he looked down at his bandaged, and shortened limb. "Where the fuck's mah hand?" He was starting to panic and Daryl wasn't sure what to do.

"Merle," Rick said in a soothing voice, "They had no choice. It was the only option, but at least your alive and we should all be thankful for that. Now, I know that sounds scary and fucked up,
and this might not help, but we'll figure everythin' out. We're gonna help you out the best we can. Carol, Michonne, Glenn, everybody."

"Well, ya can start by gettin' me some damn painkillers!" he ordered. "I'm dyin' here!" he said calming down a little.

"You're a recovering addict, ya can only have the over-the-counter stuff, but I'll see of I can get ya some more tylenol," Rick offered. "And I'll go get us dinner," he said to Daryl with a reassuring squeeze of his shoulder.

"Why can't I have some morphine? Some Percocet, Vicodin, somethin'?" Merle whined.

"No narcotics," Rick said sternly. "It's for your own good. Now, stop actin' like a pussy and suck it up," he said as he went to leave. Daryl smiled all lovestruck when he winked at him.

Merle waited till Rick was out of the room and started in on him, "If the docs don't get me somethin' maybe ya could call—"

Daryl cut him off right there. Him and Rick had decided together to tell the doctors not to give him any hard stuff. They both knew he would be in a lot of pain, but Daryl was afraid that even a small dose of something like that would send him down a dark path that he just couldn't watch him go down again.

And while Daryl had no legal right to dictate his treatment now that he was awake, he wasn't about to tell him that if he buzzed the nurse that they'd have to give him something if he asked. Merle didn't need to know that, and he probably wouldn't figure it out.

The doctor said to get him through the first couple of days and the pain would dull. Daryl was prepared to stay with him the whole time, and he sure as shit wasn't about to track down Merle's old dealer like he was most likely trying to ask him to do.

"Hell! No! Ya ride it out like a damn Dixon. If yer good, maybe I'll slip ya in some Jack. 'S gonna hurt for awhile, but we ain't no strangers ta pain, and it ain't nothing ya can't handle," Daryl reassured him.

Merle scowled at him but seemed to drop the subject. "My arm is gone. What the hell am I gonna do? Ya think I can work like this?" he asked, clearly getting upset again.

"We'll figure somethin' out," he replied. He wasn't sure if he believed that but it helped when Rick said it to him so maybe it would help Merle. "Ya just need to rest right now, okay. They said they'd probably release ya in a day or so."

A nurse came in to check him over and Rick came back in the room a little while later, arms full of stale junk food, a bottle of water shoved in his pocket, two small cups of coffee balanced on a palm, and a beaming grin. Daryl's eyes narrowed on him playfully.

"Dinner is served," Rick smirked. He stretched out his hand and Daryl took both coffees so he could situate the snacks on Merle's table side. "I tried to get all the food groups; fruit snacks, milk chocolate and cheetos, potato chips which we're just gonna mislabel as our vegetable, some jerky, and frosted animal crackers for dessert."

"Don't think any of those are really food groups, 'cept maybe the jerky," Daryl replied snatching that up quickly.

"Anything I can get ya, Merle?"
"Nah, gettin' kinda tired," he replied.

"Ya should get some rest. You've been through a trauma and your body needs to heal. It's gettin' late anyway," Rick said.

"See ya'll tomorrow then," Merle frowned, more like pouted.

"I ain't goin' no where, Merle. 'S kinda what ya do with family," Daryl explained.

"Ya ain't gotta fuss over me li'l brother. Just gonna sleep in this surprisin'ly soft bed."

"Not fussin' and this thing turns into a bed...see," Daryl said, pulling the lever on his chair so the leg rest went flying up and smacking right into the bed. He shot Rick a fake scowl when he chuckled.

Merle laughed softly as he shut his eyes. Rick and Daryl looked at each other and new it was time to settle down so he could sleep. They ate their 'dinner' as quietly as possible. Rick offered to go get them some fast food somewhere but Daryl didn't want him to leave.

"When ya goin' home?" Daryl finally whispered some time after midnight.

Rick looked at him with a furrowed brow. "I'm not," he replied, grabbing Daryl's hand and interlacing their fingers.

"Where ya gonna sleep?" he asked, quirking up an eyebrow playfully. Rick's chair didn't turn into a bed. They both knew that wouldn't be a comfortable place to sleep.

Rick leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Was kinda hopin' you'd scooch over and let me share yours."

Who in there right mind would argue with that? Rick got up and switched off the light while Daryl spread the blanket out that the nurse brought in. They kicked off their boots and squeezed into the makeshift bed, the chair's arms forcing them close and digging into their backs, blanket pulled up to their necks in the cold room. Not that Daryl minded any of it.

Being that close naturally led to a little make out session. They knew they were going to be sore in the morning, the chair was not comfortable at all, but the snuggling helped, Rick's knee between his legs helped, those lips on his helped. And before he knew it, they were sound asleep.

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They woke up to the sound of the t.v. coming to life. Daryl looked over at Merle who was staring right at him with a funny smirk, finger on the volume button obviously trying to get their attention.

"Enjoy your sleepover?" he snickered.

Daryl peeled back the blanket and moved to get up. Every muscle was stiff and his back was achy but he managed to get to his feet. "Not even a little," he said, partially lying as he stretched his sore body.

"My back sure as hell didn't," Rick agreed, stretched beside Daryl. They were pulling on their boots when Carol walked in.

"Oh Merle, how ya feelin'?" she asked, moving to the bed to take his hand, nearly ignoring the other two men.
"Ain't nothing I can't handle, babydoll. Lost my hand," he said, holding up the stump.

"That's why ya got two of 'em, one's just a spare," she teased, trying to lift his spirits.

"Mornin' Carol," Rick said.

"Mornin' you two," she smiled. "I'm here to relieve ya. Go home, take a shower, and go ta work. I'll be in around lunch after Michonne relieves me."

All three men looked at her with confusion.

"Ya heard me! We got it all figured out," she smirked.

"Sure you'll be okay with him?" Daryl asked, hesitantly.

"We'll be fine. Now, go on."

Daryl said his goodbye's to Merle while Rick pulled Carol off to the side to tell her about the pain medication situation. They left the hospital and headed home, fully intent on taking that shower Carol mention. And if Daryl had this way, he'd finally have some company.
Rick's Shower

Chapter Summary

Mind the rating. :-) 

**Rick**

Rick was rooted to the spot when he heard Shane's voice echoing down the hallway. He had no idea what he was going to say to him or what Shane would say in return. He knew the revelation that he was there with the Dixon brothers wasn't going to go over too well, but he really didn't give a damn what Shane thought.

Even if he wanted to run, he knew his legs wouldn't've cooperate. But Daryl read him like he knew he would. He squeezed his hand and gave him a few words of encouragement that his brain didn't quite register. They didn't matter; it was the tone that was important, and he got the message loud and clear.

He wasn't alone in this anymore.

And while he didn't think it was fair to be bringing Daryl into his mess, he really couldn't imagine not having him by his side in that moment or any other moment. If he hadn't been completely stunned by the way Daryl had knocked Shane down a peg or two, he would've been smiling like a love-struck fool.

He wasn't surprised when Shane looked away from him or that his gaze never returned. He knew his ex-partner was ashamed at what he had done, Lori was too, but there was no going back. And while he hoped someday he'd be able to forgive them, that day was not today because his heart still ached in the places they used to fill.

It didn't ache as much when he was kissing Daryl. In fact, nothing ached when he was kissing him, except maybe his lungs as they screamed for air and they could fuck off because it was Daryl! He didn't ache for him, he burned for the man, white hot, and he was certain that the flame he saw Daryl's eyes was mirrored in his own.

After he was able to breathe again, he had his first 'date' in a hospital, but he couldn't complain about the company. After Merle's nurse checked him over, they had a terribly unhealthy dinner of vending machine fair while Merle flipped through the eight channels on the television until he fell back asleep.

The later it got the more he started to think about sleeping arrangements. There was no way he was going to leave Daryl alone. It wasn't that he didn't think he could handle things—Daryl was the strongest person he had ever met—it was just that he wanted to be there for him, for both of them, in case they needed something, anything.

They didn't have anyone else really, so it was the least he could do for his boyfriend and his brother. He knew his friends would help if and where they could. He hadn't known the guys from the shelter that long, but he knew they were good people who had taken a shinning to both him and Daryl. And surprisingly Merle. Hell, he was surprised he took to the ornery elder Dixon so quickly.
More importantly, though, he wanted to be there by Daryl's side. It had been a long time since he had genuinely wanted to be somewhere with someone. It had been more of an obligation to stand by Lori for far too long, and he knew a lot of what happened between them was on him. She didn't just wake up one morning and sleep with Shane on a whim, but that didn't lesson the sting of betrayal.

Regardless, he was well aware that he had been far from the perfect husband, but he vowed to learn from his mistakes because he wanted to do better for Daryl, to be better for him. In that moment he realized that Daryl was more than just the man he had happened to fall in love with, he was 'the one'.

All the things he spent years hoping Lori could make him feel, Daryl did instantly. And while he honestly had very few regrets regarding his life with her, he was truly thankful that it ended when it did. The way it did could've been better, but he found himself no longer needing to complain about it.

He hadn't been happy in so long that the feeling was almost foreign to him, but that's exactly what he was feeling as he crammed himself into the makeshift bed next Daryl. The uncomfortable chair seemed like a small price to pay to get to kiss him senseless before falling asleep curled up so close to him that a sheet of paper couldn't have fit between them.

Happiness was definitely something he wanted to get used to.

*****

The only good thing about waking up in a hard hospital chair that doubled as a bed was having Daryl in his arms. Or more precisely in his right arm because the left was tucked under and so numb that he wasn't sure it was still attached. Poor Merle. It was worth it, though, to hold him, to fall asleep with his smiling face staring right back at him, to wake up the same way, worth the stiff back and aching bones.

He was thankful that Carol showed up to relieve them. He knew there wasn't a lot they could do for Merle at the hospital but keep him from crawling up the walls with boredom. Daryl, on the other hand, needed a good meal and a nice nap somewhere comfortable. He could do that.

"You okay?" Rick asked Daryl as they settled in his truck to leave the hospital.

Daryl looked over at him as he contemplated the question. He gave a slight nod for his answer.

"He's takin' it well so far. I'm sure he'll have a good day with Carol. We'll have to be sure and eat before we go back this evening. Dinner was shit," he chuckled.

Daryl shrugged and starting biting his thumb as he looked out the window.

Rick knew that was his nervous tick so he let the conversation die out, not wanting to push him after the night they just had. He spent the ten minute ride home wondering what he was nervous about. But he had a pretty good idea what it was when he pulled up to the apartment and Daryl flashed him a heated grin.

They finally had the place to themselves. Finally.

"Breakfast, shower, or nap?" Rick asked, unlocking the front door.

"Shower," Daryl whispered in his ear. The word, just as much as the breath wafting over his skin, made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end in a devilishly delicious way.
Yeah, that was definitely the right answer. He threw the keys on the side table—not noticing when they slid right off—grabbed Daryl's hand, and led him up the stairs, shedding their jackets on the way. He switched on the bathroom light and pulled off his shirt, slipping it over his head instead of bothering with the buttons.

He toed off his boots and unbuttoned his pants before reaching for the faucet and turning on the spray. He spun back around and the excited grin on his face fell when he saw a still fully clothed Daryl staring back at him chewing his thumb raw, arms crossed over his chest, looking small and insecure.

"Daryl, I already told ya that we don't have ta do anythin' ya don't wanna," Rick told him calmly.

"I...I got scars," he muttered.

Rick smiled softly as he closed the distance between them. He ran a hand through Daryl's hair and brought their foreheads together. "Ya really have no idea how beautiful ya are, do ya?" he whispered.

He watched Daryl's cheeks turn a soft pink but he didn't say anything.

Rick slowly unbuttoned Daryl's shirt and pushed it off his shoulders and down his arms, the blue checked flannel falling haphazardly to the floor. He kissed his now exposed collarbone up the curve of his neck, fingers untucking his tank top and working their way under the hem.

"If I go too fast or too far, you just let me know...and ya know I've never done this before with a man, so if I mess somethin' up or do somethin' that you're not comfortable with just tell me, okay?" Rick said more than asked.

"I just didn't want ya freakin' out from the scars," Daryl said.

"I won't," he replied firmly.

He peeled off Daryl's black tank then leaned in to kiss him as passionately and sensually as he could, hands hovering over the button of the other man's pants for just a second before committing. Maybe he should've been more nervous about stripping a man and getting him into his shower, but he wasn't because it was Daryl.

It was a little bit of a mad dash after that. Daryl kicked off his boots and pulled off his socks while Rick wiggled out of his jeans and briefs. Four hands went for Daryl as his cargo pants and boxers were slipped down passed his hips to fall to his feet.

"You okay?" Rick asked as they stood their naked and half hard.

"Yeah...yeah, I want you...I-I trust ya."

Rick put his hand under the water and adjusted the nobs before stepping in. Daryl followed, pulling the off-white vinyl curtain closed behind them. Rick put his head under the water to wet his hair, running fingers through the soaked curls. When he opened his eyes, Daryl was looking him up and down with lust-filled eyes.

"Whatcha want?" he asked the younger man. He could tell Daryl wanted to say something, but he wouldn't be surprised if he didn't know how to say what he wanted. He had a feeling he was going to have to walk him through this because he had no idea what kind of assholes Daryl was with before. He was more than okay with that because he kind of felt like a damn virgin again himself.
"You," Daryl finally answered.

"Ya already got that," he smiled. "Okay, I don't think I'm ready for the, uh, the big stuff, think we should work up ta that for both of us. That okay?" Big stuff? Good Lord, Grimes....

"S okay," Daryl replied. Rick knew that was the right call when his shoulders relaxed a bit, but it was short lived. "Rick, I-I don't know if I can do this," he added shaking his head and dropping his eyes to the ground in shame.

"Like right now? You know that's okay, right? I understand."

"Ya just been so nice ta me and kind...." he trailed off but Rick waited patiently for him to finish. The last thing he wanted to do was to make Daryl feel rushed or pressured into anything. He was quite surprised that they'd already gotten this far.

He curled both of his hands around Daryl's neck and softly traced the line of his jaw with the pads of his thumbs, the corners of his mouth threatening to curl up at the prickly stubble. Daryl finally met his eyes again and continued in a near whisper, "...and I don't know if I can take ya hurtin' me."

Rick closed the gap between them and wrapped his arms around Daryl's naked, wet body. "I ain't ever gonna hurt ya," he tried to assure him, ducking his head to meet the younger man's wandering gaze.

"But it's supposed ta hurt," Daryl mumbled, looking away.

Fucking hell!! Goddamn bastards!

"No, Daryl," he sighed, repositioning himself yet again so he could look him into those beautiful blue eyes of his. He really wanted to find every single person who ever laid an unkind hand on that man and kick them square in the teeth. "It ain't supposed ta, supposed ta feel good."

Daryl eyed him skeptically as he chewed on his lip.

"Remember our first kiss?" Rick asked.

"Member how I screwed it up," Daryl scoffed.

"Member how I fixed it? Member the second one?" he smirked. "I'm gonna make ya feel good, like that. I only ever wanna make you feel good." He trembled when he felt Daryl's hands come up to rest on his sides.

"Ya always make me feel good," he replied, finally cracking a little smile.

"Cause I like seein' ya smile," Rick grinned back. He really wanted to say it was because he loved him, but he was a little afraid that that might scare him off. They had only really known each other for three weeks, and while that was enough for him to know, he didn't want to be the one to say it first in case it made Daryl feel like he had to say it back.

Daryl's hands traveled up his body to cup his neck as he started kissing him, sweet and maybe a little desperate. That was definitely a good sign. Rick's fell to the small of his back to pull their wet bodies together. Having another man's erection pressed against his leg was a new experience but it was okay because it was Daryl. Everything was always okay with Daryl.

"Can I wash ya?" Rick asked.
"Ain't no one ever done that before," Daryl replied shyly.

Rick could see the uncertainty and apprehension in his eyes and tried to kiss it right out of him. After a few minutes it seemed to have worked when he pulled back and two darkly blue eyes were staring back at him dreamily. He reached around him for the bodywash and the cloth he had hung up on the rack.

He popped open the cap and squeezed a little onto the cloth. After working it into a nice lather, he placed the soapy washcloth on Daryl's shoulder and began to draw small circles on his skin as he moved the cloth over his bicep and down his arm. He worked his way around to his back and up to his shoulder blades before crossing over to his other arm.

"Your arms are amazin', Sweetheart. When the weather heats up, I think I'll cut off the sleeves on all your shirts," Rick teased. "But then, I might never get any work done...that or I'd be jealous of everyone droolin' over ya."

"You the jealous kind, Grimes?" Daryl smirked.

"Not usually, but that was before I'd had these things wrapped around me," he smirked as he squeezed each bicep before moving the cloth over to wash Daryl's chest.

"They're all yours," Daryl whispered as he leaned in to kiss him.

"Can I touch ya?" Rick whispered back, hands falling downward leaving a soapy trail down Daryl's torso.

Daryl nodded and began to kiss him a bit harder. Rick's hand slowly slid between them as he took Daryl's harden length in his hand, the cloth lost somewhere in between. Daryl wasn't big with words so he listen for other clues as he slowly began to stroke him: the hiccup in his breath, a low moan in the back of his throat, a grunt when it was a little too much.

And he watched. He watched as Daryl's chest began to rise and fall in quicker intervals. He watched as his jaw relaxed and his lips parted slightly. He watched his eyelids start to droop and obscure the stormy blues behind them, the eyes that went from being laced with fear to being filled with trust. And that was so beautiful a sight that it almost hurt to look upon.

It might have felt foreign jacking Daryl off if he had had the mind to think about it, but his brain was too clouded with thoughts of making his lover feel good, of satisfying him and giving him the release he himself had been so desperate for since they met. He had always prided himself on being a giving lover, and he wanted to give Daryl everything.

That was all fine at first, but when Daryl curled his fingers around his cock, things got a lot more fuzzy. He mirrored what Rick did, stroke for stroke as warm water pelted their bodies. Daryl may have been the one with a little more experience with men, but Rick was definitely the one leading.

"Turn around," Rick said softly.

"I thought ya wanted ta take it slow," Daryl frowned.

"Yeah, Sweetheart, I do," he said before kissing him softly. "That's not what I was gonna, it's just the angle is...well, I wanna do it right so, I just wanted ya ta turn around so it'd feel more natural. Shit! Not that I think this doesn't feel natural. It does, it feels good! I just, oh god, I'm ramblin' like an idiot," he said, clearly embarrassed.

Daryl let out a low chuckle as he kissed him back.
"Let me try again...I just want ya ta turn around so I can concentrate on you for awhile, 'cause while your hands feel incredible on me, their distractin' as hell. And I don't wanna be right now 'cause this is our first time doing anythin' like this and I want it ta be good for you, so turn the fuck around," he said with a playful sternness.

"Well, alright then," Daryl replied huskily as he spun around.

That was the first time Rick got a good look at the scars on his back. They didn't scare him in the slightest. Hell no, they angered him, made him see red because he knew exactly who gave them to him. But that man was dead now, and he had to shake off that anger because right now was not about old scars and haunted memories.

It was about making Daryl feel good, about having his trust, about being with him because he liked the man, because the man liked him, the man who walked out of hell and into his life to fill it, to make it brighter than it had ever been before. It was about the future, not the past, and their path to it.

Rick put his hands on Daryl's shoulders, kneading gently and reassuringly. They flowed down rolling biceps to his hips as Rick started kissing his neck. No teeth, nothing rough. This was definitely not the time for that. All he wanted to do was bathe Daryl's body in kisses, and somehow convey to him how beautiful he really was, how much he'd been wanting him, how good he wanted to make him feel.

He figured it was working when Daryl's muscles started to relax under his touch, how he was leaning back into him now instead of cautiously leaning away. The younger man had to brace himself with one hand on the cool tiled wall, and Rick briefly thought that they should've started in a bed. But he'd had too many thoughts of them in the shower together to want to stop now.

Rick lapped up droplets of water as they ran down between Daryl shoulder blades. His tongue traveled over ridges of scar tissue between valleys of smooth skin. He didn't bring any attention to them, too busy enjoying the feel of Daryl's body to care, and hoped that was okay.

"Rick?" Daryl rasped a little unsteadily, voice even lower than his usual rumbling pitch.

"What do ya want, baby? I'll do whatever ya want," Rick whispered back into his ear as he rubbed Daryl's hipbones soothingly with his thumbs. He would absolutely give Daryl anything he wanted, inside that moment and out of it.

"Touch me again," he said softly but a little more sure and confident.

Rick smiled onto his skin, right behind his ear, and pressed his chest into Daryl's back. They both moaned at the contact of skin on skin. Daryl rocked his hips back into him ever so slightly, Rick's hard cock resting gentle along the cleft of his ass. Daryl craned his head sideways, lips begging to be kissed, his hand gliding back around Rick's to thread through wavy locks.

Rick kissed him, tender and gentle, determined to wipe the slate clean, to show him how beautiful he was, how worthy he was, how so fucking incredible he made him feel. He wanted to make Daryl feel that way too, like he was burning up with want, so madly in love, so safe, so at peace.

Slowly, like it was stuck in thick sap, Rick moved his hand away from Daryl's hip to the flat, planes of muscles on his stomach. The younger man broke the kiss, to breathe, to pant, as fingers crept lower through a thin forest of hair to grip the base of his cock. He let out a groan that was almost Rick's name but not quite, and Rick figured that was what angels sounded like.
Rick planted kisses along his stubble-covered jawline as he worked his hand up towards the head of his cock. Daryl's stuttered breath sent shivers down his own spine when he swiped his thumb over the slit oozing his essence. Rick couldn't resist; he brought his hand up across Daryl's body and quite noisily sucked the watered-down precum off his thumb.

"Been dyin' ta taste ya," he cooed.

Daryl let out a soft whimper when Rick wrapped his hand back around his shafted and started to draw his fingers delicately up and down the length of him. Daryl's hips bucked forward into his fist when he gave a light twist at the end of his stroke before he would rock back against his cock. And Rick very nearly came undone from that alone.

"Shit!" Rick yelled in surprise the first time.

"'M sorr—," Daryl tried to say.

"Don't ya dare apologize for that! God, you're amazin'," he muttered praise in his ear. "So amazin', Daryl...so fucking beautiful, you are." He was determined to make the man believe that.

Rick began to increase the rhythm of his strokes encouraged by the gasps and moans freely pouring out of Daryl's mouth. Rick felt his lover's body start to give as he brought him closer to completion, closer to his breaking point. And he was right there with him because every upward stroke Rick made had Daryl thundering back into him, his own throbbing cock caught between their wet bodies.

"Rick?" Daryl whimpered. And Rick knew he was there.

"Just let go, Sweetheart, I got ya," he replied softly.

Daryl's hand left the wall it had been bracing them upon to grip the back of Rick's neck, the other interlaced with the one Rick had strewn across his chest. "Fuck, Rick...," he whimpered again as he came in Rick's hand, body going stiff as his orgasm hit him hard and fast.

Rick reached between them and only needed two pumps to finish as he spilt himself on Daryl's ass, his body finally fully satiated for the first time since they met. Hell, for the first time in years! He was glad the water was on because that could've been awkward. He'd never come on anyone's ass before.

He rested his hands back on Daryl's hips, his forehead falling to one of his shoulders, as he steadied his breathing. The heavy fog of euphoria lifted slowly as his pulse returned to normal and his body rejoiced in the peaceful warmth coursing through him.

But then his heart stopped altogether.

Daryl was crying.

*Please—god fucking please!—let those be happy tears!* "Did...did I hurt you?" Rick asked hesitantly.

Daryl adamantly shook his head, "No," he sobbed.

Rick spun him around and pulled him close, tight against his body. Daryl cried onto his shoulder, salty tears washed away by the water. "Did I make ya feel good?"

Daryl let out another broken sob as he nodded slightly.
"And ya don't know what ta do with that, do ya?"

"No," Daryl sniffled.

Rick let out a deep breath, "I'm gonna tell ya what ya do with it, you're gonna get used ta it 'cause that's us, that's how we are. And that was just the warmup, Daryl. I'm gonna make you feel so goddamn good because that's how you make me feel by just bein' near me."

Daryl pulled back and looked him in the eye, searching for truth and reassurance. Rick knew he had found it when he gave him a curt nodded, dark blue eyes stained bloodshot brightening just a tad. "I don't know why I thought you'd hurt me. I was stupid, I guess," he confessed ashamedly.

"No, ya aren't," Rick said, running a hand through his wet hair. "Ya just didn't know any different. Ya didn't have me, but now ya do for as long as ya want me," he told him firmly so Daryl knew it was the truth. "We should probably get out of here soon. I wanted ta take a quick nap before we have ta leave."

"We gotta wash ya first," Daryl protested.

Rick smiled shyly before relenting, "Alight, but I still gotta do your hair," he chuckled.

Daryl nodded before retrieving the hastily discarded washcloth from the floor. He relathered it with soap and followed the same path Rick had traced over his body; down one arm, up his back, down the other arm. After a teasingly slow pass over his chest and abs, Daryl bent down and moved down one leg and up the other ending his journey with a nice squeeze of Rick's ass.

Daryl stood back up where he was greeted with a smirk and a raised brow. "Missed a spot," Rick pointed out as he watched Daryl's eyes flicker down to his groin and back to his eyes. For a brief second he was afraid he crossed a line because Daryl just stared blankly at him before a smug smiled slowly pulled at the corners of his lips.

A little more tentatively than Rick was expecting, Daryl trailed the soapy cloth down his abs to work over his softened dick. Rick let out a shuddered breath when he gently massaged his still-sensitive balls. He smiled when Daryl handed him the washrag, cocking his head almost in challenge.

That was when Rick remembered that he hadn't gotten that far on Daryl. He lathered up the cloth once more and proceeded to finish what he started. Down one leg, up the other, a firm squeeze on Daryl's tight glutes, and a delicate fondling of his own left them both squeaky clean and satisfied.

"Time for shampoo. Would ya like the big boy stuff or the strawberry shortcake kind that Judy likes?" Rick teased.

"I do like strawberries," Daryl replied sarcastically.

"Nah, think I'd rather have ya smellin' like me," he quipped as he grabbed the shampoo and squirted some into his hand. He passed the bottle to Daryl, who did the same, before carding their fingers through each other's hair. After a nice scalp massage that was over too quickly, they took turns rinsing out the shampoo.

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After the last of it was gone and just before the water took on a chill, Rick gave him a slow, easy kiss before reaching for the faucet to turn off the now lukewarm water.

He stepped out first and got both of them a towel. He gave himself a quick rub down and wrapped the rough cotton around his waist. He tried not to stare at Daryl too much because he didn't want to
freak him out, but it was difficult, the man was hot and he was fucking naked in his bathroom. *Their* bathroom.

"Ya jizzed on my ass," Daryl said, breaking the trance his abs had on Rick's eyes.

"Huh? Oh, yeah sorry. Didn't, uh, it just kinda happened," he said guiltily looking up into his eyes knowing full well he got caught both staring and for the aforementioned jizzing.

"Uh huh," Daryl smirked, clearly amused by his sudden blush.

"Uh huh," he repeated as he smiled, "Le's go lay down." He reached out his hand and watched Daryl study it for a minute. He was pretty sure Daryl thought more than he did. The other man finally took his hand and he led them to his bedroom. He set an alarm for an hour and crawled into bed, Daryl following only after he patted the space beside him.

They laid on their sides facing each other for awhile, both slowly inching closer until they were tangled together, a heap of limbs and thick towels. The last thing he remembered was Daryl's warm breath on his neck as he drifted off to sleep and the thought that he couldn't wait to get used to that.
Daryl's Shower

Chapter Summary

Daryl really hates Monday's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Daryl**

Daryl had no idea what to expect when they arrived back at the apartment. He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure how to go about getting it. And he wasn't sure if Rick would want to do anything, or even if they should do anything physical, after the night and the weekend that they had.

But then, Rick said "shower" and that's all he could think about, titillating images swirling around in his head like a cyclone leaving a devastating path of destruction to all rational thought to the contrary in its wake.

While he stood there watching the man strip, his palms started to sweat, but he knew it was from nerves and not the warm and fuzzies that Rick usually gave him. Rick hadn't seen all his scars yet. He knew he had seen the ones on his arms, but they were nothing compared to his back.

What if he thought they were ugly, that he was ugly? What if he laughed and said he deserved them. Or worse, what if he gave him that poor pathetic look of pity most people give him when they saw them? Fuck! A shower was a bad idea. He couldn't let Rick see how damaged he really was!

All of the sudden, his skin was too tight. He wanted to bolt—out the door, down the stairs, and into the woods—but his legs were as heavy as lead and he couldn't move. He started chewing on his thumb as he tried to steady his breathing. He knew he was on the verge of breaking down, of going into panic mood.

But Rick did what he did best and talked him down from the ledge he liked to overreact on. He said he was beautiful when no one else ever had before. He wouldn't've believed them if they had, but he believed Rick. He believed him because he knew Rick believed it. He had never lied to him, never made him feel anything but safe and worth something. To Rick, he was beautiful. And he was safe.

He always felt safe with Rick, and maybe one of these days he'd remember that before letting his mind get carried away. He knew it would just take time; thirty odd years of being on constant high alert in someone else's presence was a hard mindset to break.

He could only hope that Rick had the patience to put up with him until then.

When Rick was stripping him, it felt like he was stripping his soul bare. Maybe that should've scared him—if it had been anyone but Rick, it would've—but it almost felt like a rebirth. Perhaps that sounded a bit dramatic, but you have to clean wounds, remove the detritus, before they can
start to heal.

And Rick was scrubbing him raw on the inside just as much as he was on the outside. Wiping the slate clean.

Never had he ever imagined how tender it could be, being loved, being kissed and caressed with gentle hands and a soft mouth. Not just the making love part—he had certainly never thought he'd have something like that before and he wasn't sure a hand-job qualified—but actually having someone who cared for him so deeply.

Rick cared about him that way, actually gave a damn, maybe even loved him. That, he could not doubt. It was in his touch that cut him to the quick to heal his soul, his eyes that shined with nothing but affection when he looked into them, the way he spoke, not the words but the tone he used and everything written in between the lines that were too powerful for words convey.

Rick didn't have to say it, those three little words that only Merle had ever told him, and not nearly enough to count on one hand. He would never have to say it, Daryl already knew. That was the reason he balled like a little bitch after he came in Rick's hand.

And he didn't even give a shit about how that made him look. Rick didn't either. He just held him, held him up and held him close as he wept through his catharsis, as he barreled through feelings and emotions that were so foreign to him that all he could do was cry as they overwhelmed him with something like elation.

There were so many things he wanted to tell Rick in that moment but he couldn't get the words out. Even his mouth was as stubborn as a damn mule. But Rick just held him, and maybe he didn't have to spit the words out to be understood. Not with Rick; the man always seemed to know the right thing to say or do to make him feel better, to make him feel safe.

That was the amazing part, the safe. He didn't know the meaning of the word before Rick. He didn't know it was supposed to feel like home, like his heart had been filled to bursting with kindness and warmth, so incredibly blissful that he wanted nothing more than to climb right inside the man and never leave.

What did he ever do to deserve something like that, someone like Rick Grimes?

He wanted to tell the man that he loved him right then, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate. Of course, he had no idea what was appropriate with any kind of relationship stuff, but Rick said they'd figure it out and he believed him. So, he was content to wait, to let him lead.

He wanted to thank him for being gentle and to pay penance for doubting him once again. Rick wasn't going to hurt him. Ever. He knew that now, he believed that now. And he was upset that it took him so long to figure that out. But at least he didn't punch Rick, which was not something he could say for most men who tried to touch him while he was sober.

Washing each other turned out to be almost as good as the orgasm. It certainly felt more intimate, so it came as no surprise to him that he was terrified at the start. Having someone scrutinize his body so closely, to be so vulnerable with someone, was unnerving, but he had been a lot more comfortable with it after he washed Rick.

And by the time they got out, he wanted to do it again because he'd realized that Rick wasn't scrutinizing his body, he was worshipping it, and he never wanted him to stop.

Daryl wasn't sure what was supposed to happen after they towelled off. Rick said he wanted to take
a nap, and he was fine with them going their separate ways. Well, maybe 'fine' wasn't the right word. He could accept it if Rick wanted to go their separate ways. But thank god he didn't.

He laid down beside Rick on his bed and got lost in his dreamy cyan eyes. He was definitely looking at him, as Merle would say, 'all lovey dovey'. That was okay because Rick was looking back just the same.

He was the one that moved first, his left foot creeping over passed the invisible barrier between them. Like always, Rick wasn't pushing, instead letting Daryl move toward him at his own pace. Rick may have been leading in their budding relationship, but it was clear that Daryl was the one calling the shots, and he was more thankful for that than anything Rick had done for him so far.

They were like two glaciers moving together, slow but unstoppable, until their feet were exploring the other's. There was a hand on his hip, fingers teasing his skin right below the rim of cotton before they moved around towards his lower back. His knee found its way in between Rick's, their towels hiking up just a bit. Then, they were kissing again and it was magic, like fireworks, and he knew he'd never get tired of that.

Rick fell asleep first and Daryl was happy to hold him for a change, to feel his boneless body in his arms, the steady beat of his heart, even breath on his neck. It meant Rick felt safe with him. Sure, it might not have been as big of a deal to him as it was to Daryl, to feel safe, but in that case, it was more about trust than safe.

Trust. That was another thing about Rick. He had trusted Daryl immediately, invited him in, shared his home, allowed him around his children. Very few people in their small corner of the world would take the chance of trusting a Dixon, but Rick did so without question.

The amazing part was how easy it had been for Daryl to trust him right back. That was the last thing he ever expected to happen when he met the man the first, second, and even third time—that he'd end up trusting a complete strange just because he smiled at him with big doughy eyes that he couldn't help but get stuck in.

But there he was, laying naked in the man's bed watching him drift off. Once he was sure Rick was asleep, raspy little snores escaping his lips, he kissed his bare shoulder and whispered, "I love you." And maybe, someday soon when the man was conscious, he'd have the courage to say it again.

*****

Daryl wanted to curse the alarm that woke them for half a second. After that, the lips on his neck were more than enough encouragement to be thankful for the blaring noise. When Rick finally dragged himself out of bed, he was back to cursing it.

They took their time getting dressed because neither wanted to. Their towels had been lost in the mess of sheets, and despite the chill, they weren't too hurried to correct that. Not when they were both preoccupied with stumbling all over Rick's room like clumsy animals as they made out.

What he really wanted to do was fall back into bed and let Rick show him some more of that gentle stuff he was talking about. He wanted more of him, wanted Rick to make him feel better than good, and he knew he would. But he was right. Taking it slow was probably for the best, especially since neither knew what they were really doing.

He wasn't worried, he knew they would figure it out.
Very reluctantly, he tore his lips away from Rick long enough to go get dressed. Rick had beaten him downstairs by the time he was finished and had already started breakfast when he came down. He curled his arms around him while he cooked and put his lips back where they belonged: all over his neck. He was impressed that Rick didn't burn anything, but he'd just have to try harder next time.

He couldn't very well have the man showing him up in his kitchen now could he? And it certainly was his. Rick had even said so. "Alright, I'll get outta your kitchen," he had said after Daryl shooed the man off for burning garlic bread a few nights prior. Although, he was partial to calling things 'theirs.'

"At this rate, I think Carol will beat us to work," Rick said between bites of pancakes and sticky, sweet, syrupy kisses.

"What? Ya scared the boss'll fire us?" Daryl quipped, flashing him a sideways grin. Sideways because they sat next to each other now, bodies touching wherever they could, instead of across the table where the daunting divide would've been too much.

"More worried that Carol will scold us," he chuckled back.

"Ya bes' get ta shavin' then."

"Was thinkin' about not," Rick shrugged, hand ghosting over the stubble on his chin. "Whatcha think?"

"You're serious?" Daryl asked, studying him for a moment.

"Hell yes, I'm serious!"

"Rick, not everyone can pull off a beard like the guys we saw on tv the other night," he explained.

"Don't think I could pull it off? I could pull it off," he pouted slightly.

And wasn't that just sexy as hell! Daryl couldn't help but chase it away with kisses, though. "Hard ta tell, it's only been two days. Ya ain't even scruffy yet."

"What's a matter, Honey? Ya don't like beards?" Rick drawled low in his ear.

Daryl smiled at him wickedly. "You'll pull it off," he replied, voice going sandpaper rough.

"We have ta get outta here before I rip your clothes off, throw ya down on the table, and pour syrup all over ya so I can lick it off!"

"That's the worse motivational speech a boss has ever given ta get his employee ta go ta work, y'know?"

"Have it your way, Sweetheart," Rick sighed dramatically and rose from the table. He picked up his and Daryl's plates and took them to the sink. "Jus' gonna have ta throw ya down on my desk then...one of these days," he winked before he turned to head for the door.

Daryl washed away the dry lump that had formed in his throat from the sweltering image of that with a swig of coffee. "And I do believe that was the best," Daryl replied as he followed after.

With that, they set out for work.

Daryl called the hospital once they got there to check on Merle. Carol assured him that everything
was fine and that Merle was behaving himself. Glenn was relieved not to be working alone anymore. He felt a little guilty about that, but then Rick walked by and he wasn't.

He couldn't believe he had people he could actually rely on. It was an odd feeling but one he didn't want to give up. He felt normal for the first time in his life. He had a boyfriend, which was amazing by itself, a few friends that he was starting to trust more and more, coworkers that he hung out with outside of work, a steady job, a supportive brother. It was surreal, but he liked it.

And he was done questioning it. This was his life now, and it was amazing. He was—dare he say it?—happy for the first time in his whole life, and he was going to stay that way. As long as he had Rick, he knew it would stay that way.

He briefly thought work might be awkward after their shower, but it wasn't. It was business as usual...mostly. Rick worked on plans and schedules for the big job Tyreese had mentioned, an add-on to a house. He would come out and help him or Glenn with things as they needed him before going back to his office.

Of course, there was an incident involving an ass grab when Glenn went into the bathroom that had them both giggling like schoolgirls. Rick had to make up some stupid joke as to why they couldn't stop laughing. Luckily, Glenn seemed to buy it. If he didn't, he didn't let on.

Carol brought them lunch like usual and told them about her morning with Merle. The doctors came in to check his wound and said he could most likely go home the next day. She said he didn't appear to be in much pain but she wasn't sure if he was just putting on a tough guy act.

Daryl was worried about what would happen when he was discharged from the hospital. If Merle was still in a lot of pain, he might be tempted to do something stupid. Add boredom to that from not being allowed to work, and it was a recipe for relapse. He was pretty sure that that was the last thing anyone wanted.

It would probably take him awhile to get used to doing things with the other hand, or one-handed. He might get depressed. He might hurt himself shaving. He might not be able to feed himself. Or Daryl might be worrying for nothing. Maybe Merle would surprise them all and adapt quickly. Maybe he wouldn't.

All his musing made him run through finishing nails like crazy. He shook his head at all the bent ones that littered his feet when he reached in the box and realized it was empty. He sighed and headed to Rick's office.

"Ran outta finishing nails," Daryl said, leaning in the door frame and waving around the empty box.

He eyed Rick as the man sauntered over to him and took the box from his hand, fingers intentionally brushing as he pulled it away. Rick gave the box a shake next to his ear. Daryl knew he believed him, he was just teasing. "This was full an hour ago," he finally said.

"My mind kinda got away from me...and so did the nails," he confessed.

"Merle?"

Daryl nodded, worrying his lip. Rick pulled him out of the doorway, away from prying eyes, and kissed him, comforting but not nearly long enough. It got him to stop chewing on his lip, though, which was probably the point. Or maybe Rick just wanted to kiss him. Yeah, he was definitely going with that.
"Things are gonna work out," Rick said as he walked over to his desk. "We'll come up with somethin'. Even if he has to stay with us for awhile. We'll have ta figure somethin' out with the kids if Lori makes a fuss. Maybe we can get Glenn to take him on the weekends or somethin'," he snickered, "But we'll figure it out."

I love you. "Yeah...Yeah, I'm sure it'll work out."

"Could you go buy us some more nails? See if Glenn needs anythin'. He was sayin' somethin' about blades for the circular saw. But, uh, I was too busy starin' at your ass ta pay attention," he admitted.

"Ya bes' be careful, Grimes. I just might get the wrong idea," Daryl teased, taking the credit card and keys from Rick's outstretched hands. Attempted to, Rick wouldn't let go.

"Pretty sure that was the right idea," he smirked, puckering his lips, eyes half-lidded and dark with lust.

Damn, did he look gorgeous like that! Daryl peaked over his shoulder before leaning in and kissing him, goofy smile never leaving his face. Why couldn't he just kiss that man forever? Why'd they have to part? He wanted to fuse right into his body. Was that weird?

Probably. But at least he wasn't thinking about Merle anymore.

Shit, he was so fucking in love! He had it bad, so fucking bad for that man that he didn't even remember what it felt like before him. It just felt like he had always been there, with him, a part of him. He wondered if that's how Rick felt about him. He hoped it was.

He was in deep, too! So fucking deep that he was somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean. He had traveled through the molten core of the Earth and came out on the other side. That's how deep he was. And he never wanted back up, content to stay down there floating just below the surface, weightless. That's how Rick made him feel, like he was walking on air.

"Ya gonna stare at me all day, Honey?" Rick purred, grinning big as he broke the trance Daryl was hopelessly lost in.

He blushed and went to turn away but Rick had a finger hooked through one of his belt loops. Before he knew what happened, he was pinned against Rick's desk getting the breath kissed right out of him. He was fairly certain that some part of them had been fused together from that kiss, it just wasn't their bodies.

"I mean...staring's fine, but I'd much rather be doin' that," Rick whispered before he pulled away.

"I'll remember that," he replied once he got his voice back from wherever Rick had chased it off to. "Should prolly get goin'."

"I suppose," Rick sighed. "Hurry back. I wanna close up early today. We gotta go get cell phones or Carol's never gonna get off my back."

"Did I hear my name?" Carol smirked as she popped her head in the door. And that wasn't suspicious at all....

"Just sayin' how much we love ya," Rick replied.

"'M headin' out," Daryl said as he squeezed passed her.
"Didn't mean ta run ya off," she yelled after him.

"Ya didn't,,' he yelled back. He got Glenn's order for saw blades, took a quick look at their inventory of other nails and screws, and set out to the hardware store.

On his way, he kept getting the strange sense that he was being followed. He kept checking his mirrors but couldn't spot anything out of the ordinary. He was sure he was just being paranoid. He hadn't been followed in years, and that was usually by associates of his father looking for money. Or Merle's dealers looking for money.

He shook it off and pulled into the parking lot. The first cart he grabbed had a wobbly wheel so he exchanged it before going into the hardware store. Once inside, he went straight for the nails and bolts aisle and picked up a few boxes of finishing nails as well as some for the nail gun Glenn needed.

He knew they were getting low on lacquer, so he headed for the paint section. He went ahead and picked up the soft yellow paint he'd need later that week for a dresser they were building for a little girl. He smiled fondly at the idea of building Judith one just like it some day.

Suddenly, he got a prickly feeling on the back of his neck and the sense that he was being watched. He kept checking his mirrors but couldn't spot anything out of the ordinary. He was sure he was just being paranoid. He hadn't been followed in years, and that was usually by associates of his father looking for money. Or Merle's dealers looking for money.

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Suddenly, he got a prickly feeling on the back of his neck and the sense that he was being watched. He snapped his head down the aisle and locked eyes with a blonde who suspiciously looked away. He knew her. Andrea Something, the Wannabe Governor's mistress/lawyer.

He quickly stalked down the aisle to confront her. She sighed heavily at being made but turned towards him and raised her hands defensively.

"Why ya followin' me?" he barked a little more harshly than he intended to.

"Daryl, right? Daryl Dixon?" she asked calmly.

"Who wants ta know?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"My name's Andrea. I believe you know my sister Amy."

He nodded slightly. They'd met a few times, drank together a few times, but it was more like they had mutual acquaintances. Or rather, their acquaintances were acquaintances. That happened in small towns.

"Anyway,..." she started but trailed off. He stared her down while she studied him like she was searching for something, sizing him up. "I, uh, was hoping you could tell me few things about Rick Grimes," she said hopefully.

"I don't talk ta lawyers," he hissed before turning around and stomping back down the aisle.

"Well, I'm afraid this does have to do with legal matters," she said as she followed him back to his cart. "It's about Tyreese Williams."

"I don't know nothin' about that!" he spat back over his shoulder.

If she thought he'd roll over on Rick, she had another thing coming. He attempted to push the buggy along towards the checkout counter but she stepped in front of it and stopped him.

"Look, I know you know who I am. I was here when you and Rick ran into Phillip a few weeks back. And believe it or not, I'm trying to do the right thing by your boss," she said. She looked away briefly and took a deep breath before turning back and continuing, "I broke up with Phillip. I
don't know why I'm telling you this other than maybe I want to convince you that I'm genuine when I say that I made a mistake when I drew up the contract with Tyreese and that I'd like to fix it.

"I don't know why I thought he was a good guy, I mean I was the other woman. Can't exactly say I'm surprised he turned out to be a complete asshole," she chuckled nervously. "Point is, I can get him out of the contract, but it's going to take a lot of work and I needed to know if Rick was worth the trouble."

Daryl scoffed, "Shouldn't ya be asking if Tyreese is worth it since it's his livelihood you're fuckin' with?"

"Ty will be fine. Phillip gives him enough work—"

"Yeah," he huffed sarcastically.

"Tyreese isn't hurting for it. I was supposed to draw up other contracts with T-Dog and Morgan to freeze Rick out, but I told Phillip 'no', because it felt wrong...I guess I'm here because I wanted to know if my instincts were right," she explained.

"Congrats! They're right 'cause Rick Grimes is the best fuckin' man I've ever met, and I will gladly beat anyone into the ground who says otherwise! Now leave me be, I gotta get back ta work," he growled as he maneuvered the cart around her and headed to the counter.

"Okay then," she hollered after him. "I'll see ya around, Daryl."

He rolled his eyes and kept walking. That was the weirdest conversation he'd had at the hardware store so far, and he had had quite a few when he used to stand around out front waiting for someone to come by and throw him some work.

Andrea didn't seem so bad without Phillip. Amy was always nice to him so maybe she was too, and she did seem genuine about fixing her and Phillip's dick move. That would help out Rick's business a lot. Maybe they would have enough work to hire Merle. He didn't know how Rick would feel about that since Merle had a record a mile long, but he had thought about bringing it up to see what he'd say.

He kind of felt like a jerk for not asking about Amy. He thought he heard that she went back to Atlanta for college. One of Merle's regularly hook ups was a friend of hers so she'd sometimes tag along when her friend came to see him. He always teased Daryl about her being sweet on him, but he didn't notice. Of course, he was usually blackout drunk anytime he was at home, so that wasn't saying much.

Without anymore distractions, he managed to pay and get the stuff into the truck. He drove back thankful that the feeling of being followed had disappeared. When he pulled into the driveway of the shop, he noticed a car pull up to the curb, and he got the strangest feeling that it wasn't a customer.

The car looked familiar, but it took him a minute to place it. It wasn't until he got out of Rick's truck and started for the door that he noticed Lori in the passenger seat.

"Shit!" Things were about to get interesting. "Rick!" he hollered.

Then Shane stepped out of the car.

_Fuckin' hell!_ Interesting? More like nuclear. "RICK!"
This was shaping up to be one hell of a day. Figured. He always hated Mondays.

Chapter End Notes

On an unrelated note to this madness, if you haven't read Officer Hottie & the Redneck Baker, you totally should!
Rick's In Love

Chapter Summary

Rick thinks about the future, has heated words with Lori and Shane, then has a few for Daryl.

**Rick**

They were at the shop for about two hours before Carol strolled in with lunch, a pleasant grin on her face. Rick was in his office trying not to think about how his hands felt all over Daryl a mere few hours ago when he heard her come in. She must have had a good morning with Merle from the look on her face. He smiled knowingly at her.

"What?" she asked, obviously having some clue as to 'what' from the cheeky grin she flashed him. Rick just shook his head.

"How's mah brother?" Daryl drawled.

"Doin' good. He was about to take a nap when I left. Michonne said she could stay till about six when ya'll get there."

"We'll have time ta go home and get somethin' ta eat. Ya spoiled me, Daryl! I can't eat junk food anymore," Rick said as they all followed Carol to their little break room. He really had. He couldn't even stomach the idea of eating vending machine garbage again.

It was a little while after lunch when Daryl came in to tell him they were out of finishing nails. At first he thought it was an excuse to come and sneak a kiss or something, but the man looked worried. He could only guess it was because of Merle. He comforted him the best he could before sending him on his way to the store.

The truth was that he was worried, too. About a lot of things. He was worried that he fell in love too fast and that Daryl didn't feel the same way. He was worried that if he blinked it would all fall apart. He was worried that if he told Daryl everything he wanted to that he'd run away.

Like how he wanted to get out of their tiny apartment and buy them a house. No, build Daryl one because there wasn't going to be enough room when they had a baby. And like how he wanted to figure out a way to have a baby because Daryl was so amazing with Judith, and if they ended up losing here like he thought they might, then he deserved children if he wanted them.

He was worried about how those thoughts were probably wildly inappropriate considering that they hadn't even been together a week and he was willing to grow an ovary for the man. He didn't know if Daryl wanted kids or liked them even. Maybe he was just faking with Carl and Judith, putting up with them because he liked Rick. But his gut told him he wasn't.

His gut was telling him that he was going to spend the rest of his life with Daryl, and he had no desire to argue.

He was somewhat worried about how Lori and Shane would take the news when they found out about them, but that was more for the kids' sakes. He wondered how he should broach the Judith
topic because he knew it would eventually come to a head. He preferred for that to happen before she was old enough to figure things out for herself.

He truly loved her just as much as he loved Carl. They had bonded, he was attached. But sometimes, he would look at her and all he could see was betrayal. And he knew that wasn't fair. It tore him up inside because he knew she was innocent in everything.

It would just take more time to get passed that. Passed the anger over the whole situation that was slowly but steadily dissipating. Daryl had a lot to do with that, with changing his perspective. He showed him that his life was not over like he had started to think, but that it was only really beginning.

Maybe someday, in the future of course, they could all have happy family dinners together. That him and Lori, and even him and Shane, could be friends again, with Daryl too. That Carl and Judith would someday have another sibling to corral. That he could give Daryl everything he ever wanted and things he hadn't realized that he did.

But maybe that was too long term. He had plenty to worry about for the next twenty-four hours.

Like the Merle situation. He had already decided that Merle would be staying with them for awhile. He didn't know how long that would be, but he knew the man would need help in the beginning. That only gave another pro to the house debate.

He had also spent most of the afternoon running through the books looking for things he could hire Merle for. If he couldn't go back to the garage, he'd need something to do. And who else was going to hire a one-handed former addict that also happened to be a Dixon?

He worried about how the atmosphere would change if he hired him. Things like the Carol/Merle dynamic might need to be discussed. And eventually the him and Daryl development would come to light. He wondered how that would go over with Carol and Glenn.

He was glad that him and Daryl weren't the only ones concerned about Merle. After Daryl left for the store, Carol came in for a chat. He just wondered how long she was hovering around outside his door before hand.

"He can't go back to that RV," Carol started.

"Already thought of that. We have an extra bunk. He can take that for as long as he needs," Rick replied. "I don't think he should be alone."

"What about Lori?"

Rick slumped down in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "She ain't gonna like it, and neither is Shane. She's not gonna want the kids comin' over with him there, either of 'em. I know that, but I don't see a way around it. Told Daryl we could ship Merle ta Glenn's for the weekends," he chuckled.

"I have an extra room, but I hesitate—"

"Believe me, I get that, Carol. And I don't want anybody doin' anythin' that they aren't comfortable with. We just broke the news last night that Daryl is stayin' with me, and I'm just waitin' for that ta hit the fan. Might as well keep pilin' it on."

Carol let out a sigh and wrapped her arms around her chest, "I worry about him fallin' off the wagon. Glad ya took care of that at the hospital. Still, I know he's gotta be in more pain than he lets
"It's sucks, I know, but I really think he's tryin'. I think that asshole of a father of theirs dyin' was the best thing to ever happen to either of 'em."

"I'll drink ta that," Carol laughed.

"Neither of 'em have had any sort of support system, and if I can change that, I gotta try. Lori can't take the kids away just because I'm doin' a good deed. 'Specially now that I finally hired a lawyer," he grinned wide.

Carol narrowed her eyes at him. She'd been on him several times about finding an attorney, but he had hoped him and Lori could work things out on their own. Unfortunately, it seemed the happier he got, the more irate she got. He had no intention of punishing her, but he wasn't going to be pushed around either. He only wanted what was fair.

"Who?" she finally asked.

"Michonne," he simply said, a smug smirk on his face.

"Oh, I can't wait to see that! I didn't even think about her. Guess I'm so used ta seein' her at the shelter that it slipped my mind that she could work a court room," Carol said amused. "Well, I'm just glad ya finally decided to listen ta me, Rick."

"I want to respect Lori's wishes, I really do, but how can I expect my son ta grow up ta be a good man if I don't lead by example? I'm sure we'll share quite a few of whatever concerns she's going to have about it, and she has every right to be apprehensive about the whole Dixon situation.

"I jus'. I can't send 'em back ta where they came from. I jus' can't do it...not when I can help. Not Daryl. And not even Merle. Not when he hasn't done anythin' ta me ta warrant suspicion. I mean, I don't exactly trust the guy with my life and I won't be leavin' him alone with my kids anytime soon, but I can't just throw them out on the street."

"You're preachin' to the choir here, Rick. I get where Lori's comin' from, but if I was in your shoes, I'd be doin' the same thing," she said sympathetically. "It'll work out. And until it does, don't forget ya got people behind ya."

"Thanks for lettin' me vent, Carol. I don't wanna burden Daryl anymore than he already is," he smiled kindly.

"How's he holdin' up?"

"He's hangin' in there," Rick replied, trying his damnedest to bite back the smile threatening to bust forth and give them away at the mere mention of his lover's name.

"Whatever it is you're doin', Rick, keep it up. He's startin' to come out of his shell," she smirked as she turned to leave.

He was thankful she left because this time he couldn't hold back the blush that overcame him at the thought of Daryl. And not just at what they'd done that morning, but also because of the fact that he had noticed the budding confidence in the man and it looked damn sexy on him.

While Daryl was out, Rick helped Glenn with plans for a small dresser a woman had commissioned for her daughter, Carol took care of some bills, both sending them out to customers and paying their own, and T-Dog the cat napped as usual.
He couldn't help but smile to himself when he heard his truck pulling in. But before Daryl came through the door, he yelled for him. At first, Rick thought he might've needed help carrying things in. Then he called again, more urgency and alarm in his voice, and all three dropped what they were doing and headed for the door.

Rick swung it open to see Lori and Shane getting out of her car. He told her not to come by, but he wasn't really surprised they had after dropping that bombshell on them the night before. Daryl handed Glenn the bags and followed close behind as they walked over to them. He could not have described how calming it was to know Daryl was just a step behind him.

Rick could feel the energy radiating out from him. He fed off of it, and he was sure Daryl was going to feed off of him. He knew he had to stay as calm as he could for him, for both of them because he knew Shane was going to push and push with the goal of getting Daryl to push back until he did something stupid. He needed to make sure that didn't happen.

"You've been letting a Dixon hang around our kids, Rick!" Lori hissed. Her words were laced with a cold fury that he had almost mistook for a mother bear protecting her cubs if it hadn't been for the undercurrent of seething jealousy.

He had to scratch his head at that because he wasn't sure if she was jealous that maybe the kids liked Daryl better than Shane or because he was truly happy for the first time in years—maybe even ever—when she herself was probably still miserable.

"Kid! He's only got tha one!" Daryl clarified, bristled up and ready for a fight.

That was not how he wanted the whole Judith topic to come up, and he would've been mad if it had been anyone but Daryl. But he knew the man was just trying to help; he couldn't fault him for that.

"You don't know what the hell your talkin' 'bout, ya dumb hick. Why don't ya go find some trouble somewhere else ta get into," Shane snarled.

"I don't gotta know nothin' ta see that the li'l one ain't his, ya disloyal home-wrecker. I'd have ta be blind not ta. Ya think he was too stupid ta figure it out?" Daryl said pointing to Rick. "He's known from tha beginnin'!"

"Daryl, go back inside," Rick told him calmly. He wanted him close by, but protecting him from Shane was more important.

"There's nothin' to know. She's Rick's," Lori assured them all, but Rick heard the waver in her voice.

"Drop the bullshit, Lori. That's a lie and ya know it. Did ya even wait ta see if I'd come outta the damn coma? Or did ya let him jump into our bed as soon as the coast was clear?" Rick snapped.

"It wasn't like that Rick!"

"Kinda looks that way," he countered, eyes narrowing on her.

"Prollly did it on your unconscious body, Rick. Wouldn't put it passed 'em," Daryl helpfully added. Fuck, that man was fiercely loyal. Rick already knew that, but it was hot as hell to see it up close.

"This don't concern you, so why don't ya go on and get outta here ya hillbilly piece of trash!" Shane shouted.

"I ain't no trash!" Daryl shouted back before nearly charging Shane. He got up into his face, chest
"Daryl, just go inside, okay," Rick said, gently pushing him towards the shop door. No doubt, Shane would cry like a bitch if Daryl hit him, filing any charges he could think of against him.

"Ain't that cute! Ya really think he's your friend, don't ya, Dixon? That's funny, man. I know all about you and that family a criminals o' yours. How he picked ya up from the shelter like a damn puppy, how ya weaseled your way into a warm bed, takin' advantage of a lonely man and his son. You ain't nothin' ta him but a boost to his ego, a charity case," Shane taunted, eyes cold as they bore into Daryl.

Daryl tried to charge him again, but Rick got in his way and walked him further towards the shop. "He ain't worth it, Daryl," Rick told him softly. "Baby, he ain't worth it," he whispered, briefly brushing his thumb over Daryl's jaw before dropping his hand to his chest to gently push him back. Daryl looked at him, brows knitted together, but then relented and nodded.

"He ain't your friend, Dixon, he just needed a pet after his life fell ta shit," Shane continued.

"And who's fault was that?" Rick bit back harshly. He turned around and headed towards Lori and Shane, unconsciously clutching Daryl's shirt for dear life, pulling the younger man along with him. Daryl's hand fisted in the back of his, grounding him as best as he could. For that, Rick was eternally grateful.

"Really Rick? After ever'thin' we been through, you're gonna replace me with that? A fucking Dixon?"

"No Shane, I didn't replace ya," he said evenly, "Not in the slightest, 'cause unlike you, he's an actual friend. Not another backstabbing, wife-stealing, asshole. He's an upgrade as far as I'm concerned! And what does that say about you, huh? That 'a fucking Dixon', both of them actually, are upgrades compared to your sorry ass?"

"Tells me you're delusional!"

"Maybe...but I can live with that, and I can live with myself at the end of the day. Couldn't say the same if I were you!" Rick turned to Lori and sneered. "I ain't payin' a dime to ya for his kid, Lori, even though I love her just as much as I do Carl. So, you'll be hearin' from my lawyer."

Rick turned to leave, leading Daryl to the shop door with a hand curled around the back of the younger man's neck softly. Before they got too far, Lori yanked his arm away and spun him around. He wiggled out of her grip and took a step towards her. He couldn't imagine the look on his face, but it must have been something feral because she took a step back, a wary look in her eyes.

"We aren't done talkin' about this, Rick! You let him sleep in the same room as our son? He's a criminal!" she yelled, motioning to Daryl who leered back at her.

"No, he's not! He's never been arrested and has no record. He's a good man regardless of his last name. You'd know that if ya weren't such an uptight snob, always judgin' people before you get to know them. That's one of things I could never stand about ya, and now, thank God, I don't have to."

"Come on man," Shane pleaded, "Don't be like that."

"Oh go ta hell, Shane! Ya stole my wife, ya shit on our friendship, ya knocked her up when I was near death laying in a hospital bed, ya played house with my family! Shit, ya tried ta pass your kid
off as mine, probably for the money, so ya don't get ta say a damn thing ta me ever again!"

Shane didn't deny any of it. He only looked away with a confused look on his face—*Did he not know?*—while Lori looked down in shame. With that, Rick knew all of it was the truth, everything about Judith. She knew at least, the whole time and didn't say a thing about it.

"You knew, didn't you? Ya knew she was his, both of you, and ya didn't say a goddamn word?"

Rick grabbed Daryl's wrist and gave it a little squeeze as he tried to steady his breathing and contain his growing wrath. He hoped that said enough to Daryl about how much he needed him right then. It must've because Daryl pulled his hand away just enough so he could intertwine their fingers.

That meant everything.

"I wanted ta work things out with you after the coma, Rick. I did! That's why I didn't tell you, but then, after you left...she liked you and I know you liked her, and I didn't have the heart to...Rick, I'm so, so sorry," Lori said, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh fuck you, Lori, FUCK! YOU!"

"Now Rick, le's be civil," Shane said, stepping in between them and Lori.

"Fuck you too, Shane!"

Then, it was Daryl's turn to hold him back.

"Calm down, baby," Daryl mirrored in his ear, his arms wrapped tightly around his chest. Lori and Shane were saying things but he couldn't hear them, didn't want to. He only heard Daryl calling him 'baby' as he whispered soothing things into his hair. His anger dissolved at the sound of his voice, the feel of his body against his.

Slowly, he came out of the haze of rage he was in guided out by that voice. He nodded to acknowledge Daryl as he reached a hand around to grip the back of his head, the other squeezing a forearm firmly. He nodded again and Daryl loosened his grip but kept one arm around him, hand clutching the front of his shirt, the other letting go to fall to his hip.

"...I don't want him sleepin' in the same room as our son! I'll make sure ta tell your lawyer that too!" he finally heard Lori yell.

"It was just temporary. Daryl will be sleepin' in mine from now on," Rick said, voice going eerily calm as he took the hand Daryl had on his chest to weave their fingers together.

"What the fuck has gotten into you, man?" Shane said, shaking his head with shock and maybe contempt, disapproval, and a bit of disbelief.

"Nothin' yet, but we'll get there," Rick smirked before turning around and walking Daryl inside—a hand placed intimately on Daryl's opposite hip, his pinky burrowing into his back pocket, way too close to each other for them to be mistaken for anything other than lovers—leaving the two stunned adulterers wide-eyed and speechless in their wake.

Daryl was understandably irritated when they got back in the shop. Rick had expected that with the overload of stimuli. "Why'd ya order me inside like that? Like I'm your damn lap dog?" Daryl hollered.
Rick knew that comment was all Shane and it really fucking pissed him off! That anger wasn't meant for Daryl, though. His boyfriend needed him calm, so Rick spoke as soothingly as he could. "You're not. I was tryin' to protect ya is all. He's a cop, Daryl. Don't matter that he wasn't in uniform, it'd still be assultin' a cop. That'd just bring us trouble that we don't need."

"I can take care of myself!" Daryl barked as he paced a little in front of the door. Rick knew better than anyone that he could, but he needed him to know that he didn't have to.

His police training kicked in and he walked closer to him, slowly so he wouldn't be perceived as a threat. Not that Daryl would see him that way, but he'd never seen him so agitated before. They were in foreign territory, and he hoped to all the gods that ever were that Daryl wouldn't turn around and run out the door.

"I know ya can, I've never doubted that, but I need ya, okay? Ya are not a charity case, Daryl. You are my friend, and I need you!" he explained. He tried to catch Daryl's eye to make sure he would know it was the truth, but his eyes were trained intently on the ground.

And that just broke his heart because Rick knew exactly what was going through that pretty little head of his. Daryl was thinking that he blew it, ruined everything by losing his temper and yelling at him. He couldn't look Rick in the eye because he couldn't bare the thought of finding out that he was right. And he certainly didn't help calling him his friend.

"More than friends," he corrected. He placed a gentle hand on Daryl's shoulder and used the other to raise his chin to make him look at him. He didn't even think about what came next. All he knew was that there was no holding it back. "Daryl...I'm in love with you...I-I love you."

He didn't know what he had expected, but he watched Daryl's deep blue eyes start to glisten and his bottom lip begin to quiver. And that was it, he lost it, liquid fire streaming down his cheeks as Daryl grabbed him by the collar and pulled him flush to kiss him hot and desperate.

Maybe it was the adrenaline or endorphins or the flame in those blue eyes, but Rick didn't care what Glenn or Carol might've been thinking about them. In that moment there was nothing else in existence but Daryl. And that would forever be enough for him.

"I love ya, too," Daryl whispered on his lips.

"I know," was all Rick could think to reply. Daryl let out the most perfect little hybrid laugh/sob at that. He felt it and heard it and could've sworn he even tasted it. He hooked his arms around Daryl's shoulders and kissed him slow and easy in the middle of the shop, refusing to stop until their tears did.

"Was waitin' for you ta go first," Rick said smoothly when their lips parted once more.

"Was waitin' for you ta go first," Daryl replied with that same little chuckle as before.

They got lost in each other's eyes for a moment until someone cleared their throat behind them. They reluctantly pulled apart to face the music. Or the firing squad; it was Georgia after all. But Rick was pleasantly surprised to find two huge knowing smiles greeting them instead.

"I love this job," Carol snickered. "Thanks for the show, Rick. You should've seen their faces as ya'll walked away. There's probably lots on the security cameras, I'll be sure to check. And, uh, the encore wasn't bad either," she smiled fondly.

"Do me and Maggie look that disgusting mushy and sweet when we kiss?" Glenn asked.
"Oh yeah," she teased him.

"Geez, sorry guys," he said with a slight grimace.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with it," Rick assured him, love-struck eyes fluttering over to Daryl.

"Nothing at all," Carol stated. "Plus, they just won me twenty bucks!"

Rick gave Daryl a confused look that was instantly returned.

"Maggie and I started a pool," Glenn explained.

"We were that obvious?" Rick asked as he and Daryl both turned crimson. Carol smiled wide. "Well, ya coulda told us. Would've saved a lot of trouble!"

"We knew you'd figure it out...eventually," Carol said.

"And it was more fun this way," Glenn added.

"I'll remember that when bonus time comes around," Rick quipped. "Okay, I think it's time ta close up for the day," he said, hoping to change the subject, which seemed necessary if the crescent moons Daryl was decorating his arm with were any indication.

It was only a quarter past four but it had been a long night and an even longer day. Everyday seemed to get more and more busy since he met Daryl. Not that he was complaining; there was never a dull moment, and he was never bored. He knew there were bound to be more coming up around the corner with the day he had, but that was okay.

If someone would have told him a month ago that he would've finally had the courage to stand up to Lori and Shane, give up his forced responsibility to Judith, become friends with a few Dixon's, and get himself a boyfriend, he would've thought they were crazy.

But for Daryl Dixon, he really didn't mind being crazy.
**Daryl's in Love**

Chapter Summary

Merle leaves the hospital.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Daryl**

Rick came rushing out the door, face full of worry, and Daryl could've—probably should've—taken him right there up against the wall for all to see. The man was worried about him! About *him*, Daryl Dixon. He was pretty sure that that was the single best moment of his life regardless of the storm brewing ten feet away.

Then it hit. He tried his best to stay calm, to back Rick up, to put Rick's former best friend in his place and the woman who tossed him aside. Sure, Rick kept telling him to go inside, but he didn't want to leave him. He thought they agreed to handle things together. He was just trying to do right by him.

Maybe he should've kept his mouth shut about Judith. That wasn't his place and they both cared for her. It wasn't her fault her parents were dicks. He and Rick were probably better parents to her than they were. Maybe that was just his anger talking. Carl never mentioned them mistreating them.

Christ! Why'd he have to say anything? Now, they weren't ever going to see her again, were they? He could've pitched in with the child support if it was too much for Rick. Hell, his paycheck was practically Rick's money anyway. Shit, they hadn't even talked about Rick saying anything. What if he overstepped his bounds?

It was too late to take it back; the cat was out of the bag and there was no getting it back in. He didn't have much time to worry about it in the moment because him and Rick were taking turns holding each other back. He really wanted to punch Shane in the face, but he figured if anyone had the right to so, it was Rick and not him.

They were a good team, pulling the other back when they went too far off the rails. Eb and Flow, partners in crime.

But even he was a bit shocked when Rick basically outed them to Shane and Lori. He was not expecting that at all. At first he thought it was just to piss them off. Maybe it was to a point, but that wasn't who Rick was. If anything it was a statement that Daryl wasn't going anywhere.

Then what did he do? He went and yelled at the man. Rick was only trying to protect him—he knew that, he did—and that was just a slap to his face. There was no call for it, he didn't know why he lashed out at him, at the only man on planet Earth who'd probably grin and bear it. And he did.

That just made it worse: his guilt, his self-doubt, his shame and inadequacies. How could he face the man after fucking up yet again?

It was just that he'd never had anyone who wanted to protect him but Merle. It was a defense
mechanism, he supposed, pushing back against something different. He was so used to fighting his own battles that he almost felt like a failure, like Rick didn't trust him to be there by his side when he told him to go back inside.

He knew that wasn't true. He knew that before Rick even said "I love you."

But then he did and Daryl couldn't have imagined a more perfect moment. All the amazing things Rick had told him came flashing back in an instant, and he knew everything would be okay, that they would be okay because Rick loved him. He thought Rick loved him, but now he knew that he did.

He didn't even realized he was crying until Rick was. That was enough to weaken his knees because he knew they were happy tears and that he was the one who caused them. He looked damn sexy like that too, raw and exposed with his soul laid out bare.

Daryl kissed him hard, on instinct, his brain too clouded with pure bliss to do anything else, to think about anything else. It wasn't until they pulled back that he realized he hadn't said it back. He had to fix that, so he did.

The next thing he knew, Carol cleared her throat and a blanket of fear settled over him. He forgot the two of them weren't alone in the room. There was really no way to know how everyone would take the news about him being gay and Rick being with him, but her and Glenn were smiling at them, and relief washed over him.

The weirdest part was all their friends seemed to have known already. That explained Michonne and Carol's endless gawking. He wondered how long they knew, how they had found out, and why the hell they didn't say anything! He supposed it didn't matter anyway. Him and Rick were together now and that was the important part.

He had no idea so much emotion could be packed into such a short period of time. The last three days had been emotionally exhausting. All he wanted to do was go home, crawl in Rick's bed, curl up in his arms, and sleep for a week.

That wasn't going to happen, though. They still had the Merle situation to deal with, the Lori and Shane fight was surely not over, and they needed to talk about the whole Judith problem. And those were just the big things.

Rick decided to close up the shop thirty minutes early so they could go pick out cell phones. Daryl never had one before but it would be nice to have a way to get ahold of Rick if he needed him. Also Merle or Carl in an emergency. They programmed their new numbers in and sent them to all their friends.

It was weird for him to have a phone full of contacts, but he wasn't going to complain. Of course, Rick was number one on his speed dial under 'My Hot Boyfriend'. He’d have to come up with something better later. Rick had him in his as 'Sweet Thang'. With the 'A' and everything. That made him smile.

On the way home, they talked about bringing Merle back to their apartment for awhile after he was released from the hospital. Rick also wanted to give Daryl a few days off from work so he could help get him settled in wherever he ended up.

Rick suggested putting Merle in his bed and having Daryl sleep with him, but the man was adamant about not pushing him into something if he wasn't ready. Daryl wasn't used to sleeping in a bed with anyone but Merle, but he'd already slept with Rick three times and had the best two
night's and a nap's worth of peace he'd ever had in his life.

He almost blew a gasket when Rick told Shane and Lori he'd be sleeping in his bed. But who was Daryl to argue?

He was a little uneasy about how Merle would take that. It was one thing for him to know he liked men, liked Rick—loved Rick—but would he be okay with them sleeping in the same bed? He really didn't care, he was going to do it anyway. He just hoped Merle wouldn't give them a hard time about it.

They had about forty-five minutes before they had to be at the hospital when they pulled up to their apartment. "Whatcha want for dinner?" Daryl asked while he waited for Rick to unlock the door.

"Sandwiches," Rick answered.

"Sandwiches?" he asked with a puzzled look as they walked into the living room. He thought Rick wanted a good home cooked meal.

"Yep. Figured that's all we'll have time for after we finish makin' out on the couch," Rick smirked as he grabbed him by the collar and kissed him. "Unless you were in the mood for something else," he said, quirking an eyebrow.

"Nah, sandwiches are fine," Daryl replied. He probably should've thought that through. He wasn't sure if Rick meant dinner or the kissing. Because yes, he wanted more of the latter even though he really liked the kissing, but he figured that they should take things slow. Plus, he didn't want to make a fool of himself and cry a third time that day.

Rick kissed him again and led him towards the couch pretty much with his luscious lips alone. They shucked off their jackets and Rick pulled him down on top of him on the couch. After that, it was a blur of hands and lips and tongues and moans. Somehow, their shirts made their way to the floor and Rick had flipped their positions to kiss his way down his chest.

He watched as Rick caressed every one of his scars on his torso. At first he thought he was overcompensating, doing it to prove a point that they didn't bother him. That didn't sound like Rick, though. That may have been part of it, but then Rick looked up at him with those gorgeous blues of his, stained dark with arousal and told him he was beautiful. That was the point, and Daryl knew the man believed it.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight to hold back the tears that had flooded his eyes. Goddammit! He was determined not to cry again! Guess he was fucking crybaby....

"Sorry, I didn't mean ta make ya uncomfortable," Rick said, moving his hands up to cup his face.

"Ya didn't," Daryl said with a fake cough to mask a sniffle.

Rick crawled his way back up to reclaim his kiss-swollen lips, a hand on Daryl's neck, a thumb gliding over the line of his jaw. He pulled back and stared down at him as if he was memorizing his face, and that was fine with Daryl. He could paint Rick's with his eyes closed, but those eyes were making his blood boil and he wasn't about to make him look away.

Just when Daryl was about to retort that staring was nice but he'd rather be kissing, Rick pulled back and sat up, his knees straddling Daryl's hips.

"As much as I'd rather be kissin' ya, a lot of things happened today, and I was thinkin' we should
talk a bit before we head to the hospital," he said.

Daryl started biting chewing on his lip nervously. He was never good at talking.

"Stop that," Rick grinned as he leaned down and kissed him softly. "Ain't nothing ta be worried about."

"Alright then talk, Grimes," Daryl huskily replied.

"Judith."

"M sorry, Rick. I know it wasn't my place. Jus' came out is all. Then, I knew I couldn't take it back," he explained, looking away with shame.

Rick gently tilted his face back towards him and gave him a reassuring peck on the lips. "I know, heat of the moment. It needed to be brought up and I'm glad it's out the open..." Rick paused and sat up, "...I'm just gonna miss her, y'know?"

"Me too," Daryl muttered.

"Y'ever wanted kids?" he asked, finding Daryl's hands that were planted on his thighs and intertwining their fingers.

"Never really thought about it, didn't think it was an option." That was mostly true...until he met Rick. He was trying very hard not to read into what Rick was probably not getting at. It was just one of those questions you're supposed to ask on a first date, which he realized they hadn't exactly had yet.

"I always wanted more, but after Carl, Lori...obviously that didn't happen. I was so excited when I woke up and Lori was pregnant, but...when I realized she wasn't mine, it was like something was taken from me. Not that I need a biological connection to love a child. I love Judith, I do, but sometimes when I look at her, all I see is Lori and Shane, what they did. Now, I might've lost her."

"M sorry," Daryl said, looking away again.

"Hey, look at me," Rick softly demanded. Daryl sighed heavily but obliged. "It's not your fault, Sweetheart. Don't ya go thinkin' that it is. I ain't mad at ya because I know you were just tryin' ta help. Thank you for that. I know I should've manned up and handled it sooner."

Daryl was afraid Rick was going to be angry about the whole mess, but he was relieved that his boyfriend was so fucking understanding. Of course he was, he had to be to put up with him. "That all?" he asked.

"Nah, but how 'bout I make us some grilled cheeses," Rick smirked as he pushed himself off the couch and stood up. He pulled Daryl up after and gave him a few more pecks before they put their shirts back on and headed into the kitchen.

"Ya mean, 'how 'bout I make us some'," Daryl corrected.

"Hey now! I've been watchin' ya cook for weeks. Was kinda hoppin' you'd rub off on me a little, but since we already did that today...," Rick chuckled as they walked to the fridge, "...thought I'd cook for you for a change."

Daryl didn't want Rick cooking for them, and not just because he liked to burn things. Cooking was one of the few things he brought to the table, one of the things he could actually do for the man
who gave him everything, and he didn't want to lose that.

He watched as Rick got out the cheese, butter, and ketchup to take to the counter. He scrunched up his brow at that last one but didn't say anything about it. Rick turned around and leaned back against the counter. He grabbed Daryl's hips and pulled them flush.

"I know they won't be as good as yours, babe, but I wanted ta do somethin' for ya after ya helped me through all the craziness today," Rick said as he carded his hands through Daryl's hair. And that just felt fantastic!

"Mhmm," Daryl moaned, certain he couldn't've composed a single word if his life had depended on it.

"So...I know you're the chef of the house, but I could probably handle some sandwiches with supervision...if ya wouldn't mind me stumblin' around your kitchen, that is."

Then the bastard pouted his lips and how could he say 'no' to that? "Ya got one shot 'cause your cute. If ya burn 'em, then you're banned for life," Daryl replied.

"Ya think I'm cute?" Rick smiled. It got wider when Daryl turned bright red, his cheeks heating up of their own accord.

"Ya bes' get ta cookin'. Michonne's gonna be mad if we have ta wait for the fire department before we can relieve her," he smirked.

Rick rolled his eyes at the barb as he turned around to get the pan from the cabinet. He put it on the stove and got out a knife from the drawer to butter the bread. Daryl watched him intently as he put the first piece of bread in the pan followed by a slice of cheese and the top piece of bread. Then, he quickly assembled the second.

"Impressed?" Rick asked, flashing Daryl a smug sideways smile.

Daryl grunted and moved to stand behind him. "They ain't done yet," he whispered low as he wrapped his arms around him and gave a little nibble on his earlobe before resting his chin on Rick's shoulder.

He watched Rick flip the sandwiches and groaned internally because they looked perfect. He just couldn't have that. So he started peppering Rick's neck with kisses and slowly trailed a hand down to palm his cock through his jeans.

"Pretty sure that's interference," Rick said, his head falling back on Daryl's shoulder as he let out a shuddered moan.

"Don't know what ya mean," Daryl replied as his other hand made its way under the hem of Rick's shirt.

Before his fingers could make their way into his pants, Rick grabbed his hand and shrugged him off. "Cheater," he chuckled, turning off the stove and sliding the grilled cheeses onto their respective plates. He handed them both to Daryl and retrieved some chips and two beers before joining him at the table.

The second side was a little dark but not burnt. Daryl picked his up and bit into it. "Not bad, Grimes. Must have a good teacher," he admitted around a mouth full of toasted bread and melted cheese.
"Thank you, Sweetheart," Rick purred as he kissed his cheek. "Actually, I'm surprised I learned anythin'. My teacher's so fuckin' hot, all I can do is stare at 'im while he cooks. It's the sexiest thing in the world."

Daryl blushed at that. It made him feel good knowing Rick loved to watch him in the kitchen. Rick was kind of cute to watch, too. The man looked proud to have cooked something for him. He supposed it wouldn't be too terrible to let him feed them on occasion. With supervision of course.

Daryl watched as Rick squirted some ketchup on his plate, dipped his sandwich in it, and took a huge bite. "'S there anythin' ya don't put ketchup on?" he smirked.

"Ice cream," Rick mumbled before taking another big bite.

"What else did ya wanna talk about?" Daryl asked before scarfing down another bite.

"Merle," he muttered with a mouth full of potato chips.

"As long as he stays clean, he ain't gonna be a problem, Rick," he tried to assure him.

"Yeah, I know. It's probably gonna be hard on him for awhile while he adjusts. And I already told ya that he can stay here for as long as he needs ta...I was just wantin' ta know how you'd feel about me hirin' him...if it comes ta that."

Daryl was starting to think that him and Rick shared a brain or something like that because they always seemed to be on the same page. He was convinced that soon they wouldn't have to talk at all to be able to communicate with the other.

"He's a hard worker. Guess it depends on if ya can find something he can do with one hand," Daryl said.

"I ain't worried about that," Rick said, taking his hand and locking their fingers together. "I just wanted ta know how you'd feel about it. Nothin's set in stone because I'd need ta talk ta Carol about it to make sure she'd be comfortable with it, but I just want it ta be an option."

Daryl took a deep breath before he replied. "I love ya, Rick. I ain't ever loved anyone before so that means a lot ta me ta admit it, ta say it out loud, but ya mean a lot ta me. And I know I ain't ever gonna be able to repay ya for everything you've done for me and now Merle, but I'm gonna try every day...I jus' wanted ya ta know that."

"I love ya too, Daryl. But ya still don't get it, do ya? You've already given me enough, you've given me everything. Ya make me happy, and I never thought I'd have that again. Wantin' me back is reward enough for doin' right by you and Merle, so ya ain't gotta do anything but stay right here by my side. That's all I want from ya."

"I ain't goin' nowhere," Daryl said, leaning his shoulder into Rick's.

"Good...One more thing, then we should get goin'...I don't wan'cha thinkin' ya have to sleep in my bed if ya don't wanna. We can figure somethin' else out when Carl comes over. I could take your bunk and you could sleep in mine or somethin'."

Daryl wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. It didn't sound like Rick was changing his mind, just giving him an out so he didn't feel obligated to sleep with him. That was so Rick, but at the same time, there was a hint of hesitation in his voice.

That's when it hit him: Carl! What were they going to tell him? What would Rick want to tell him?
What would Shane and Lori tell him about the two of them? What would the boy think?

"And even if ya do sleep with me on the weekends, ya don't have ta during the week, or not every night, like if ya need space or somethin'," Rick added when he didn't reply.

"Whatcha gonna tell Carl? About us? 'S fine if ya don't wanna tell 'im anythin', but what about Lori and Shane?" he asked, unconsciously raising his thumb to chew on. Rick gently pulled it away, brought the abused digit to his lips, and kissed it.

"I don't know...he's smart, he'll figure it out on his own, but I'd rather he didn't, and I don't wanna sugarcoat it. I know it's Georgia, but it's the twenty-first century, and Lori and I both have tried to teach him not to be hateful or intolerant of other people. I don't think Lori or Shane will say anything. They both probably think it was just an act anyway."

"Hell Rick, even I was stunned by that," Daryl chuckled.

Rick stood from the table and stretched before gathering their dishes. He took them to the sink and rinsed them while Daryl put everything away.

"Didn't plan on outing us, but can't say I regret it...Alright, le's get movin'. Don't wanna get on Michonne's bad side since she is my lawyer now. Think we already stirred up enough trouble for her for one day."

*****

When they got to the hospital, Merle and Michonne were having a heated discussion about ninjas versus cyborgs. How they got onto that, no one would ever know, but Daryl had a hunch it had something to do with Merle's new dream to get a bionic hand and Michonne's famous collection of katanas.

They told them about their encounter with Lori and Shane, which Michonne didn't seem too worried about but made Merle mutter something unsavory about cops that he added didn't include retired ones after Daryl reminded him where he would be staying for the foreseeable future.

Michonne left to pick up her kid from the sitter, and they all thanked her for staying with Merle. While Rick walked her to her car, Merle talked about how his morning went with Carol. Merle had been in lust many times, and Daryl would admit that he was a little wary about the two of them knowing both of their histories, but this seemed different.

Maybe that was the rose colored glasses he had been wearing lately thanks to Rick, but who was he to judge where and with whom they found love?

That didn't stop Daryl from threatening to cut off his other hand if he ever hurt her. Rick came back in at that point and added that he'd cut up the rest of him.

Then, Merle told them that he talked to the guy who was selling him the bike and said Daryl could have it if he took over the payments. Even though it needed a few repairs, it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Rick gave him a look that he imagined most wives gave their husbands when they talked about getting a motorcycle, and that made his heart swell up with love. He was pretty sure that some day soon it would reach maximum capacity and just explode. At the same time, he thought he'd never get enough of Rick or his endless loving. Or maybe he didn't want to.

Him and Rick curled up in the torture chair again and cuddled after Merle dozed off. He couldn't
wait to sleep in Rick's bed the following night. He still hadn't told Merle about the sleeping situation, but he didn't want to overwhelm him just yet. He needed one more peaceful night in the hospital before he stepped into Rick and Daryl's House of Craziness.

*****

Merle was released first thing in the morning. Rick dropped them off at the apartment and went to take a quick shower while Daryl got Merle settled in the kids' room. That was when Merle took it upon himself to bring up the whole sleeping arrangement thing.

"Ya takin' the top bunk, baby brother?" he asked as he flopped down on the bottom bunk.

Daryl didn't reply immediately. He had been trying to find a way to let him know he'd be sleeping with Rick, but the conversation always went a lot smoother in his head than he knew it would once he had to look him in the eye. Apparently his silence said more than he intended it to.

"Don'cha think it's a li'l too soon ta be jumpin' in his bed, Darlina? Sure ya already live with 'im, but ya ain't never had a boyfriend before, unless they was secret, and I know he looks at ya all lovey dovey, but he's still married."

"Michonne's already workin' on the papers," he spat back defensively. He knew Merle was just looking out for him, that was his job, and he couldn't be upset with him for that, but he couldn't imagine Rick going back to Lori now, couldn't imagine his lover with anyone but him.

Yes, he was well aware that things with Rick had moved from zero to a hundred miles per hour in the span of a weekend. Even so, none of it had felt rushed, and he had been more than comfortable with where they were at the moment. It just felt right, all of it, and he just knew Rick was it for him, what he'd been waiting his whole life for.

Sometimes he doubted that Rick felt the same, but he was starting to get it because the man didn't just tell Daryl he loved him, he showed him. It was in the little things like letting him have the last piece of bacon—that was love—as well as the big things like letting Merle stay with them. Anyone who was willing to put up with two loud mouthed, stubborn ass Dixons under one roof was a keeper, especially when it could effect whether or not he saw his kids.

"I love 'im, Merle," he finally admitted when his brother kept staring at him expectantly.

"Well, I'll be sure ta knock real loud before I come bustin' in. Do I need ta announce my presence when I'm walkin' in a room or can ya'll confine your debauchery to the bedroom? 'Cause I love ya, but I don't need ta be seein' all that!" Merle insisted.

"Christ Merle, we ain't animals!"

"Jus' try ta keep it down, I don't need ta be hearin' it either," he grimaced.

"Can we please stop talkin' about my sex life?"

"Ya wanna talk about mine?" he smiled dirtily.

"Ain't nothin' ta talk about or you'd o' already told me...unfortunately."

"I know ya like hearin' all about my sexcapades!"

Merle's full, mirth-riddled laugh echoed in the room and must've caught Rick's ear because he popped his head in the door. "What's so funny?" he asked.
"Nothin's funny. He just thinks he is," Daryl grumbled. "Thought ya were takin' a shower."

Rick smiled wide, "I was just rearranging some drawers in my dresser so you could put some of your clothes in there...if ya want. Thought it'd give Merle some more room for his things." Rick tried to say it as casually as he could, but Daryl saw right through it. He was excited as hell!

"Ain't gotta go through all that trouble on account o' ol' Merle. Don't got many clothes anyway," Merle said.

"No trouble, Merle," Rick replied. "I better go grab that shower and get goin'. Otherwise Carol will get onto me for bein' late."

"Can't have ya gettin' on the li'l lady's bad side now," Merle hollered after him.

Daryl shook his head dismissively and went to the dresser to pull out his clothes. "Gonna go put these away, then I'll make breakfast."

"Ya do look like you've been eatin' well," he snickered.

"Keep makin' fun o' me and ya won't be," Daryl bit back as he walked across the hall to Rick's, nay, his, room, their room. Rick was leaning against the doorframe to the bathroom apparently waiting for him. Daryl tossed his clothes on the dresser and went to kiss him.

"How's he doin' with all this?" Rick asked when Daryl pulled back slightly.

"Said ta keep our quote 'debauchery' in the bedroom...he'll be fine. You, on the other hand, bes' be gettin' yourself in the shower," he replied.

"Was about ta, but then I got kinda sad about takin' one alone for some strange reason," Rick whispered in his ear before kissing a trail down his neck.

"Told Merle I was gonna make us breakfast."

"Go pour him a bowl of cereal," he chuckled back moving his hands to the buttons of Daryl's shirt.

Daryl swatted them away and quirked a brow at him, "Later," he growled playfully. He really, really wanted to jump in the shower with him, but Merle had literally just walked in the door. He seemed okay with everything, but he wanted to take things slow for a bit, didn't want to stress him.

"How 'bout ya undress me...then breakfast," Rick smirked.

"Ain't gonna happen," he chided, pulling away. His self-restraint was becoming nonexistent when it came to Rick. If he undressed him, he'd be naked in the shower before he knew what hit him.

Rick glared at him and grunted in frustration, but Daryl knew he wasn't angry when a mischievous grin worked its way onto his lips. "Can't blame me for tryin'," he sighed dramatically as he went into the bathroom.

No, he certainly could not.

Rick got the last word when he started stripping with the door open in plain view of him. It was slow and deliberate like a strip tease and Daryl wished he had some dollar bills. The damn torturous bastard!

Just when he was about to give in, Merle knocked on the door. "Can ya'll boys take a break from yer fornicatin'? I'm hungry Darlina! Shouldn't be cooking' with one hand," he yelled through the
"Goddammit, Merle!" he yelled back as he shut the bathroom door that he had unconsciously moved closer to in the last minute or so. He swung the bedroom door open and brushed past his brother towards the stairs.

"Yer dressed?" Merle asked, almost disappointedly.

"Shuddup, asshole!"

Merle's laugh followed him down the stairs. He really seemed to be okay with him and Rick, but that didn't mean he'd stop being his usual dick self. He just liked to stir up trouble. Daryl thought it was because he was in love with the sound of his own laugh.

They had a good breakfast that Merle was more than thrilled about after a few days of hospital food before Rick headed off to work. He kissed him goodbye, but frowned at the thought of Lori doing the same thing to him for years. They had a history, he knew that, accepted that, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he had to prove himself, be better than her or something stupid like that.

"Wish I didn't have ta kiss ya goodbye," Rick whispered on his lips. "But it's just for a few days is all. This way, you can text dirty pictures ta me all day," he snickered. "Preferably of yourself, in case that wasn't clear."

He knew that there was no way in hell that Lori had ever done that for him. He wasn't going to either. Not yet anyway. "Christ, I didn't know I was datin' such a perv," he teased, the tip of his tongue flicking out to ghost over Rick's lips.

"Ya say it like its a bad thing, Darlin'," Rick cooed.

"Must'a said it wrong then," he drawled before pressing Rick back against the front door and kissing him hard.

"I'm coming' in the livin' room now!" Merle announced, loud and exaggerated.

Daryl jumped back and rolled his eyes as Merle came stomping in theatrically. He had no idea how Merle would handle any sort of pda's between them. Honestly, he was afraid to find out. He'd heard how Merle and his friends would talk about gay people and none of it was ever good.

Merle said he was okay with them being together, but knowing they were a couple and seeing it were two very different things. And he had made a point to say that he didn't need to see all 'that'. Daryl thought it best for him and Rick to keep their distance when he was in the room. He just hoped that wouldn't upset Rick too much.

He knew it was kind of ridiculous that he was fine making out with him in the ER in front of strangers, even sleeping in that chair together, but he couldn't even bring himself to hold Rick's hand when Merle was in the room with them in their own home. He kind of felt like a coward.

"'Fraid he's gonna be like this for awhile," Daryl explained.

"Worth it," Rick grinned. "I'll call ya later, okay? Love you."

"Love ya, too," Daryl said low as he blushed a little. He didn't want Merle to hear him even though he already knew. Having both him and Rick around was going to take a bit getting used to, but they'd manage.
The rest of the week was boring in comparison to Monday. Daryl spent most of it on the couch with Merle trying to keep his mind preoccupied with things to think about other than the pain of his lost limb. He had to take Rick to work one day so he could have the truck to take Merle to the doctor, but other that that, they didn't leave the house.

Thursday night, Rick went over to Lori and Shane's to talk. Daryl wanted to go, but the man insisted that him and Lori needed to have some time alone. He only let him go when he assured him that Shane wouldn't be there either and promised to tell him everything when he got back, but Daryl had a feeling he would've anyway.

Unsurprisingly, Rick came home angry and frustrated. He stalked up the stairs and went straight to bed even though it was only eight-thirty. Daryl wasn't sure what to do, but he waited till about nine and followed him up.

He slowly pushed open the door and quietly slipped in in case he was asleep. After changing out of his t-shirt and jeans, he climbed in bed. He wasn't sure if Rick was awake until the man's arms snaked around him and pulled him close. They melted into one as Rick buried his head in Daryl's neck.

"Wanna talk about it?" Daryl mumbled lazily in the dark, his fingers carding through soft curls as he breathed in the scent of Rick's musk, their shampoo, and a slight hint of cinnamon that he knew must've came from Lori's. He couldn't deny that it smelled good on him.

"Tell ya in the mornin'. Jus' want ya ta hold me," Rick mumbled back.

"Whatever ya want, babe," he said, kissing his forehead and squeezing him for emphasis.

"Jus' want ya."

"Ain't goin' no where."

"Wouldn't let ya if ya tried," Rick said, placing a kiss on his bare shoulder, his arms tightening around him. "Goodnight, Sweetheart."

"Always is with ya." He couldn't help but smile when he felt the edges of Rick's lips quirk up on his skin. It was true; as long as they fell asleep together—with gentle smiles in a tangle of tender limbs—it would be a good night, and that could only lead to one thing: a good morning.

Chapter End Notes

So that's how I eat my grilled cheese because I am twelve and think ketchup is a food group. Also, the fire department quip has me daydreaming about my guys in Firehouse Twelve coming to their rescue. If you haven't read Inferno, why not? It's the first TWD firefighter fic and has Rickyl, what's not to love. /shameless self-promotion.
Rick's Blessings

Chapter Summary

Rick has some meaningful conversations.

Chapter Notes

Hope ya'll didn't miss me too much, just needed a little breather. But you guys are pretty awesome so I'm sure you understand that. Sorry if this chapter is a little Lori heavy but I thought it was necessary. Hopefully the Rickyl fluff balances it out. Anyway, here ya go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Rick**

The first week with Merle in the apartment went a whole helluva lot smoother than Rick was expecting. It was difficult not having Daryl at work with him. It was a double edged sword really. On one hand, he got a lot more work done because he wasn't distracted by him building things and getting sweaty and coated in saw dust. On the other, he missed him terribly.

Another downside was their lack of privacy. When he got home, Merle was always there. All three would eat together and watch some tv until bedtime. After lights out was the only alone time they had to themselves, and it was a bit frustrating, both sexually and otherwise.

He got the feeling that Daryl was a little insecure, maybe scared, to do anything with Merle so close by, and he didn't want to push him. A couple of times they had gotten close only to be interrupted. It wasn't intentional after the first time, usually just bad timing.

He also had to wonder if part of it was Daryl not being quite ready to move their relationship to a more physical level. Although, the younger man kissed him like he was, looked at him all wanton and heated and hungry, like Rick was the only thing that could quench his parched lips. And he wanted to be. So maybe it was just Merle. He hoped it was just Merle.

Daryl wasn't even comfortable holding hands in front of Merle, so anything else was out of the question. He felt like they were on a chaperoned date or something, like Daryl was afraid to sit too close to him. Okay, so it was beyond frustrating, but if that's what Daryl needed to feel comfortable, then he'd suffer through it for the time being.

The good part was that when they would steal a kiss, Merle would always announce his entrance so Daryl had time to compose himself, but he knew part of that was just him being an ass. The best part was that they did get to sleep cuddled up together every night. And that was just amazing.

Merle didn't tease them as much as he assumed he would. Rick wondered if that was because he didn't want to risk getting kicked out or because he really didn't have a problem with them being together. Either way, he wasn't going to complain about it.
He didn't hear a peep from Lori or Shane for days after their altercation. He sent her a few texts about Carl and Judith that went unanswered. Eventually, he decided to give her some space to work things out. There were things he needed to work out as well, like what to do with Merle when Saturday came around.

That was what he was contemplating when he finally heard back from Lori.

[Incoming msg from Queen B]: We need to talk. Can you come by tonight? Alone.

[Msg sent to Queen B]: Will Shane b there?

[Incoming msg from Queen B]: no

[Msg sent to Queen B]: What time?

[Incoming msg from Queen B]: Soon as you get off.

[Msg sent to Queen B]: Alright.

He let out a deep sigh after he put his phone down. He would've preferred to have Daryl with him, but he had his hands full with Merle, and he didn't want to subject him to her wrath if she was still upset. Him and Lori really needed to have a long talk alone. He hoped Daryl would understand that.

He could only hope they could be a little more civil this time around. Ironically, the fighting between them had gotten worse since he moved out, and he desperately wanted to figure out a way to head back in the other direction for the kids' sake and to make everyone's lives easier.

He had loved Lori once, as the mother of his children, a part of him always would, but there was still healing to be done, anger and resentment still present.

As much as it hurt, he couldn't really say he would've changed anything that happened. Everything worked out the way it was supposed to to bring him and Daryl together. He was thankful for that and thankful for the amazing man he now had in his life. The pain and heartbreak was worth it. Daryl was worth so much more.

[Msg sent to Sweet Thang]: Hey beautiful! Miss u!

[Incoming msg from Sweet Thang]: miss u 2

Daryl hadn't exactly gotten the hang of texting yet. He'd usually call after Rick texted him, so he waited. A few seconds later, his cell rang.

"Hey baby, what are ya'll doin'?" Rick answered.

"Merle's got us watchin' a damn soap opera or some shit," Daryl grumbled. "Better than the judge shows, I guess...Wish I was with ya, though."

"Me too! I just wanted ta let ya know I'm gonna be late gettin' home, so don't worry about me for dinner."

"Workin' late?"

"No, I...gotta go talk ta Lori."

"Well, come and get me then, I'm gonna with ya!" he insisted.
"I love ya," he chuckled fondly, "But she insists on talkin' alone, just the two of us. No you, no Shane. It'll be fine, okay? Don't wan'cha worryin'."

"Ain't worried 'bout ya, jus' don't wan'cha goin' alone."

"Daryl, I gotta do this, but I promise I'll tell ya everything we talk about. If Shane shows up, I'll come right home, won't even say a word ta 'im. Same thing if she starts goin' off on you or us. I'm not gonna listen to her talk shit she doesn't know a damn thing about, alright?"

"Rick—"

"I know you're just tryin' ta protect me, and I love ya for it. But she said alone, and after we royally pissed her off, I gotta give her somethin'. For the kids at least," Rick explained. There was a long, uneasy silence as he waited for a response.

"When will ya be home?" Daryl asked shorty.

"Don't know...please don't be mad at me," he pleaded. That was the last thing he wanted.

"Nah, I ain't mad," he huffed. "Jus'...okay, so maybe I'm worried. Jus' be careful."

"I'll call ya later."

"Alright, love ya."

"Love ya, too," Rick said as he hung up. He smiled down at the really bad selfie he managed to take of him and Daryl on his phone. He needed a better one. Before he put it away, he shot off another text.

[Msg sent to Sweet Thang]: Send me some pictures! ;p

[Incoming msg from Sweet Thang]: perv

[Incoming msg from Sweet Thang]: ;p

The next three hours went by dreadfully slow. He really wasn't looking forward to going over to Lori's, but it needed to be done. He locked up at five and drove down to the gas station to fill up his truck. Instead of paying at the pump, he went inside so he could grab a sandwich at the attached Subway. A week ago, he would've called Lori and asked if she wanted anything, but his kindness level towards her and Shane was at an all time low.

After enough stalling, he headed over to Lori's, driving well under the speed limit. He pulled up to the curb and let out a sigh of relief to see that Shane's car was gone. He didn't think she'd lie, but without Daryl, he most likely only had the patience to handle one of them at the moment.

He meandered up the stone path to the front door. His movements were sluggish and hesitant, every one of his footfalls louder than the last, the sound of impending doom. This was not where he wanted to be, but at least he'd get to see Carl and Judith.

He fleetingly noticed how the hedges were a tad overgrown and the leaves had yet to be raked. Lori would've never let him get away with that, but apparently she let Shane. If him and Daryl had a house—when—they'd do the yard work together while Judith jumped in the pile of leaves Carl raked. In the summers, they'd all weed the garden.

The knocks on the door rang hollow in his ears as his daydream continued. Him and Daryl would
sneak kisses while the kids grumbled about doing manual labor instead of playing video games. Then, they'd go inside and eat sandwiches that were better than the one he just ate because they grew the lettuce and tomatoes themselves.

"Rick," Lori said, stiff and curt.

"Lori," he replied, a little warmer. She motioned for him to enter and he did. "Where are the kids?" he asked when Carl didn't come running like usual.

"They went to dinner and shopping with Shane."

He hid the grimace at Shane's name surprisingly well, but it still stung that the man was out with his kids. Kid? He followed Lori into the kitchen where she offered him a cup of coffee without words, but he shook her off. She sat down at the table and he mirrored her on the other side.

He had so many memories in this cozy little kitchen with the blue frosted wallpaper and soft yellow cabinets. They were mostly of Carl and him snickering while Lori burned breakfast or he burned dinner. How had Carl not died of food poisoning with the pair of them?

But none of those memories seemed as warm as the ones he'd already made with Daryl in their kitchen, both with and without the kids. As he sat there, all he could think about was how Daryl would've hated the layout and the colors and probably the cabinets themselves.

"You stopped shaving," Lori observed, pulling him out of his musings. He could tell she was attempting to keep any judgment out of it, but she wasn't too successful. Just as well, he wasn't in the mood for small talk.

"Daryl likes it," he said back trying very hard to keep a lid on his thinly veiled contempt. She openly cringed, and he bit back a smile.

"What the hell are you doing, Rick?" she snapped.

"Lori, I came to have a calm, civil discussion with ya about our kids. If we can't do that, then we'll have ta start communicatin' through our lawyers and I really don't wanna have ta resort ta that. Do you?"

She took a deep breath as she interlocked her fingers and gently placed them on the table in front of her. "No," she answered stiffly, "But it's a perfectly valid question. We've been separated for three months and you move a homeless bum—"

"Lori, I am warnin' you...I will leave if ya insist on talkin' about him like that," he raised his voice slightly.

"How else am I supposed to address him, Rick, other than Darren the homeless man?"

Rick's cheeks heated with rage as he growled through gritted teeth, "His name is Daryl."

"Dixon," she harshly pointed out.

"And I imagine Shane has already ran his name and came back with nothin'. He was down on his luck and I took him in when Carl and I helped out at the shelter. I gave him a job, a place to stay, a way to pull himself out of the place he was at. Isn't that the kindness we always said we wanted ta teach our children?"

She looked away.
"Or did ya just mean by sending in a check and lettin' someone else do the heavy liftin'?"

"Thought you wanted to be civil," she sneered.

"It's a perfectly valid question," he parroted back. "Lor, he is a good man. Do ya honestly think I'd let him around our children if he wasn't? Do ya think that little of me as a father? I was a cop for over a decade, I know good people from bad. I know ya know that."

"Did you have to pretend you were with him? Do you want people to talk? Do you want Carl to have to hear people snickering and gossiping about his father?"

"I don't give a damn what people say about me! Carl shouldn't either. And what makes ya think he ain't hearin' people talk about you and Shane?"

"It's different," Lori insisted.

"Why? 'Cause bein' a slut's better than bein' a fag? That what you think?" he hissed.

Lori gasped in shock, possibly more at his language than his insult. He bowed his head and ran a hand over his mouth and chin. "What exactly are you saying here?" she asked, voice low and uneasy.

"I haven't said anythin' yet, but ya haven't asked the right questions either."

"Like what? Are you gay now? Have you always been? Were you in the closest our whole marriage? Is that why this didn't work out? Who the hell are you, Rick?"

Rick took a deep breath a sighed it out. "I'm not gay, I wasn't in the closet, and our marriage fell apart because we grew apart. I don't know how to label it, label me, I don't know if ya can, don't really care if ya do. It's not men, it's just Daryl. Me and Daryl...and we are together and he is my boyfriend."

She scoffed in disbelief, "There are better ways to get back at me, Rick!" she snapped.

"Daryl and I have nothing to do with you!" he scowled. "He isn't a reaction, he isn't a ploy or a midlife crisis or a psychotic break. He's...Lori, I know this is...hell, I don't even know what this is, but I don't expect ya to understand, not right away. I'm still tryin' ta figure it all out, wrap my head around it, but all I can tell ya is that he ain't goin' away. I know Shane isn't. I have ta deal with that, and ya'll have to deal with me bein' with him."

"Rick...," she trailed off. Rick watched as she squeezed her hands together, her knuckles white, as she fell deep in thought.

He just sat there staring out the window. The sun was setting outside, and he wondered what Daryl was doing. They were supposed to have some kind of cheesy chicken Daryl made once before that had his mouth watering at the memory. Maybe there would be leftovers.

He wasn't sure how long it was before she spoke again. It could've been a week for all he knew. "I don't want Carl around that," she said softly.

"Ya wanna try and keep the kids from me because of him? Good luck because I can tell ya right now that my lawyer won't let that happen," he said darkly. "I'm sure ya know that if ya already looked her up, which I know you've done because that's who ya are."

Lori shifted in her chair when he called her bluff. She set her jaw and stared him down. And that
was fine because he stared back. He knew she was searching for something else to object to regarding Daryl. She'd be searching a long time.

"That's all I'm gonna say on the matter, Lori."

Her gaze fell to a spot on the table as her shoulders slumped slightly. He fiddled with the bowl of cinnamon potpourri between them. It smelled nice but he still preferred sawdust, how Daryl came home some nights in a second skin of the stuff, his hair drenched and intoxicating as he breathed him in, the aroma lulling him into a peaceful slumber.

"Now...Judith," he softly muttered.

Her head snapped up at that and she met his eyes. They were uncertain and full of regret, and he knew what she had said the other day was the truth. She hadn't done any of it to hurt him.

"She ain't his, Rick. She's yours," she said strong and full of conviction.

"Lori...biologically, she's not mine—"

"Doesn't matter where her DNA came from!"

"I need ta know! Shane...he needs ta know. What the hell has he said about all this?"

"He won't talk to me about it, said he needs time," she said bowing her head and shaking it softly, her dark hair sweeping over her shoulders, and he wondered when that stopped being beautiful to him. "How did this get so screwed up?"

"It was a long time comin'," he said, slowly reaching out his hand across the table. He waited until she took it to continue, "It's on both of us and neither of us. Sometimes things just fall apart...sometimes it's so better things can come together. And I'm tryin', Lor, I'm tryin' ta get passed this, passed the hurt and anger, but it's gonna take time...for all of us."

She nodded as a single tear rolled down her cheek. It was quickly wiped away as she turned to look out the now dark window. "I want you in her life. You are such a good father to Carl, and I want that for her too. And I trust you. I trust your judgement, but I'm gonna need time with that too, with...Daryl," she managed to spit out.

"So where does that leave us?" he asked, finally releasing her hand.

"I don't think they should stay with you this weekend."

"Lori!"

"Just this weekend," she tried to assure him.

"Until that turns into next weekend too, then the week after and so on?"

"How well do you even know this man, Rick? Ever thought that he's just using you?"

He rolled his eyes and let out a humorless laugh, "Are ya kidding' me right now? I knew Shane for decades, both of ya'll, and you had no problems screwin' me over! But I know, know, with every fiber of my being that he would never do what ya'll did ta me, and that's all I need ta know!"

"Rick...I just don't feel comfortable sending the kids over there yet is all," Lori shrugged.

"Why? 'Cause ya don't know him? We can fix that," he replied optimistically.
"How? A dinner party? You think him and Shane in the same room together is a good idea?"

"They're both gonna have ta learn ta get along eventually. If you're serious about Shane." She shot him a defensive look and he continued on, "Do ya love 'im?"

"Of course I do," she hissed a little too defensively.

He didn't believe her. He wanted to press the issue and ask her why she was playing house with him if she didn't love him, but he had a feeling it was because she was scared to be alone. The thought saddened him. Was the that the reason she married him? Because he was the first guy to get caught in her lonely web?

"Fine," she huffed, lacing her hands together again. "We'll do your dinner party, but I'm takin' the kids to Atlanta this weekend," she said sternly.

He wanted to argue but thought it was best to just leave it for now. "Alright, one weekend...is Shane gonna want ta take her away from me?" he asked softly.

"I don't know, Rick. He hasn't said a word about it."

"Do they need anything?"

"No."

"Will they be back soon? I was kinda hopin' ta see 'em, especially since I won't this weekend," he smiled weakly. She forced one back.

"Should be...," she said biting at her lip. It wasn't nearly as endearing as when Daryl did it.

They sat in silence for awhile after that. The front door swung open a little after eight and Carl came barreling through yelling for him upon seeing his truck outside. "Missed ya, son," he said, wrapping his arms around Carl and kissing the top of his head.

"Miss you too, dad. Can I stay with you instead of going to Aunt Rebecca's This weekend?" he pleaded with his big doe eyes.

"Not this weekend, Carl," he said, his eye catching Shane's as he walked in the door with Judith. She squawked away for him when she saw him, and surprisingly, Shane turned her over without a fuss when he came in the kitchen. He turned around and walked out without a word.

Rick said his goodbye's and was headed out the door when Shane's phone rang. He heard the annoying ringtone from the other room, and before he knew what was happening, Shane was rushing towards him, his face dark and hardened. Rick had the good sense to continue outside away from the kids.

He didn't fight back when Shane grabbed him by the shirt and swung him into the awning of the house. He could already feel the bruises forming on his skin from the force, and all he could think about was how livid Daryl was going to be. He gripped the large forearms pinning him to the wall and heard Lori yelling for them to stop.

"Now ya got Merle stayin' with ya?" Shane howled.

"It's jus' temporary. Till his arm heels. He won't be there when the kids are. I've already got it worked out," Rick partially lied.
"Merle's the felon, Lori," Shane explained. "He's got a felon there now. What's next, Rick? Gonna go all Breaking Bad style and start yer own business, become a drug lord?"

"You're overreacting, Shane. He just lost his hand for god's sake. What was I supposed ta do, leave 'im in the street ta die? I ain't like you, ain't that kinda man," Rick snarled back. He grit his teeth when the pressure on his shoulders increased.

"Let him go, Shane!" Lori demanded. She grabbed his arm but he shrugged her off. "Shane, stop this right now!"

Rick just stared Shane down. He was never afraid of him, and he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of starting now. "Lori, this isn't looking too good for you right now," Rick warned.

"Shane!" she pleaded.

"Ya threatenin' her?" Shane scoffed.

"One of those facts, Shane. Michonne's not gonna be too happy about the bruises you're leavin' on me right now."

"That yer little pet name for 'im?"

"My lawyer," Rick replied.

Shane's jaw clamped shut. He gave one more hard squeeze before finally releasing him. Rick rolled his shoulders in an attempt to shake out the pain once he was free. "Merle will not be there when the kids are, Lori. Ya have my word on that."

"Just you and yer fag boyfriend then? What's his name? Daryl?" Shane barked. "Tell me somethin', man. Do ya get on your knees for both of 'em? 'S'at why ya let 'em move in? 'S'at how yer little arrangement works? Or is it the other way around?"

"Dad? Is Daryl your boyfriend?" asked a confused Carl from the doorway. All three of them went pale as their gazes snapped to him holding a wiggling Judith awkwardly.

Rick's feet were moving towards him before he realized it. He shot a glare at Shane and dropped to his knees in front of his son. He had no idea how this was going to go. He hadn't even thought about it really. Everything with Daryl was so new and happened so fast that he figured he'd have time before the subject came up.

"Y-yeah, Carl, he is," he told the boy as calmly as he could. His mind was racing as he waited for a response. He truly had no idea how Carl would respond or if he would even understand. Would he hate him or Daryl? Would he not be comfortable coming over anymore? Would he be hurt or angry or upset?

"He's good for you, dad. I really like him," he smiled. And Rick let out the strangled breath he'd been holding as he hugged him and Judith close. He was stunned into silence for a moment as he processed the words—at Carl's blessing—and he was hit with an overwhelming sense of pride at how mature, accepting, and perceptive that Carl was.

"I do too, son," he said into his hair before kissing his forehead and then Judith's. "Do..do ya have any questions? Any concerns ya wanna talk about? Y'know ya can talk ta me about anything anytime."

"Just be careful with him, dad...," he said before leaning closer and finishing with a whisper, "...he's
fragile."

Rick let out a soft chuckle, "I noticed that. I'll, uh, take good care of 'im," he replied in a stern yet playful tone. "I promise."

No one noticed Shane stomp off until his car door slammed shut and the engine revved before he peeled out. Rick looked to Lori as he stood. "Take her back inside, Carl," she said.

"Goodnight, dad," Carl said reluctantly.

"Goodnight, kid," Rick replied, ruffling his hair. Rick watched them walk inside before he looked back at Lori. When it was clear that she had no idea what to say, he broke the silence. "He's so good with them, Lori," he said, smiling fondly as he thought of the last time Daryl had Judith propped on his hip.

Lori gave the slightest hint at a nod, "I'll talk to Shane."

"Lori, I wouldn't ever think to take them away from ya, not even Shane, because I know he'd never hurt them. I just hope you'll give me the same curtesy. Hope you'll try ta give Daryl a chance."

"It's a lot to deal with, Rick...."

"I know...I-I know. And I know it'll take time. Everythin' is still fresh and raw, but I gotta believe it'll get better. It has ta, for the kids at least...I need ta get goin'," he said.

"We'll talk again soon, okay?" Lori said, wrapping her arms around her chest.

"Yeah. Goodnight, Lori."

"Nite."

He let out a heavy sigh as he walked to his truck. The evening went better and worse than he thought. He hoped that he got through to Lori. He couldn't tell if she was tired or just defeated, but he was relieved that she had been willing to listen, willing to compromise on some things.

It had been a long time since they'd had a conversation that ended with something other than screaming or one of them storming off, so he was counting that as a win. He didn't think they were out of the woods yet, but he wanted to think they were on the right path.

But all he could think about now was getting back home so he could crawl in bed with Daryl and go to sleep curled up in those biceps he still dreamed about every night.

*****

Rick woke up the next morning with an angry Daryl Dixon leering down at him from where he was perched on his chest. He knew exactly why he was mad. Before he went to bed, he thought about putting on a t-shirt instead of just pajama bottoms like usual to cover the bruises Shane gave him, but he didn't like the idea of hiding anything from Daryl, so he didn't.

Rick hooked his arms over Daryl so he couldn't get away while he explained, "He showed up with the kids after me and Lori talked." Just as he thought, Daryl tried to wiggle free, but he squeezed him tighter. "Everything was fine until he got a call informin' him that Merle was stayin' with us, then he shoved me against the house. That was all. He removed his hands after I threatened him with Michonne."
"I'm gonna fuckin' kick his ASS!" Daryl thundered trying to break free again as Rick held on, wrapping his legs around him and chuckling. "Lemme go, Rick!"

"Can't...I ain't done kissin' ya yet, Honey," he drawled as he started doing just that along Daryl's neck. It didn't take long before Daryl finally settled against him and started kissing him back, the anger leaching out of his body with every swirl of their tongues. He rolled his hips just right and was rewarded with a heavenly moan escaping Daryl's parted lips.

"Rick...," he rasped. "'M sorry," he said sadly as he rolled off of him; Rick let him go. Daryl threw his legs off the side of the bed and sat up, hanging his head and hunching his back, drawing himself inward.

Rick was pretty sure he was about to start crying. He quickly sat up and scooted over to him on the bed. "Hey," he said softly as he wrapped his arms around him from the side, one of Daryl's biceps resting against his chest, his hands locked together on the other. "Tell me what's wrong?"

"'M sorry we ain't done nothin' since Merle came. 'M sorry, I want to, I jus'...I don't wan'cha thinkin' I don't want ya...," Daryl sniffled, leaning his head into Rick.

Rick tucked Daryl's head under his chin. "I don't think that at all. It's not a big deal, Sweetheart. I've gone a lot longer without having sex. And yeah, I want to. How could I not with your sexy ass runnin' around gettin' me all hot and bothered?" he snickered.

Daryl let out a clipped grunt of a laugh, and Rick knew he rolled his eyes without seeing them.

"It's true...but only when you're ready. I know ya ain't exactly comfortable doing anythin' with Merle here. I understand that, okay?"

Daryl reached up to grip his forearms with both hands. He pulled back and nodded before giving Rick a peck on the lips.

"We got all the time in the world for that. And Merle's just here temporarily...I hope," he chuckled. That got a little smile out of the younger man and Rick's heart fluttered. He ran a hand through Daryl's hair before leaning forward to kiss his temple. "You are worth the wait, Darlin'," he whispered.

"What else happened? What about Judith?"

"I have some good news and some bad news. Which one ya want first?"

"Bad," Daryl replied, raising his thumb to chew on it. Rick kissed him on the cheek and he dropped it.

"Lori's takin' the kids to Atlanta to visit her sister this weekend, so they won't be comin' over. She said that it was just for this one weekend. I figured she needs some more time ta work things out. And with Merle here, it's probably a blessin' in disguise right now.

"Also, I got no where on the Judith situation because apparently Shane is refusing ta talk about it. So I have no idea where we stand there...Ready for the good news?"

"Not sure, Dixon's don't get much 'o that," he replied.

"Good thing ya got me then," Rick smirked, "I'll give ya some of mine...Shane accidentally outed us ta Carl, but he's a smart kid. He said you were good for me and that he likes ya. That was the part that sent Shane running. He got in his car and drove away. Felt kinda good ta watch 'im go,
too,” he admitted.

Daryl blushed deep. "Like 'im too...One less thing ta worry about," he said.

"Yep," he agreed as he gingerly placed a kiss to Daryl's bare shoulder. One turned into several, but he forced himself to stop because he didn't want to push. "Gotta jump in the shower now. Hey, ya wanna take me ta work? I was thinkin' ya'll could come have lunch with us today. Getcha out of the house for a bit."

"Yeah, sounds good," Daryl replied as he got up. He threw on a shirt and went down stairs to make breakfast while Rick hopped in the shower.

A few minutes later, he heard a knock on the bathroom door. "Come in?" he replied a little confused. Daryl never knocked. He figured it had to be Merle.

"Think we need ta have us a little chat, Officer Friendly," Merle chirped over the shower noise.

"Kinda busy Merle, can it wait?" he asked. He didn't think it was appropriate to elaborate on why that was. Merle probably didn't need to know he had his cock in his hand as he fantasized about his naked brother.

"Are ya attracted ta my baby brother?" he nearly hissed.

Rick pulled back the curtain slightly so he could regard the older man. He was shirtless, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned up against the small sink, his dark blue eyes narrow as they pierced right through him. "Yeah," he replied hesitantly.

"Then why don'cha fuckin' act like it? Ya want 'im runnin' off with someone else 'cause he don't know that? For someone who don't treat 'im like he's a goddamn leaper? For fuck's sake, _Rick_, ya don't even sit next ta him on the fuckin' sofa. 'Fraid he's got cooties or sumpin?"

"Merle, that's his choice! He's the one in charge here, and if he ain't comfortable with me touchin' him when you're around, I sure as shit ain't gonna push him into it!" Rick said defensively.

"Wait...he ain't comfortable with me here?" Merle asked, his shoulders slumping as his scowl turned into a softer frown.

"Nah, he likes ya bein' here, but he said ya told 'im ya didn't wanna see all that. Us. He doesn't wanna make ya uncomfortable, and I respect that," he calmly replied.

"Was jus' jokin' around," the older Dixon shrugged as his scowl returned, "If he wants ta kiss yer ugly mug, it ain't my business when or where he does it as long as he's happy. Didn't expect a cop ta make 'im that way...but ya do," he grumbled.

Rick had to smile at the compliment. "Former cop," he corrected, "I'm reformed." They both laughed at that.

"Guess havin' a _former_ piggy as a brother-in-law won't be so bad," he said more to himself than to Rick.

The ex-lawman was once again stunned speechless. Merle had just given him his blessing to marry Daryl. Sure he'd thought about it, but he never expected for Merle to be the first one to say it out loud. The couple still had a ways to go before entertaining those ideas. Right? Shit, he wasn't even divorced yet!
"I know this goes without sayin' but if ya hurt 'im, I'll cut off yer nuts and feed 'em to ya. Then, when ya shit 'em out, I'll feed 'em to ya again," Merle snarled.

"That ain't ever gonna happen, Merle," he stated firmly.

"See that it doesn't...and jus' fuckin' kiss 'im already. 'M tired of him mopin' around like a sad little pup I jus' kicked!" he said as he turned and stormed out.

Too distracted to finished the task Merle had interrupted, he turned off the water and quickly got dressed. He went downstairs to find Daryl hunched over the stove cooking what smelled like sausage. He shot Merle a smug smirk as he walked up behind Daryl, wrapped his arms tightly around him, and kissed a trail up his neck.

Daryl sagged back against him, having obviously forgotten about Merle sitting at the table until the older man snorted. Daryl went rigid and elbowed Rick in the stomach as he pushed him away.

"Rick," he admonished with a whisper over his shoulder.

Rick twisted him around and pinned him against the stove. He slammed their lips together for a scorching kiss that Daryl fought only momentarily before they both just melted into one. Rick pulled back to look into his darkened eyes before giving him a sweet peck that managed to break Daryl out of his daze.

"What the hell's gotten inta ya?" Daryl barked, nervously looking towards an amused Merle.

"Merle and I just had a talk, man ta man, and I told 'im that this is my house and if I wanna kiss my boyfriend in it, then I'm damn well gonna! And he'll just have ta deal with it!"

Merle scoffed from the table.

"Ya didn't say that," Daryl huffed.

"No," Rick admitted as he smirked to Merle, "But he did say that if I didn't do a better job at showin' ya how much I want ya that you'd leave me. And well, we can't have that now, can we, Darlin'?" he winked.

"Nah, we can't have that," Daryl smirked back, pushing him away. "Now, go eat yer eggs before they get cold, sausage is almost done."

Rick was content to do just that. He'd just crossed one more thing off his list of worries, and his day was shaping up to be a good one. If their good fortune continued into the weekend, he'd be a happy camper. And even if it didn't, he'd still have Daryl.

Chapter End Notes

Finally got me a tumblr here. Add me if you'd like, but it is multi-fandom, just fyi.
Daryl's Blessings

Chapter Summary

Rick brings Daryl breakfast in bed.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is nsfw for a little bit of awkward sexy times. I don't know why, but I just see these two being a bit awkward at first as they figure things out. Hopefully it's still hot and sweet.

**Daryl**

Daryl was usually the first one awake in the mornings. He attributed that to his inner hunter that preferred the sunrise to an alarm clock, but he'd had an oddly tiring week with Merle and on Saturday Rick somehow beat him to it. He couldn't say he minded because he wasn't going to complain about waking up to a piece of bacon being held up to his nose like smelling salt.

"Breakfast in bed?" Daryl sleepily asked as he sat up next to Rick and the plate of food he brought up. He eyed Rick suspiciously and took the offered bacon from his hand. "Y'know ya ain't supposed ta be in the kitchen without proper supervision," he muttered.

Rick grinned wide, "Who said I was?"

Daryl shot him a puzzled look and took a bite of the salty, crunchy, cured meat.

"Carol cooked. Said she wanted to help us out a bit. Her and Merle just left. She's takin' him shoppin' for a few things, then back to the trailer to get some other stuff he didn't think ta bring over," he explained, stealing a bite of his bacon.

"What about Sophia?"

"She's at the shelter helping Beth. Kinda wish we were there. It's like our Saturday morning ritual now. 'Course that's usually with the kids," Rick sighed with a small from.

"They'll be back next week," Daryl tried to assure him. He hoped they would at least.

"Jus' do me one favor...if these pancakes are better than mine, just be a dear and lie ta me," he smirked as he raised a fork up to Daryl's lips. Daryl took the warm, fluffy pancake into his mouth--eye's burning into Rick's--and slowly pulled it off the prongs.

"Jus' terrible," he teased.

Rick faked pouted.

"What? Ya said ta lie...nah, it's good, baby, but yours are better, prolly 'cause I know ya make 'em
just for me," he said, leaning over to give his boyfriend a syrupy kiss. "Why'd ya let me sleep so late?" he chided as he looked over at the clock that said 10:17 AM.

"Figured ya needed some extra with having to run around with Merle all week."

The elder Dixon was a lot to handle energy wise and Daryl spent a lot of time over the past week chasing him around the apartment as he cleaned up the disaster area he left in his wake. Taking him to the doctor wasn't that big of a deal but they spent over two hours at the shop on Friday disturbing everyone there. He finally had to drag Merle out the door so Rick, Carol, and Glenn could get back to work.

Merle seemed to be adapting pretty well and Daryl thought his pain had subsided a lot since he was released and he'd had a lot to distract him from it. He had only taken extra analgesics once or twice, and his grimacing had decreased substantially.

Daryl wasn't quite sure how long it would be until he was ready to go back to the RV, but he was feeling guilty about it. Him and Rick had a nice place and he was going to send his brother back to a tiny trailer one-handed. Unfortunately, there weren't many other options. He couldn't stay with them, not long term, and especially not after Shane flipped out.

"Hey, where'd ya go, baby?" Rick asked, laying a gentle hand on his thigh, grounding him and bringing him out of his thoughts.

"Just thinkin' 'bout Merle," he replied before stuffing another bite of pancake into his mouth.

"How's he doin'? He seems to be feeling okay today. He was happy to see Carol anyway."

"I think he's gonna be okay. Think we got 'im passed the hard part. Now it's just him readjustin'. That's what the doc said anyway, Jenner. He asked about ya, asked about the kids. Prolly thinks ya got brain damage ta leave yer family for me," he snorted pitifully.

"I didn't leave anyone for ya. The stars aligned and brought us together. And the kids ain't goin' no where...well, not Carl. Besides, we could always find more kids. Think they're havin' a sale on some next week," Rick teased. He leaned down on an elbow and rested his head on Daryl's bicep, the scruffy beginnings of a beard tickling his skin. "Would ya wanna have kids with me? Y'know someday?" he asked fiddling with the bedspread.

There was something endearing about the way Rick's fingers were twisting into the heavy blanket that made his heart swell. Or was it the fact that Rick might want to have a baby with him someday? "Guess no one told ya about the birds and the bees either, huh?" Daryl said.

"Gay couples have babies all the time. Where there is a will there's a way...I mean, if that's something you'd want," Rick shrugged, "...In the future...with me...."

Fuck the future! He wanted one now! But that might be rushing things. "A sale, ya say?" he snickered.

"Well, that might not be the most ethical route," Rick chuckled, finally looking back up at him. "I don't mean ya put ya on the spot. Kids are definitely something ya can't decide on after one brief conversation, and it'd probably be a year or two before the house was ready anyway, so that's like way in the future that I'm thinkin'—"

"House?" Daryl confusingly interrupted as he moved the now empty plate over to the side table.

"I just went and jumped the gun by a mile," Rick said under his breath. "Now, I don't want ya ta
freak out or anythin', but this stuff with the kids and Merle losin' his hand just has me thinkin' about the future and kids and houses and stuff. So I don't want ya to think I'm pressuring ya or that any of this needs to be decided or agreed upon today or even this year.

"All I'm sayin' is that I've been thinkin', I do that, too much sometimes, you do too, by the way. Anyway, I was just thinkin' about the future and I see ya in it with me. That's all this is, that's what I'm tryin' ta say."

Rick wanted to have babies and get a house with him? And plan a future with him? Sure, he thought about that kind of stuff, but he didn't know Rick did, too. With him? Maybe he did get brain damage. "Ya wanna a buy a house with me?"

"No Darlin', I wanna build ya one," he smiled nervously. "I'll need help, but with T, Glenn, Tyreese, Morgan, and some of the other people I know we should be able to do it without much trouble. Abraham's a contractor. We'd need an architect to draw up some plans that ya like, what ya want the kitchen ta be like and stuff."

"I love ya," Daryl said, sliding back down the bed to face him, running his arms along Rick's lithe body to pull him in for a fierce kiss. He wanted to disappear into it. The conversation was too much, or maybe not enough. The idea was amazing, Rick's words were everything he ever wanted to hear, but he knew he wouldn't be able to take it if there wasn't a followthrough.

"I love ya, too! So what do ya say? Wanna build a house with me?" Rick asked excitedly, his fingers absentmindedly twisting in the tips of Daryl's hair at the nape of his neck.

Daryl wasn't exactly sure how to answer that because he absolutely did, but at the same time, he couldn't help but think that he was getting his hopes up, that Rick would change his mind, that it would be made of straw and some metaphorical wolf would come by and blow the whole damn thing to the ground.

But it was okay to dream, right? To plan?

He was never one for plans or dreams or aspirations because his never came true, and he had no clue what to do with the conflicting feelings churning inside him: fear, elation, love, apprehension. He wanted to believe that Rick would make them happen, if anyone could, it was him, but what if he couldn't?

"Yeah...yeah, I think I want that," he eventually answered. He trusted Rick and decided to go with his gut. He knew that was the right answer when Rick's eyes lit up like a star going supernova, all white hot and brilliant blue.

"Really?" Rick asked with a kiss on Daryl's shoulder.

"Yes, really, but how much does something like that cost? Don't know how much I can help, especially if I get that bike."

"Ya ain't gettin' that bike, Daryl," he said sternly. "Did ya forget what happened ta Merle? What if that happens to you, or worse? I've worked to many accidents involvin' motorcycles ta be able ta let ya out of my sight on one of those things without losin' my shit."

Daryl couldn't decide whether or not he should be mad about Rick going all alpha male. Or was that nagging wife? Rick was just trying to look out for him, and he was absolutely right, but Daryl really needed a vehicle and a bike would be just as cheap as anything he'd be able to find.

"Was thinkin' about gettin' another truck for work. Would really help out with deliveries. That way
"You'd have somethin' to drive."

"Ya wanna build me a house AND buy me a truck?" Daryl asked in disbelief. Was he still dreaming?

"Figure you're worth the investment," Rick smirked as he kissed the corner of his mouth.

"Ya know I ain't," he frowned as he looked away.

"All I know is that ya are to me, regardless of whether or not you believe it, but I do, and I wanna make you believe. And just so ya know, I don't much care for ya talkin' about my boyfriend like that," Rick teased.

"Shuddup," Daryl replied with a bashful smile as he gave Rick a playful shove. He knew Rick believed it, maybe one day he would too.

"Wanna go out with me tonight?"

Daryl furrowed his brow, "Where?"

"Wherever ya want. My treat! Our first date...hmmm, probably should've had a few of those before making plans to build a house together," Rick chuckled.

"Might be washin' my hair," he said dryly.

"Well, fuck the date, le's do that instead! Hell, le's do that right now!" Rick insisted. He lunged towards Daryl's lips and kissed him until his lungs burned.

Daryl was left panting as Rick worked kisses down his neck. He had a hand tangled in Rick's messy curls and the other on his back, but he didn't think it was fair that Rick had a shirt on and he didn't. He grabbed two fistfuls of cotton and yanked until Rick got the message and helped him peel it off.

He felt his erection start to grow in his boxers the lower Rick trailed kisses down his body. There was a nip on his collarbone and he instinctively tensed when his mind caught up to the fact that they were probably about to have sex again. They hadn't done much since the first time in the shower, which was amazing, but what if that was just a fluke?

"Hey," Rick said, pulling away so he could look at him. Daryl bit his lip in anguish at the look of concern in his eyes. "I am never gonna do anythin' ya don't want me to. Ever."

Daryl nodded. He knew that, he definitely believed that. It was just that one time wasn't nearly enough to make up for the two decades of horrible sexual encounters he'd had in the past. "Was just a reflex. Promise it ain't you," he adamantly said.

"I know...wanna stop or slow down?"

"Nah, want ya ta make me feel good. 'Cause that's how it's supposed ta be, right?"

"Yeah, baby," Rick smiled before kissing him tenderly. He started over again, slowly kissing his neck down to his collarbone, but left out the teeth this time.

"Love ya," Daryl said, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Love you, too," he replied, smiling on Daryl's chest as he continued downward. "Can I try somethin'?" he asked after he swirled his tongue slowly over one of his nipples, the pink bud
hardening under the attention. "I mean, ya can say no, but I've been...," Rick trailed off as he looked away, a blush staining his cheeks.

"Been what?"

"Been wantin' ta try somethin'," he shyly admitted, sucking Daryl's other nipple into his mouth.

Daryl shivered at the sound of his voice and the faint slurping noises coming from Rick's lips that now had him painfully hard. He was pretty sure he'd let this man try anything he wanted, but when he went to speak, nothing came out. All he could do was nod and watch as Rick's face lit up into a bright smile.

"Ya don't even know what I wanna try," he smirked, "Aren't ya gonna ask me?"

"Trust ya," Daryl replied after clearing his throat. "Love ya," he added.

Rick kissed his way down his abs and curled the tips of his fingers into the hem of his sweats, not once breaking eye contact, no doubt searching for any hesitation on Daryl's part. His breathing picked up when Rick inched them down past his hips. Rick started kissing the newly exposed skin at the juncture of his hip which sent a chill down his spine at the thought that Rick was going to make him feel good.

He was only ever going to make him feel good.

Rick bit his lip and tentatively pulled down the top of his boxers to expose his cock to the cool air and Rick's warm breath. He wrapped his fingers around his shaft and began to gently stroke him as Daryl hardened more than he thought possible in his hand. Stopping briefly, he placed several fluttering kisses on the tip and tentitively licked at the bulbous crown.

"M sorry I don't know what I'm doin'," Rick blushed.

"S fine," Daryl managed to whisper, voice surprisingly audible but low in his throat. "S good."

"If ya don't like somethin', just say 'cause I want ya ta like it. Might need ta practice some before I get your toes curlin'. But ya wouldn't mind that, would ya?" Rick asked biting his lip.

Daryl shook his head and got a warm smile in return. His breath hitched when Rick slowly took the head of his cock into his hot, wet mouth. He knew Rick was trying to be gentle, but after a few bobs he couldn't help but hiss in discomfort.

"What's wrong?" Rick asked, eyes full of worry as he pulled back.

"Uh...teeth," Daryl awkwardly muttered.

"Shit, sorry," he replied, cheeks going from pink to tomato red in a heartbeat from embarrassment. "I'll, uh...I can fix that."

He felt like shit for complaining. He told himself he wasn't going to, but he knew Rick would've been upset if he lied or didn't answer his question. Rick wanted him to feel good, wanted him to like it, and he supposed they both had a few things to learn about being together. Rick said they'd figure things out and this was part of it.

And Rick wasn't lying when he said he'd fix it.

Daryl watched in awe as he worked up to an easy rhythm. Less teeth, more soft perfect fucking
beautiful lips. God, he was gorgeous! Rick slid his mouth down his length, not too far, but what he couldn't fit in his mouth, he stroked with his nimble fingers. He would come back up to take a breath, before plunging back down his shaft a little more each time.

He hadn't had many blowjobs that he remembered, but he knew he'd never forget this one. Rick had no idea what he was doing, so he said, and Daryl wasn't exactly experienced enough to coach him through it, but it still felt incredible. It felt just right and he couldn't wait to return the favor.

After a few minutes, Daryl could tell Rick was getting more comfortable with what he was doing. He had not expected the morning to start out that way. In fact, he hadn't expected Rick to be ready for blowjobs for awhile if ever, but he wasn't going to complain because Rick was making him feel better than good.

He threaded his hands in Rick's curls. Then, the man hummed onto his cock, and that felt so fucking amazing that he accidentally bucked up into his mouth. "Shit! Sorry," Daryl said when Rick pulled away gagging. "Fuck, I didn't—"

"Would ya stop apologizing," Rick said, chuckling in amusement as he cleared his throat, one hand still firm on Daryl's length, the other squeezing his hip, thumb rubbing soothing circles on his skin.

"But ya just apologized ta me."

"Yeah, that might happen till I figure out what the hell I'm doin'."

"Ya think I know?" Daryl asked a little more defensively than he had intended.

"You're right...we'll just take things slow...and I still have a hand on your cock," he added.

"Well, don't take it off on my account," Daryl smirked.

"So it's, uh, it's good then?" Rick asked softly.

"I was pretty close ta showin' ya how good, but I fucked it up," he scoffed.

Rick ran his tongue up the underside of him before resuming smooth strokes on his cock with his hand. "'S'at mean ya want me ta fix it?" he asked, playfully raising an eyebrow.

"Ya said ya would," Daryl replied, matching Rick's expression.

Before he knew it, Rick had him panting again, his breath erratic as those luscious lips glided over his sensitive flesh with renewed vigor. He still couldn't figure out if it was supposed to feel this good or if the incredible sensations flowing through him were a testament to Rick and how they fit together.

But now was not the time to think about it because he was close, the pressure rapidly building in his whole body towards his climax. He wasn't sure if Rick would be okay with him finishing in his mouth so he tugged his hair until he released. Rick looked up at him with questioning eyes. "'Bout ta come," Daryl shakily explained.

Rick didn't reply, he only grinned wide and redoubled his efforts, his hand stroking in earnest as his mouth slid down even further, sucking and lapping at the hard member hungrily. Daryl tried to keep his eyes on Rick's, but they finally flitted closed when the man did some amazing thing with his tongue.
"Fuck...Rick, I...," he whimpered as his orgasm hit, a pleasant warmth washing over him with his release, his muscles tensing before turning languid and lax.

But his eyes snapped open in panic when he heard Rick coughing. He looked down at his watery blue eyes and was both filled with appreciation and regret at coming in his mouth on their first time. The man was choking on his come...they probably should've worked up to that.

"'M fine, I wanted ya to," Rick said as if he read his thoughts because he probably did. He wipe up the mixture of come and saliva that had dribbled his chin before crawling up the bed and snuggling up to Daryl's side, burying his face into his neck as they both caught their breath. "Just didn't exactly know what to expect, but I will next time."

'Next time'? He really did love him. "Didn't have ta," Daryl replied, squeezing him tighter.

"I know, but I wanted to...hope ya had worse," Rick muttered.

"Are ya fuckin' kiddin' me? I've never had better...'cause it was you," he said.

Rick looked at him sheepishly as a small smile hanging on his puffy lips. Daryl pulled him in for a kiss, the taste of himself on his tongue almost as intoxicating as Rick alone. He could feel Rick's erection on his leg and slightly lifted his thigh, the friction causing Rick to gasp with pleasure.

Daryl quickly rolled them over and kissed him hard before kissing down his neck like Rick had done to him. He was just about to pulled down his sweats when Rick's phone rang. He reached for it and almost threw it across the room when he saw the call was from Lori, but Rick managed to wrestle it from his hands before he could.

"Hello," Rick answered, voice rough, and Daryl smugly hoped she could hear how lust and sex riddled it was, "Right now?...Yeah, okay, I'll be right down," he said before hanging up.

"What she want?" he spat out.

"She said Carl threw a fit this morning and demanded to come over before they left for the city."

"What for?"

"Didn't say, but they're outside," he said as he got out of bed. He grabbed his shirt from the floor and slipped it on. Daryl got one from the dresser and followed him down, smirking to himself at Rick's well-tussled hair. He was certain he looked the same and he hoped Lori noticed that, too.

Rick opened the door and Carl pushed right passed him. "I need to talk to you," he said to Daryl completely ignoring his father.

"Okay," Daryl replied warily as he looked to Rick who looked back with the same bewildered expression he surely wore.

"Rick," Lori said from the doorway as she handed Judith over to him who was primed to jump out of her arms. "He said it was important and it couldn't wait."

"Uh, okay...I guess you two already met, but this is Daryl...and uh, Daryl this is Lori," he officially introduced them. They both gave each other forced smiles before Carl grabbed Daryl's arm and pulled him into the kitchen.

He liked Carl. They got along just fine, and he had some pretty decent conversations with the boy, but he had no idea what a twelve year old would want to discuss with him that would be so urgent.
Maybe he changed his mind about him and Rick and wanted to run him off.

"Ya sure ya wanna talk ta me? If ya have a problem, yer mom or dad might be better help than me," Daryl said as he crossed his arms nervously.

"You're my dad's boyfriend, right?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah, that's...right. Are ya okay with that?"

"I just need to ask a few questions before I say yes," he said, and Daryl was struck with just how mature the little guy was. If he didn't want to have a baby with Rick before, he sure did now knowing how they would turn out.

"Go on."

"I heard Shane this morning say that you were just using my dad. Is that true?" Carl's face was hard as steel and Daryl had to hold back a grin at how much he looked like Rick.

"No, kid, it ain't."

"Why would he say that?" Carl asked, his brow wrinkling in confusion and his head tilting in contemplation.

"Things with him and yer dad are a little...uh, rocky right now. He jus' cares for him and wants to protect 'im, jus' like you. 'Cause of my last name and the mistakes my family made, some people think I'm just like them, like my daddy was, but I promise ya that I ain't. I ain't ever gonna use him," he replied.

Shit, he couldn't believe he was defending that asshole Shane.

"Do you love him then?"

Daryl paused for a moment. He wasn't sure if this was a conversation he should be having with Carl alone, but he wasn't going to lie to the kid. He was in it for the long haul with Rick, if he would have him, and lying to his kid was not a good way to start their relationship.

"I love him very much...more than I loved anyone before, hell, he's the only person I ever loved besides my brother," he honestly answered. "And I ain't ever gonna use 'im or hurt 'im. Ya have my word on that, kid."

There was a brief pause while Carl thought over what he said before he nodded and held out his hand for Daryl to shake. He smirked and took it.

"I'm okay with it. At least, I know he's not gonna starve or burn the house down," Carl chuckled as he headed back out into the living room.

"Yeah, he's not allowed in the kitchen without supervision," Daryl quipped as he followed behind his second Grimes of the day.

"Ya done?" Lori asked impatiently.

"Yeah," he replied as he gave Rick a big hug who still had Judith. The baby was wiggling and reaching for Daryl, and he instinctively reached for her so Rick could hug Carl back.

"Hey pretty girl," Daryl cooed as he kissed her chubby neck. She laughed and made some happy gurgling noises as she kicked her little feet excitedly. "Gonna miss ya this weekend," he said into
her hair. He looked over to Lori who was watching him with an expression that was one step above a glare, and he decided not to push his luck. He didn't want her to make a scene in front of Carl.

He quickly handed her back to Rick who gave her a big kiss before handing her back to Lori. Carl gave him a hug as well before the three went to the car. Him and Rick stood in the doorway and watched them pull out before shutting the door.

"What'd he wanna talk about?" Rick asked curiously as he draped his arms over Daryl's shoulders.

"We jus' needed ta have a little talk, man ta man," he casually replied with a shrug.

"Uh uh," Rick said, eyeing him skeptically.

"He jus' wanted ta make sure I wasn't usin' ya and that I loved ya. Told 'im I wasn't and I did. Then, he shook my hand and said he was okay with us. Ya got some good kids there, Grimes."

"Do me a favor and keep that in mind," he said. "So...about that date?"

"Think that's a good idea 'round here? Two guys...on a date?" Daryl asked, looking away as he bit at his lip.

"I think it's a great idea! But we don't have ta. Don't much care where we are or what we do as long as I'm with you. We can have a date here if you'd like...'course Merle will be here, too," he chuckled.

"I don't know, Rick...I was kinda lookin' forward to washin' my hair," Daryl teased.

"Did ya want some help?"

"Know anyone who'd be interested?"

Rick's hands drifted down to his ass and pulled their hips flush, "I might know someone real interested," Rick drawled. He pressed his lips softly to the soft skin of Daryl's neck. "Maybe we should, uh, go back to bed...y'know, to take a nap, rest up," he winked.

Daryl just quirked a brow and starting pulling him up the stairs. They got halfway up before a knock on the door stopped them. He grunted as he rolled his eyes. Maybe one of these days life would stop throwing them curveballs.
**Rick**

Rick woke up to a text message from Carol. She offered to take Merle off their hands for the morning so he and Daryl could have a little alone time. He was grateful, and even more so when she offered to help him cook breakfast for the four of them once she got there.

As soon as they left, he took Daryl's plate upstairs to wake him. He almost thought against it when he looked down on his gorgeous boyfriend sleeping so peacefully. The man was an angel as far as he was concerned, and he looked pristine as he laid there with his face slack and unencumbered by the stress the last week had brought their way.

At the same time, he did not want to waste the precious few hours they had alone together. With that, he sighed and reluctantly woke him.

Rick always thought that there was something romantic about breakfast in bed. Maybe that was why he brought up the possibility of building a house and having children with Daryl seemingly out of the blue as they shared a piece of bacon. He had no clue how Daryl would react to any of it and the last thing he wanted to do was turn him off or push him away by being too forward or presumptuous.

He just had a compulsion to know if they were on the same page, if they were going in the same direction, or even if Daryl had given any thought to any kind of future with him. It seemed like that's all he could think about, and it was a scary wonderful thing.

He was still so amazed that he had found someone—and so quickly after separating from Lori—that he wanted to settle down with. In all honesty, he had expected to want to date and explore single life for the first time in nearly twenty years now that he had the opportunity to do so, but what was the point in that if he'd already found someone he wanted to spend the next forty with?

Of course, he was afraid that maybe Daryl didn't share those same dreams in life. They did come from two entirely different places and backgrounds, and there were plenty of things still to learn about each other that may render them incompatible, but how could he ever not love that man again? It didn't seem possible. The concept was unthinkable.

He couldn't help but wonder how different his life might've turned out if he had met Daryl before he met Lori. There was no doubt in his mind that they would've fallen in love all the same. Him and Lori had a few good years in there, but the only thing he would've truly missed was Carl and Judith.

There was no changing the past, they could only plan the future, and he was absolutely elated when Daryl agreed to build a house with him, or was at least hesitantly considering it. He saw that as the first step. The man hadn't exactly answered him on the children front, but they had plenty of time to explore their options there, especially with the Judith situation still up in the air. And if
Daryl didn't want any, he could be happy with just Carl, just so long as he had Daryl too.

What did surprise him about their morning was how fucking easy it was to wrap his lips around Daryl's cock. Now *that* was certainly something he never thought he'd do before he met Daryl. Just like all things with them, it felt natural, though, like he'd been doing it all his life. Okay, maybe not right away, but definitely after he figured out the basics.

*Teeth? Really?*

At first, he tried to draw on the sporadic blowjobs Lori had given him over the years, but thoughts of her were doing nothing for his arousal. Not to mention, he didn't think Daryl would appreciate it. It wasn't like there was much to go on, things had been pretty mechanical between them in the later years of their marriage anyway.

Instead, he focused on the cerulean eyes staring down at him, the love pouring out of them, their intensity and the ink black pools in the center that spoke more of the pleasure coursing through his lover than the soft moans departing from his lips could do alone.

He lost himself in them, in the warm stretch of his lips as they glided down the length of him, the burning muscles in his neck that he was looking forward to strengthening over time, the feel of Daryl's hard cock slipping over his tongue and scraping along the roof of his mouth on its way to the edge of his throat. He knew he couldn't take him all in right then, but he would one day, he was sure of it.

He moaned at that, at the idea that his life goals were now measured by his boyfriend's penis. And he was absolutely fine with that. However, the bucking of Daryl's hips into him caught him totally off guard. Of course Daryl would apologize for that, but he really took it as a compliment. He probably should've told him that, but he wasn't exactly in his right mind at the moment.

Before Daryl tugged at his hair, he had a feeling he was getting pretty close to his breaking point if the near breathless syllables the man was mumbling that Rick was too far gone to comprehend were anything to go by. He wasn't exactly a porn connoisseur, but he was a man and had an inkling of how orgasms were supposed to work and the signs one was approaching.

The thought that he was the one about to push Daryl over the edge only exhilarated him further. He sped up the stroke of his hand and forced himself to take more of his rigid cock into his mouth, sucking more forcefully as Daryl's head fell back and his eyes drifted closed.

And that sight was worth all the shit anyone could ever give them about being together.

He wanted to know what it felt like to have his lover, this beautiful man coming undone beneath him, exploding in his mouth, and with one small flick of his tongue against the crown—one more pass as he swallowed him down the best he could—he did.

Sure, he *knew* what was going to happen, he knew the logistics of it, hot ejaculate spurting out of the tip to coat his tastebuds. He knew that was coming, but he still didn't know how it would feel until it happened, until the milky substance shot down his throat in the blink of an eye.

He was a little embarrassed about choking on the bittersweet essence of the man who probably could've gotten better head from someone who wasn't completely new to cocksucking, but then Daryl said it was good, and Rick didn't even want to entertain the idea that he could've been lying, that it was just something to be said, pillow talk, because even if he wasn't 'the best he ever had' like Daryl said, he was going to make sure that someday he was.
And just when Daryl was about to return the favor—not that he needed to, Rick was just as satisfied at the moment knowing he made Daryl feel good—that damn phone rang. He really thought about throwing it across the room to shatter into pieces like his previous device, but he resisted only for the children's sake.

He was kind of glad he answered and equally glad that he got a chance to officially introduce Daryl to Lori. And only some of that was to spite her because he was fairly certain him and Daryl were both in a state of post-coital dishevelment.

"Why'd he wanna talk ta Daryl?" Rick asked Lori after Daryl and Carl had made their way into the kitchen.

"I don't know, Rick," Lori sighed. "After Shane left this morning, he said he wasn't leaving the house unless he could come over and speak with him. I asked him why, but he sassed me and said it wasn't my business."

It wasn't like Carl to talk back like that, but he was growing nearer to his teenage years. "What'd ya say ta 'im?"

"What could I say? It shocked me. I don't know what got into him, but all the fighting we've been doing lately sure isn't helping...among other things," she muttered.

Rick had a feeling she wanted to add some kind of jab at Daryl, but he was grateful that she kept her mouth shut. "He doesn't need ta be talking to ya like that, but you're right. I know all this has been hard on him, and I'm sure whatever Carl wanted ta talk about is nothin' to worry about. I'll find out from Daryl what he wanted and let ya know."

Lori nodded her appreciation. "I'm just glad she doesn't know what's going on yet," she frowned as she ran a hand down Judith's back.

"She's gettin' big, huh? They're both growin' up."

"I know and I don't like it," she said, her frown growing deeper.

"Ain't something we can control, Lori. Can ya image what it's gonna be like when this one gets ta be his age?" he smirked as he gave Judith a raspberry on her neck.

She giggled as Lori rolled her eyes. "I don't even wanna think about it."

The next thing he knew, Carl had flung his arms around his waist and had him in a bone-crushing hug. Judith started to squirm for Daryl as he came into view and he handed her over without a second thought, not missing the uneasy look Lori gave the other man as he cradled the baby in his arms.

He didn't like the look, but there was a warmth the image of Daryl holding Judith brought to his chest that counteracted any hostility Lori could've thrown their way. However, he did find it odd that he already trusted his boyfriend of less than a week with her over Shane. And it wasn't like he didn't trust his ex-best friend of over twenty years with his own flesh and blood.

As much as he liked the feelings Daryl and Judith elicited in his chest, he was happy to see the three Grimes go. Just this once, because he really wanted to get Daryl back upstairs and naked in bed where he belonged. The knock on the door that came after was just another unwelcome distraction to add to their growing list, but he swung it open thinking that it was Carl again.

And once again, the universe decided to throw them for a loop.
"What do ya want, Shane?" Rick bit out between his gritted teeth. He could feel Daryl behind him tensing.

The deputy glared at Daryl over his shoulder but spoke to him, "I need ta talk to ya."

"I think we've said all we need to say to each other," he sighed tiredly. Talking to Shane had a way of making him feel like he was running a marathon even before things fell apart between them.

"I didn't come here ta fight, okay? I jus'...I been thinkin' and we got some things we need ta discuss...alone," he said pointedly, eyes still locked on Daryl.

"He said he don't wanna hear it, pig," Daryl growled, his body so close to Rick's that he could feel the man's radiating heat seeping out and embracing him, calming him.

"Why don'cha go put yer apron back on, Dixon? This don't concern you," Shane snarled, baring his teeth like a rabid dog.

"If it concerns my lover, then it concerns me," he said proudly, resting his chin on Rick's shoulder as his arms wrapped around his stomach. Rick smiled at the affectionate contact. This was not the same man he met five weeks ago.

"Don't even fuckin' joke 'bout him like that!" Shane snapped defensively, taking a step towards them obviously itching for a fight or to impose some sort of intimidation tactic or maybe just to rip Rick out of his arms. "Or I'll fuckin' kick your hillbilly teeth—"

"Shane! That's enough...and he ain't jokin' either, I just finished suckin' him off," Rick snickered, laugh overflowing with mirth as Shane went a little pale.

"Nah, nah, that ain't fuckin' funny!"

"And I'm gonna blow his fuckin' mind when ya leave...and his cock," Daryl added, kissing Rick's neck for added effect as they both watched amusingly as the officer cringed at the image that most definitely popped into his head.

Shane must've been stunned speechless because there was a moment of awkward silence before he gathered the courage to speak again. "You always been this way?" he weakly asked Rick.

"Nope, just gay for Daryl is all. So fuckin' gay for Daryl Dixon! Love 'im, too," he replied in all seriousness.

Shane furrowed his brow, his mouth slightly agape in shock, clearly not prepared for this turn in conversation.

"Shocked the hell outta me too," Rick said.

"Shockin' the hell outta me now," Daryl smirked.

"Doubt that," he said back, "So, Shane, if ya wanna talk to me, ya do it with him by my side 'cause that's how it's gonna be from now on," Rick continued without raising his voice, but his tone was now biting instead of playful.

He felt the grunt of approval Daryl breathed out on his neck and he tried not to think about how turned on that made him. He couldn't help but lean back further into Daryl's orbit as those strong hands loosened and made their way to his hips. Goddamn, all he wanted to do was turn around and kiss the shit out of that man!
Shane had completely deflated at their words. He started shifting his weight from one foot to the other like an animal pacing in his cage. His gaze was firmly planted on Daryl, but Rick could see the subtle nervous twitch of his eyes before they dropped to the ground. He finally looked up at him from under his lashes and let out a sigh.

"Rick, man, this whole thing is fucked...I don't know where it all went wrong, but I ain't the only cause of it. I do take responsibility for my part in it, my mistakes. I know I can't change 'em, and I'm sorry for how things went down. And I'm sorry I didn't apologize sooner, I just, I didn't know what ta say, and I know words ain't enough anyway,...but it tears me up inside ta think that I may've driven ya into...whatever it is yer goin' through...," Shane mumbled.

And once again, Rick didn't miss the look shot Daryl's way with whatever he was trying to imply. Apparently Daryl didn't either. "What the hell ya tryin' to say?" he snapped.

"Daryl," Rick said soothing as he turned his head to look at him. He hoped his lover understood everything he didn't say, hoped he could read it in his eyes. The 'it's okay' and 'he doesn't understand' and 'I love you so much'. Maybe he did because Daryl squeezed his hip and let out a deep breath he had obviously been holding.

"Shane, I'm gonna tell ya the same thing I told Lori," he said sternly, turning back to him. "He ain't a phase, he ain't retaliation or a reaction or a midlife crisis or anything like that. Me and him have nothin' ta do with you or Lori or anythin' that happened between us. Yes, we are together, he's my boyfriend, and I don't know and don't care what your feelin's are on that sort of thing because they don't matter."

"I've known ya for decades, Rick, how am I not supposed ta get fuckin' weirded out when I find out ya've been...prancin' around with a man? A Dixon no less?" Shane hissed.

Rick threw his head back exacerbated by the fact that he'd rather talk to a brick wall sometimes than Shane Walsh. "Did ya not hear that part where I said I don't give a shit what ya think?"

"Come on, man! What the hell are ya doin' with him?" he asked, his voice almost pleading like he was trying to convince Rick not to replace him. Or not to kill his puppy.

"He's bein' happy, and who the hell are you ta deny him that after what ya'll did, to make him feel bad about movin' on and puttin' his life back together? He's with me 'cause he wants ta be, and as long as I make 'im happy, you and everyone else who has a problem with me or him or us can fuck right the hell off!" Daryl snapped.

Rick couldn't have said it better if he tried. He hooked his arm around Daryl's neck and pulled him forward until they stood side by side where they belonged.

"I don't get it, man, I jus' do not get it...," Shane said, shaking his head perplexingly as he stared daggers at the hand Rick had on Daryl's shoulder.

"I don't either but I ain't gonna fight it. He makes me happy, he does, more so than I've been in a long time, and I ain't gonna question that. There's no point because the answer's the same no matter what," Rick said.

"What's the answer?" Daryl asked, whisper soft.

"Fate," he replied, shooting his boyfriend a sideways smirk as he pulled him closer. He kissed his cheek before resting his forehead on his temple for a few seconds, breathing in his musky scent, the smell of home and everything he'd ever need.
Shane scoffed as he looked away. His nervous hostility transforming into an uncomfortable uncertainty. "Rick, this ain't why I came over...."

"Then why did ya?"

"Judith."

Rick felt the hand on his hip give him a good squeeze. He wasn't sure if Daryl was trying to comfort him or himself, but he found his doing the same on his shoulder in return.

Shane let out a sigh of utter defeat, "She ain't mine."

Rick rolled his eyes, "Shane, I've done the math. The only way she's biologically mine is if Lori rode my unconscious body while I was in the damn coma!" he yelled. He tried not to wince when the gentle squeeze on his hip turned into a vice grip.

"And I'm tellin' ya I've done the math too, and the kid ain't mine!" Shane hollered back.

"What do ya mean she ain't yours?!"

"Unless Judy was premature, and at nine pounds I doubt she was, she cannot be biologically mine! We always used protection anyway," Shane insisted.

"Well, who the fuck's is she?" Rick asked.

"Ya think I know? I fuckin' thought she was yours till ya pointed out she wasn't!"

"Rick?" Daryl said calmly.

"What?" Rick unintentionally snapped at him then immediately berated himself when Daryl flinched. He hoped it was out of shock and not fear, but he didn't pull away. "Sorry, baby," he soothed, running a hand through Daryl's hair, "What is it?"

"Sh-she is yours. She loves ya, and she don't care where her genes came from. You're still her daddy, and she's lucky ta have ya. She's gonna be smart jus' like Carl. Maybe even smarter than we thought now that we know she don't share his DNA," Daryl smirked to Rick as he motioned to Shane with his head.

Rick let out a small laugh before pinching the bridge of his nose and sighing. "So what the hell do we do now?" he asked, dropping his hand to weave it together with Daryl's.

"Suppose ya need ta talk ta Lori," Shane said.

"Why me?"

"Cause...as much as I hate to admit it...," he grumbled, "He's right, she's still yours."

And as much as Rick hated to admit it, he was glad she wasn't Shane's. He was relieved really because he hated the idea of losing her. Of course, he had also resented the fact that she was Shane's, but she wasn't now, not anymore. Daryl was right, she was his.

That little piece of information shouldn't have made that much of a difference, but for some reason it did. She was a blessing because in a round about way, she was the first domino that fell setting everything into motion, everything that brought him Daryl and he was truly grateful for that.

"Shit, man! I thought she had your eyes. Karma's a fuckin' bitch!" Rick gloated.
"She fuckin' cheated on me too then, huh?" Shane said under his breath.

"You're surprised? She was cheatin' on her hot-as-fuck husband with your sorry ass at the time. What'd ya expect?" Daryl snarled. "And for the record, officer if ya fuckin' touch 'im again, I'll beat your ass inta the ground!"

Shane scoffed but looked away.

"One more thing, Shane, I don't appreciate you bad mouthing my boyfriend within earshot of the kids," Rick added. "Carl heard what you said about him this morning and he heard what ya said the other night, and both situations are unacceptable. I'm tryin' ta teach my kids ta be loving, accepting, kind people and if ya insist on underminin' that, then we're gonna have a problem."

"Nah, man...we ain't gonna have a problem. If ya want your kids hangin' around convicts than I guess it ain't my call," Shane spat.

"You're right, it ain't," Rick replied, rolling his eyes. "Anythin' else ya care ta pointlessly bitch about?"

"I jus'...things are just fucked up right now all around," Shane sighed, running hands his through his hair, his tell for when he was overwhelmed and didn't know what the hell to do about it. "I jus'...things ain't the same...I kinda...m-miss ya, man," he all but whispered, looking down at the ground as he toed the concrete step.

Rick wasn't about to feel sorry for him, but that was the moment he realized that Shane had lost something too in the midst of their clusteruck, his friendship, his brotherly love, and that probably hadn't been easy on him, but none of it was easy on any of them.

"I-I'll talk ta Lori," Rick said, "'Bout Judy, about what we're gonna do, whatever the hell that is."

Shane nodded, "'S better comin' from you. Don't even know what I'd say...."

"We done?" Daryl asked impatiently.

Shane narrowed his eyes at him.

"Are we?" Rick asked.

"Yeah, we're done," Shane replied looking back to him.

"Good, now if ya don't mind, we got things ta do," Daryl said, backing him and Rick up as he reached for the door. "Cocks don't suck 'emselves," he huffed as he slammed the door in Shane's face.

"Daryl," Rick playfully chided.

"What? We ain't got all day," he shrugged as he immediately starting kissing Rick.

The grin on Daryl's face was infectious as Rick cupped the side of his neck and kissed him back, his other hand at his side pulling their bodies together. "'S been a pretty good day and it ain't even noon yet," Rick said pulling back to look into his deep blue eyes.

"Bet I can make it better," Daryl smirked leaning back in for another scorching kiss.

Daryl maneuvered them around and walked them to the stairs. For a moment, Rick thought he was going to have to go up them backwards, but Daryl practically pounced on him and sent him
tumbling down onto them. He let out a laugh as Daryl moved to straddle his thighs.

"Sorry, jus' been wantin' ta kiss ya," Daryl said, looking down at him. He bit his lip and frowned. "Didn't hurt ya, did I?"

Rick ran his hands up and down his back reassuringly, content to stay lock together like that forever. "Nah, Darlin', and ya don't ever have ta apologize for wantin' that," he replied, his hands falling to knead Daryl thighs. "Are ya done?" he teased, playfully wiggling his brows.

Daryl let out a low laugh as he leaned back down to kiss him, lips smooth and silken, and when he rocked his hips just right, Rick's cock jumped to attention, his breathing hitched, and he moaned Daryl's names and a few murmured curses into the other man's mouth.

Rick would've been happy to stay like that all damn day, but Daryl pulled back and dropped to his knees on a step in front of him. He spread Rick's legs and ran his hands up them and around to his ass as he settled in between. They took up another round of kissing until Daryl coaxed him down to lay back on the stairs.

"This okay?" Daryl asked as he broke away.

Rick nodded in reply. The edges of the steps were digging into his back, but fuck if he was going to admit to that! "You're so beautiful, baby," Rick smiled up at him adoringly as he twisted his fingers in his hair.

Daryl shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"Would I lie to ya?" he asked when Daryl made eye contact again.

"Nah, ya wouldn't," Daryl answered, leaning down to kiss the breath out of him, deep and passionate and full of emotion. "Love ya," he whispered on his lips, the words ghosting over them before they kissed again.

"Love you too," Rick replied.

"Can I try somethin'?"

Rick had to laugh at his mirrored words. "Sweetheart, I'll let ya try anything ya want!"

Daryl gave him a smoldering look as he readjusted himself on a lower step. He sucked in his bottom lip as he hooked his fingers into the hem of Rick's pajama bottoms. Rick was already pretty hard from having his lover's body on his as they made out, but the sight before him sent his pulse skyrocketing, every beat making his cock throb with anticipation.

Daryl pulled his pants down until they rested under his balls. He wasted no time as he took him in hand and gave a few tentative tugs. When he wet his lips, Rick realized he wasn't going to last long at all. Daryl hadn't even started with his mouth yet and he was dangerously close to the edge.

He had to drop his head back on the step, his breath erratic as he tried to think of anything but what Daryl was doing, otherwise it would've been over before it even started. Then, all there was was a wet warmth spreading over his entire body as Daryl sucked him down.

He had to chance a look. He just fucking had to! Daryl was looking up at him with those beautiful sea storm eyes while his kiss-swollen lips were devouring his cock. The fucking tease pulled off and ran his tongue up the underside of him, giving a little flick to the sensitive juncture where the shaft met the head.
Rick let out a pretty pathetic little whimper at that and he didn't care who knew it because that was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen in his life. He squeezed his eyes shut as his head fell back down onto the step. "Fuck, baby! God, ya feel so fuckin' good!" he praised. And he swore he could feel Daryl's lips curling up into a smile as they slide back down the length of him.

He wanted that moment to last forever, but he also felt the pressure building to his climax and he wanted that too. His hands, which he had been trying to keep to himself for fear he'd mess something up, tangled in Daryl's locks and he raised his head to look back down at him.

"Yer so fuckin' amazin'!" he said. That definitely earned him a smile if the twinkle in Daryl's eyes was anything to go by. It must've been a boost to Daryl's confidence because he began to stroke him faster as he took him in even deeper. His free hand found its way to Rick's balls, and he gently rolled and squeezed them as he slid along his cock.

And that was just too fucking much!

"Baby, I'm, shit, god, FUCK! I'm about ta come!" Rick stammered. His balls tightened and so did the grip on them as he came hard, his body arching off the stairs, head falling back, as he tried not to thrust into the searing heat of Daryl's mouth.

Never had he ever had an orgasm that intense in all his life. His whole body was trembling as Daryl milked him dry leaving him boneless and probably soulless because he was fairly certain that he died and was laying at the gates of Heaven when his vision flashed white.

What a way to go that would've been!

When he came back into his body, Daryl was hovering over him and looking down with unsure eyes. He reached up and grabbed him by the collar so he could smash their mouths together in the hottest kiss imaginable. The disorienting combination of his seed on Daryl's tongue almost had him hard again.

And with that, every last ounce of doubt he might've had left in him leached out into the darkest depths of the universe; there was no point in denying it, he knew he was going spend the rest of his life with that man.
Daryl's Doubt

Chapter Summary

A lazy Saturday.

**Daryl**

Daryl had only given one sober blowjob in his life that he could remember, and it was a complete disaster. But that was the last thing on his mind when he started kissing Rick. All he felt was need, the need to make the man see stars. He wasn't even sure if he was doing it right, but it must've been good if the sounds Rick was making were any indication.

If he hadn't been so fucking excited about it, he might've dragged it out a little longer, but he just wanted to make Rick feel good, wanted to know he turned him on, wanted to push him right off the ledge into a canyon of euphoria. And Rick's encouraging words only made him want it more.

He took as much of him into his mouth as possible, relishing in the feel of Rick's overheated flesh gliding between his lips. When Rick's hands burrowed into his hair, he knew the man wouldn't last much longer. And he didn't. He exploded in his mouth, hands fisting tightly in his hair holding him in place as he released everything he'd been holding back all week, all month, maybe all his life.

Rick's body went limp underneath him as he gasped for air, Daryl's chest heaving just as much as his was. "How was that?" he asked shyly, but Rick didn't answer. He wondered if he even heard him.

He crawled up the stairs until they were face to face, him on his hands and knees above him until Rick's eyes snapped open and pulled him down. That was as good of an answer as any, and he returned the kiss with everything he had with lungs still on fire.

They got lost in lazy kisses until Rick eventually let out a grunt of discomfort. "What's wrong?" Daryl asked, reluctantly breaking away.

"Stairs are startin' ta hurt my bony ass," Rick chuckled.

Daryl smirked as he pushed himself up. He reached out his hands to Rick and helped him up. Instead of heading upstairs, Rick pulled him over to the couch. He laid down on his side and motioned for Daryl to join him. Like he'd ever turn down that invitation. They kissed for awhile before they finally settled into staring deeply into each other's eyes, and before he knew it, they had both nodded off.

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Daryl woke up an hour later to fingers tickling him as they grazed over the skin just under the hem of his shirt. His knee was wedged between Rick's and his fingers were still twisted in his perfect curls. His boyfriend smiled at him lovingly when he opened his eyes and he went pooling into a puddle of mushy romantic sap.

"Hey beautiful," Rick cooed, and Daryl couldn't help but kiss the smile right off his face. He tried to anyway, but when he pulled back, an even bigger one had replaced it.
"Hey yourself," he said, unable to stop himself from smiling back like a lovestruck fool.

"So...that was—"

"Good?" Daryl interjected, resisting the urge to raise his thumb to his teeth.

"I was going to go with incredible, but good's fine," he smirked.

Daryl lightheartedly scoffed and looked away giving Rick the perfect opportunity to start kissing on his neck. He hummed his appreciation and trailed a hand down Rick's back to squeezed his ass. He rolled his hips bringing their bodies into perfect alignment as Rick sucked hard on a sensitive spot right above the collar of his t-shirt.

"Markin' me, Grimes?" Daryl huskily asked.

"Stakin' my claim," the older man giggled, actually fucking giggled. "Shit, Daryl, you're makin' me hard again. And that is in no way a complaint."

"Am I?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"It's okay, baby," Ricked purred. "Can tell I'm havin' the same effect on ya," he whispered as rocked into him, the leg draped over Daryl's thigh tightening and bring their bodies even closer.

Daryl didn't have to answer, it was obvious he was beyond rock hard. Now, he was a goddamn diamond. Rick started placing open mouth kisses along his jawline on his way up to his lips, a tongue sweeping over his bottom one before delving inside to met his.

He had never really cared much for kissing until Rick came along, never had anyone he cared to kiss, but now that's all he wanted to do. Maybe not all, but it was pretty close. Every time Rick's lips touched his, or any part of his skin, it sent off sparks igniting all over his body, and like an addict, he couldn't get enough.

They made out for a little while longer, gently rocking against each other and enjoying the feel of their bodies woven so flawlessly together. Rick was solid next him, concrete, tangible, but it was still an odd feeling to be so close to someone when he'd spent most of his life avoiding that very thing.

It was different with Rick, though. He knew it was, he knew he'd never be able to lay next to anyone else, sleep next to anyone else—not even Merle—and feel the kind of safe he felt next to Rick. He had a hard time wrapping his head around that and the idea that maybe Rick felt the same.

He was still struggling with the fact that Rick loved him and was willing to admit it out loud to the world and everyone else. He didn't think Rick would lie to him, and certainly not to Merle, but he kept questioning whether or not this was really his life now.

Could he really let himself relax and settle into it—into plans for building houses and finding babies to adopt or however that worked—instead of looking around for the string that would surely get caught on something and send the whole thing unraveling like a cheap sweater?

What if things didn't work out? What if they couldn't afford to build a house? What if no one would give two men a baby to raise or Lori found a way to take Carl or Judith away? What if Rick woke up one day and didn't love him anymore? What if he realized that he preferred to sleep with women after all instead of him and that Daryl really was just some sort of midlife crisis?

"Hey? Where'd ya go?" Rick frowned at him as he ran a hand through his hair. He loved when
Rick did that. It always calmed him down, grounded him.

"Jus' thinkin' about houses...don't even know how that stuff works," he shrugged.

"Well, that's why we'll need some help, but I suppose the first steps would be lookin' for a plot of land and gettin' some floor plans goin' and a budget," Rick replied, his fingers still gorging ruts into his hair.

"What kinda floor plans?"

"Like one story verses two, how ya want the kitchen set up, where ta put the kids' rooms, and how far they need ta be from our room so we don't wake 'em when we make love," Rick winked, and Daryl blushed as he rolled his eyes.

"Sounds like a lot of shit," Daryl said before bitting at his thumb.

"Yeah, but we'll go slow, one thing at a time. Ain't gotta rush anythin'. We can start with location. Where do ya wanna live?"

"I dunno," he shrugged again.

"Okay...well, I'd like ta be close to work and to Carl's school, but I wouldn't mind moving a little ways from the center of town. Maybe get enough land that we could have a garden," Rick suggested.

"Sounds fine."

He'd like to be near the woods somewhere, but he figured that if Rick was kind enough to want to build him a house, then he should be grateful with wherever the man decided to put it. Except maybe for the kitchen, because his boyfriend had no clue what went on in one of those.

"Nah, Daryl, ya can't do that," Rick insisted, crashing through his thoughts like a wrecking ball through a house of cards.

Daryl knitted his brows together and gave him a confused look.

"Ya can't go all quiet and expect me ta make all the decisions myself. It's your house too!" he called him out. "We're partners here."

*Partners?* Like life partners? Like commitment ceremonies and place setting and what color paint to get for the nursery? Where to buy their cemetery plots?

Or like business partners? Which wall to run the gas line for the stove along? How many outlets the living room needed? And where to put the windows?

Both?

"You're gonna have ta help me out, darlin'," Rick said, nuzzling his nose into Daryl's neck. "It's supposed ta be our dream house, where we've gonna live forever, so it's gotta be some place we both like...no, *love.*"

"Was jus' thinkin' that it'd be nice to live near the woods 'cause I like ta hunt is all," Daryl replied, bringing his thumb back up to teeth to nibble on, but Rick intercepted him and interlocked their fingers.

The big excited smile that broke across Rick's lips had Daryl's insides melting like the people's
faces in the movie they watched last night, Indiana James or something, except much more pleasant. He was so far gone for his man that he'd have to send postcards or people would start to wonder where the hell he went.

"Carl would love that! And we need to go huntin' 'cause I just got the strangest urge to see ya in action, then get some of that myself," Rick said in his low bedroom voice that sent a delightful tingle down Daryl's spine.

"Are ya part rabbit or sumpin'? Needin' ta fuck like a bunny or you'll die?" Daryl teased. Not that he minded.

"I'm down with the fuckin' like bunnies part," he chuckled back. "And it ain't my fault you're so sexy that I can't keep my hands off ya. 'S'at a problem?" Rick continued, kneading Daryl's ass and rocking his hips into him to emphasize his point.

Daryl scoffed good-naturedly but held Rick tighter to him. "Nah, rabbits are delicious," he said as they shared a laugh that was punctuated by another heated kiss.

"Good," Rick grinned happily when they finally parted again.

"So...are ya really okay with the whole Judith thing? I didn't mean ta butt in or nothin'."

"Daryl, you're my boyfriend, ya didn't butt in, okay? And I don't know what the hell's gonna happen there. I am listed as her father on the birth certificate and Shane seems to think she ain't his and I love her. I imagine it's like havin' an adopted child. I ain't gonna love her any less jus' 'cause we don't share DNA.

"I suppose I could still walk away, tell Lori to find her real dad, but what if she don't like him or he ain't as good of a father to her? Or what if he don't want her? 'Cause I can be a good father to her, y'know?"

Of course, Rick would be a good father, the best really, he already was to Judith and Carl, but he shouldn't have to raise someone else's kid if he didn't want to. Although, Rick had known Judith wasn't his since she was born and still loved her and protected her. She wasn't Daryl's either, but he had already fallen in love with her, too.

"You're a good man. Hell, ya have ta be ta take me and Merle in," Daryl said. "But do you want her?"

"Yeah, 'course! She's mine," Rick replied. "I love her."

"Well, I guess that settles it...I love her, too," he said meekly, not really sure if it was his place.

"Course ya do, she's our Li'l Cockblocker," he chuckled. "You're a good dad," Rick added.

"I ain't her dad," Daryl replied. The word just blew his mind. He never thought anybody would call him 'dad'. The simple fact that someone else—no, this amazing man—would want to share his child, that title, with him was unfathomable. When did this become his reality? That a handsome man would want him to be a father to his children?

"Pshh, she's gonna be callin' ya 'daddy' before me, so ya might as well be. She loves ya, and I can't say I blame her. 'Sides, you're just as much a father to her now as I am. I mean...if ya wanna be 'cause I promise no pressure. She could always call ya Uncle Dare like with Sophia if ya want."

"Never really thought about kids before, Rick, what ta be called or...hell, I ain't ever held one till
Judy," Daryl admitted.

"I know it's a lot ta take in at once, to think about with the house and stuff, but if ya need time or for us ta slow things down, ya jus' gotta say the word....oh, I think that's Carol and Merle pullin' in. 'S probably time ta get up."

Thank god! Daryl thought. The conversation in general was starting to get a little heavy. For once, he was glad for Merle's habit of barging in at the most inopportune moment.

"Ya'll decent?" the elder Dixon yelled as he slowly opened the door.

"Oh stop hasslin' them," Carol said pushing passed him. "Hey, boys," she greeted them with a knowing smile as they stood and stretched. "How 'bout a little lunch?"

"We could eat," Rick answered for them.

The four of them sat down and had leftover chili while they talked about their respective mornings. Merle grumbled about still being able to kick that deputy's ass one handed and Carol wished she could've seen Shane's face after Daryl slammed the door in it.

After lunch, Rick helped Merle get his things from the car to take to his room while Daryl and Carol cleaned up the kitchen. "I really appreciate ya takin' care of Merle today," Daryl said as the other two men headed out.

"It was nothing. I kinda like hanging out with him," Carol smiled.

"I know he likes hangin' out with ya...oh, and thanks for breakfast, too."

"That was for everyone's sake," she winked. "I'm glad you do the cookin' around here. He's lucky to have you. Don't ever forget that...I know he won't."

"Can I ask ya something?" Daryl asked.

"Yeah, anything," she smiled back.

"How long have ya known Rick?"

"About two years or so. We met right before he got shot. Him and Shane responded to...a domestic disturbance at my house."

"Ed?"

"Yeah...he roughed me up pretty good. Rick was the one who finally got through to me...after the accident, I said to myself that if he could make it through that, then I could leave Ed. I left the day I heard he came out of the coma, took Sophia to the shelter and never looked back. Ed died a few weeks later. He was alone and had no one ta call 9-1-1 when his heart stopped."

"Sorry ta hear that," Daryl said, unsure of what else to say. He closed the dishwasher and started it up to fill the awkwardness he felt settle in.

"Don't be. We're much better off now. Rick's a huge part of that," she assured him.

He turned around and leaned up against the counter as he crossed his arms in front of him. "How did ya'll know about us?" he asked, nervously bitting at his thumb. The digit was rather raw by that point, but at least it wasn't bleeding...yet.
"It was just the way ya'll look at each other. I can't really explain it, ya'll just look right when you're standing next to each other, like the world could fall down around you but you'd still be alright as long as he was standing beside you," Carol said.

"That's how I feel," Daryl softly agreed, bitting the inside of his cheek to ward off the blush threatening to wash over him.

"I know, and I'm sure that's how he feels about you."

"How do ya know?"

"'Cause he looks at you the same way you look at him, like you hung the stars. So don't you go doubting that."

"It's hard, y'know...comin' from where I did ta this, ta him." Daryl wasn't sure why he was opening up to her. They'd been acquaintances for about a year, but they'd gotten closer since they started working together. And like with Rick, he just felt comfortable with her. Well..more so than with others.

"I get that. It's been a big adjustment for you. Do you doubt he loves you?" Carol asked, stilling the rag in her hand as she looked up from the table she was wiping clean.

"No," he replied immediately. That was a no brainer. "It's jus' that he wants ta build me a house and keeps talkin' about babies and the future and stuff...."

"Is he movin' too fast? If so, you need to tell him," Carol said sternly. "He'll understand, if that's what you're worried about."

"It ain't too fast," he smiled to himself. "That's the part that's scary. Jus' feels right with 'im and I'm afraid it's gonna fall apart, y'know? I...I ain't never had anyone who loved me like that before. Ain't never loved anyone like that either. 'S jus' too perfect and I know I don't deserve 'im."

"Hey! Don't you go thinking like that!" Carol chided. "He was single for a few months before he met you, and I can attest that he had plenty of women throwing themselves at him. He didn't give any of them a second glance. But you...you walked in the shelter on Christmas and blinded him for anyone else. I knew it immediately. Why do you think Michonne and I gave up on him?" she smirked.

Daryl furrowed his brow in a silent question.

"What? Can't blame a girl for tryin'," she chuckled. "I've never seen him happy before, not really, not till you. So if your gut is telling ya that he's the one, trust it. Because he wouldn't fall in love with someone who wasn't worthy of him. And he certainly wouldn't be planning a future like that if he didn't think you deserved it, if he didn't want it with you."

Daryl nodded but worried his lip. He just needed more time for it to sink in that he might actually have a chance at a real future with Rick, that he could maybe hope and plan for normalcy. He could be okay with that. He could be beyond okay with that. He could be happy. With Rick.

The two joined Rick and Merle in the living room when they were finished. Merle was sprawled out on the couch—it was close to his daily nap time—and Rick was in the lounge chair flashing him a smile as he walked in.

"It's been fun fellas, but I should be headin' back to the shelter," Carol announced.
"We should go get a drink tonight after," Merle suggested. "Since we don't have those smelly rugrats ta tie us down!" He talked a big game, but Daryl knew he was falling in love with Rick's children, too.

"Sure tha's wise with your injury? 'S only been a week," Daryl asked.

"Be fine after a li'l nap, Darlina. Ya ain't gotta worry 'bout ol' Merle. My hand is feelin' fine. Or my stub, guess I should say," he slightly frowned. "Tell ya what ya should be worryin' about is havin' ta fight all those gals off yer man," he snorted a laugh.

"Oh he ain't got nothin' ta worry about there," Rick winked. "Besides, I'm pretty sure I'm the one whose gonna have ta fight off the herd a' girls 'cause my boyfriend is smokin' hot!"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Merle cringed a tad.

"Well, I would!"

"So, I guess I'll be seein' ya'll later," Carol said, shaking her head as she moved to the doorway. "Six-thirty at Bob's," she reminded them before she took her leave.

"Y'all need ta be quiet now. I gotta rest up for my big date," Merle snickered, laying his arm over his forehead.

"We just took a nap, Merle. What are we supposed ta do till then?" Daryl asked.

"I got an idea," Rick smiled.

"Jus'...jus' try ta keep it down, okay?" Merle pouted. "Don't think my delicate ears could handle listenin' to yer afternoon delight."

"Oh hush, it ain't that! Well, maybe," Rick teased. He went into the kitchen and grabbed his laptop. On his way back, he took Daryl's hand and led him up the stairs. "Thought we could look up designs for awhile. See what we like and stuff," he suggested, flopping down on the bed and opening the laptop.

Daryl laid down and curled up as close as he could against his side, safe. Rick had an arm flung over his back holding him tight, the other on the touch pad as they browsed designs for houses. It would've been monotonous if it was with anyone else, but for the first time in his life, Daryl made plans that stretched beyond tomorrow.

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By the time they made it to the bar that night, Daryl was a nervous wreck. It was him and Rick's first official outing as a couple, and for every time Rick assured him it wasn't a date, Merle insisted that it was. He wasn't embarrassed about it, about him and Rick; he'd just never been on a date before.

That wasn't really the issue. The problem was that he was afraid what people would think of Rick not only walking in with a man but a Dixon. They could say whatever they wanted about him—he was used to being called every offensive name under the sun—but he didn't want Rick subjected to that. The man could handle himself, sure; he just didn't want the business to suffer or for Rick to get hurt somehow just because they were together.

Not to mention, he'd been in the closet for so long, he didn't know how to act out of it. As far as he knew, their friends were all supportive of them, but that didn't mean they'd be okay with seeing
pda's and things like that exchanged between them. They were still in the American South after all.

Merle was the first out of the truck when they pulled in the parking lot and hollered for them to hurry up as he jumped out. Rick opened his door to follow, but pulled it shut again when Daryl started gnawing on his thumb.

"Sweetheart, it's alright. Ain't nothin' ta worry about. I'll even sit on the other side of the table if ya want so I won't be tempted ta hold your hand or nothin'. We can play footsies instead where no one can see," Rick assured him as he tried to offer comfort.

"I ain't ashamed a' ya, y'know that, right?" Daryl asked, staring out the window unable to look at him. He felt like a coward, but he needed the man to know that, that it wasn't shame. It was fear.

"Course I do," he replied, reaching across the seat to rub Daryl's knuckles. "I'd never think that...It's just drinks with some friends. Then, we can go home and curl up on the sofa and cuddle, maybe give Merle a show for bein' an ass," Rick teased.

"I love ya, Rick," he muttered, "Want ya beside me, not across the table."

"Then that's where I'll be. Always." Rick squeezed his hand before letting go so they could exited the truck. "I love ya, too," he whispered, coming up beside him. He gave Daryl's shoulder a squeeze as they hit the door before his hand lightly trickled down the back of his arm.

Daryl mourned it when it disappeared. He took a deep breath and blocked out all the bullshit anyone ever gave him about who he was, silencing the wretched voice of his father that was becoming easier to ignore everyday and with every kind thing Rick said to him to replace the lifetime of insults.

Rick loved him and was always going to be beside him. *Always*. No matter what. Fear had nothing on that, on the way they felt about each other or the way Rick was looking at him with big, blue eyes so sincere they almost hurt to stare into.

He grabbed Rick's hand and twined them together. And before the man could ask the "Are you sure?" no doubt perched on his tongue, he opened the door and dragged him inside.
Rick and Daryl's weekend.

**Rick**

Everyone was already gathered around their usual table when Rick and Daryl walked in together. He was determined not to make a big deal out of Daryl taking his hand. It would've brought attention neither really cared for. Instead, he concentrated on the warmth of it, the way their fingers fit flawlessly, how Daryl's constricted nervously the closer they got to the group.

He smiled despite himself. His boyfriend had been pretty adamant about their outing not being a date. He wasn't sure if that was because he'd had bad ones in the past or if he was just afraid of what people might think of them together. He didn't give a damn about the latter. As long as their friends were supportive, no one else's opinion mattered to him.

Speaking of, Maggie was beaming at them as they approached. She jumped off Glenn's lap and rushed to hug them both. "Congrats," she smiled wide, the warmth in her soft green eyes hopefully putting Daryl at ease like it did him.

"'Bout time ya two love birds showed up," Michonne ribbed. "Oh my god, Daryl, is that a hickey?" she shouted.

"NO! Shuddup," Daryl blushed, pulling up the collar of his shirt as everyone turned to examine him. Rick felt bad when he turned in on himself slightly, his expression going dark and closed off. He'd be more mindful where he left marks next time, but the man just tasted so fucking good!

"Sorry," Rick apologized, a little more smug than it probably should've been. "Looks good on ya, though," he whispered as they shuffled into the booth next to Carol, his thigh pressing into Daryl's as he handed him a pint.

"Nice one, Rick!" Michonne teased.

"Quit fuckin' starin' ya pervs! Christ!" Daryl hissed, his face just as red from anger now than embarrassment.

"Are you coming back to work on Monday, Daryl?" Glenn asked.

Rick was thankful for the change in topic and reminded himself to thank Glenn for it later. "Whatcha think, Merle? Ya still need a babysitter?" Rick asked when he realized Daryl wasn't ready to talk to them yet.

His boyfriend was sipping his beer with a scowl, and Rick covertly placed a hand on his thigh under the table and gave him a gentle squeeze in support. Daryl's shoulders released a bit of tension, and Rick let out a small sigh of relief in response.

"Don't think I can handle myself?" Merle grumbled defensively.
"Nah, Merle, jus' teasin'."  Dammit! Rick didn't know everything about the brothers yet, but he was pretty sure that two pissed off Dixon's was not a good combination. "When you're up for it, you can come hang out around the shop, help out where ya can...if ya want," he added.

"Yeah, it'd be nice ta have another...," Glenn started laughing, "...set of hands around." The table erupted in a roar of laughter, even Daryl, as Merle sulked behind his beer. "M sorry, man! I mean more help on jobs," he snickered.

"Prolly jus' be in tha way," Merle glared at Glenn, "Most things these days are made in China anyhow."

"He's Korean," Daryl corrected.

"We'll find somethin' for ya, Merle. When you're ready...no need ta rush your recovery," Rick said.

"Hey, Rick? Tyreese just walked in," Glenn pointed out. The group looked over to the large dark skinned man as he headed to the bar.

"Who's the blonde?" Michonne asked.

"Andrea Harrison, that Governor prick's girlfriend, or ex, or mistress, or lawyer or...whatever," Daryl said, turning his attention back to his beer.

"Hey, Ty?" Rick hollered at him.

Tyreese turned and smiled wide when he saw him. He grabbed the bottle of suds Bob placed on the counter for him and walked over, Andrea trailing slightly behind looking a tad bit out of place in her rather expensive looking pantsuit.

"Hey, Rick, Glenn, Carol," Tyreese greeted them.

"How's it goin'?" Rick asked after going around the table and introducing him and Andrea to everyone else.

"Just came to celebrate my newfound freedom with my new lawyer," he smiled, nodding to Andrea.

"Thought you were Blake's lawyer?" Rick asked her skeptically.

"Everyone makes mistakes," she replied.

"She got me out of that ridiculous contract," Tyreese explained. "Called me up outta the blue and fixed everything."

"That's great news! Perfect timin' too 'cause I'm...well, we...," he said winking at Daryl, "...been thinkin' about buildin' a house."

"Yer shittin' me!" Merle gracefully said. "Where 'm I gonna go? Do I get a room at least?" he pouted, looking a little hurt.

Rick knew neither brother had ever lived alone, and he must've felt a little left out now that Daryl had someone else in his life after it'd been just the two of them verses their father and the world for so long. "No, ya don't get a room, but...if you're good, we'll get ya a trailer for out back...maybe, maybe a guest house if you're really good," Rick teased.

Merle scoffed, but looked relieved, if not a bit grateful. "Guess it'll do," he mumbled.
"If ya ain't livin' with Carol by then," Michonne interjected, wiggling her brows.

"Oh shush," Carol playfully admonished, he cheeks turning the slightest shade of pink.

Thankful for the reprieve, Rick leaned his shoulder into Daryl who had went quiet and introspective. "Ya okay?" he whispered, squeezing his thigh again as the the gang continued their assault on Carol and Merle for a change.

"You'd be okay with Merle bein' so close ta us?" Daryl quietly asked back, taking Rick's hand in his under the table.

"If it's what ya want. I know the two a' ya'll are a packaged deal jus' like me an' the kids."

"Think ya got ripped off," he scoffed.

"Tha's funny 'cause I think I won the lottery," Rick cooed, leaning even further into Daryl to where they were almost cheek to cheek, eyes locked in their peripheries. He got caught up in studying Daryl's profile, from the slope of his brow to the curve of his chin and every crevice in between, and didn't notice the conversation dying out beside them.

"Care ta share with the class?" Michonne asked.

"Sure ya wanna know?" Rick fired back in challenge, a cheeky grin playing on his beer-stained lips.

Glenn, Tyreese, and Merle made faces and blurted out several no's while the ladies expressed a certain curiosity in their varying answers. "Yer shit outta luck 'cause we don't kiss an' tell," Daryl said, before taking a swig from his mug.

"So there's kissin' then?" Maggie teased.

"'Course, there's kissin'. Can't leave 'em alone fer two seconds without 'em swappin' spit like they's dyin' a' thirst," Merle shook his head. "Thought they got inta the superglue the other day an' got stuck together."

"So, you two are together?" Andrea asked with an inquisitive look, brow creased slightly.

"Got a problem with that, sugartits?" Merle answered in question, baring his teeth almost in warning. He reminded Rick of a guard dog, and it was obvious that protective nature he'd seen in Daryl ran in the family.

"No, no problem. Quite the opposite actually. My practice focuses on human rights. However, your vocabulary leaves something to be desired," she replied, earning a round of laughter from the table.

"You kiss Carol with that mouth?" Michonne quipped to Merle.

"Not tonight," Carol teased.

"Merle ain't never been good with words," Daryl added. "He gets even dumber when he drinks."

"Shuddup, Darlina. Go back ta makin' out with yer boyfriend an' let us grown folk talk."

"You hush now, Merle, and come dance with me," Carol said as she stood.

"Only a few songs, okay. His arm starts hurtin' when his blood pressure goes too high," Rick called. Obviously, they all shared that protective streak.
"What are ya? My brother's boyfriend or my mama?" Merle hollered back over his shoulder as Carol dragged him towards the dance floor. Maggie and Glenn followed after.

The group soon went on to talk about Phillip and what a bastard he was as they grilled Andrea for details about him. They were on their second beer when a hand started creeping up Rick's thigh just like the last time they stopped in for a drink. He was determined not to freak out this time or come in his pants, not that he'd mind the latter.

Daryl's hand reached his cock and he started applying gentle pressure as he palmed him through the dark-wash denim. Rick tried to swallow the dry lump in his throat caused by the sharp intake of breath the lovely friction claimed from his lungs. The bar was dimly lit, so hopefully no one noticed the way his body stiffened when his hips jutted forward involuntarily.

"Jus' checkin'," Daryl whispered in his ear. He slowly moved his hand back down Rick's thigh, gave it a good squeeze, then placed it back on the table.

Rick could've cried at the loss of contact. Instead, he tried to think unsexy thoughts to will away the bulge Daryl conjured up in his pants: baseball, his grandmother, the Governor. He wasn't completely successful.

"Checkin' what? Ta see if it's still there?" Rick smirked after clearing the dust from his throat, still trying to distract himself.

"If we'd both freak out again," Daryl answered.

"Told ya, your hands are always welcome, Darlin'. Even if they make me wanna drag ya to the bathroom for some relief." The last part was whispered low in his ear.

"Think I had enough dirty sex in bars, Rick," he frowned.

"Ain't nothin' dirty about me an' you, 'cept maybe my boxers right about now," he assured him, bumping him with his shoulder. He wanted to run his hands through his hair—it usually calmed them both—but he didn't think Daryl would appreciate quite that much open affection in such a crowded place.

"There's a blonde over there checkin' ya out," Daryl said.

Rick wasn't sure if that made Daryl jealous or insecure, but he didn't even bother to look. The most beautiful thing in the bar was sitting right next to him. "Blonde ain't really my type," he said, taking a sip of his beer, making a point to keep his eyes locked on Daryl the whole time. Not that they'd be anywhere else.

"Love ya," the younger man said, whisper soft.

He couldn't help the smile that broke across his face, "Love ya more," he quietly said back. "And don't get too drunk now 'cause I'm gonna suck ya off again when we get home and I want ya to remember every li'l thang I do to ya," Rick drawled low in his ear, delighted and encouraged by the tremor he saw rip through his boyfriend's body at his words.

"How long have ya'll been together," Andrea asked, breaking the bubble they had built up around them.

Rick chuckled as he composed himself, "Bout a week," he answered. It was hard to believe that. It felt like all of time and just a split second combined.
"Hmmm," she hummed contemplatively.

"What?" Daryl scowled.

"Oh nothing, it just looks like you've been together longer than that. I would've guessed years. And you have kids, right Rick?"

"Carl's twelve and Judith's nine months," Rick replied. "In the middle of a divorce. Michonne's my lawyer," he continued, answering the silent question in Andrea's eyes.

"Michonne, a lawyer? After busting my balls about being an ambulance chaser?" she dryly teased.

"You have quite the reputation for being a ball buster yourself," the darker skinned woman countered.

"Bust more than that," she replied. The group exchanged knowing looks at what Rick thought was flirting between the two lawyers.

"I think that's how the group figured us out, baby," Rick said to Daryl. The younger man grinned and nudged him with an elbow in agreement.

Shortly after, the couples returned from the dance floor and Rick expressed his desire to get home, mostly because he wanted to be alone with Daryl, but also because Merle looked like he was getting tired from the excursion. The three said their goodbyes and headed home.

"What'd ya think of that Andrea chick?" Daryl asked as they were heading up the stairs to their bedroom, Daryl leading him by the hand.

"Seems friendly, but she did date Phillip. 'M not exactly sure I'd trust her taste in men," Rick replied.

"What about women?" Daryl smirked back down at him as he hit the top step.

"They seemed to hit it off, didn't they? Didn't know Michonne swung that way, but didn't know I did either...not till I met the right man," Rick purred, wrapping his arms around Daryl's belly and pressing his chest snugly against his back. Daryl's head tilted to the side and he took that as an invitation to plant kisses along the soft expanse.

Daryl placed his hands on his thighs and pulled Rick into him as he rocked his ass back against his fast-swelling cock. Rick somehow managed to kick the door shut as he sucked a bruise at the juncture of his neck while simultaneously working his fingers under Daryl's shirt so he could dip one hand in his pants right into the course curls just below his belt.

"Want ya," Daryl breathed.

"Want ya, too," Rick replied, nosing into his dark hair. He'd never wanted anything more in all his life than to wrap his lips back around every scorching inch of his beautiful boyfriend's body until he cried out in pleasure. So he maneuvered him to the bed and did just that.

*****

Rick woke up the next morning with a text from Shane that said he was moving out. He didn't reply because he honestly didn't care either way at this point. He was a little concerned about Lori being there all by herself with the kids, but she was a momma bear when it came to their children, so he wasn't too worried.
"Who's that?" Daryl sleepily asked, snuggling closer to him when he turned back around to face him after returning his phone to the side table.

"Jus' Shane sayin' he's movin' out," Rick replied, pulling Daryl closer still as he kissed his forehead.

"Wonder what brought that on?"

"Guess he was jus' there for the baby. Maybe he decided ta cut his losses when he found out she wasn't his."

"'Cause she's ours," Daryl mumbled nuzzling into Rick's neck.

Rick smiled and squeezed him tight. After a few more minutes of cuddling, things turned into heated kisses and heavy petting until Merle hollered for breakfast through the door. "Looks like our other baby's up," he chuckled as they reluctantly dragged themselves out of bed.

They went about with their normal Sunday routine, breakfast followed by a trip to the grocery store. They skipped the park but both looked longingly at it out the window as they passed on the way back home. The three had a late lunch of homemade tacos before settling down for a round of lazy afternoon napping.

Rick was woken up for the second time that day when he received a text from Lori asking him to come by the house after the kids' bedtime so they could talk some more. He really didn't want to talk today but figured he should try to make an effort. Daryl was hesitant to let him go alone again after the Shane incident last week, but he assured his adorably concerned boyfriend that Shane wouldn't be there.

A little after eight that night, he knocked on the door of the house that used to be his home. Lori greeted him with a warm smile which confused him, but he disregarded it. She usually came back from her sister's recharged.

"What'd ya wanna talk about?" he asked as they moved into the entryway.

"Shane moved out," Lori said, her meek tone something he hadn't heard from her in awhile.

"Yeah," Rick sighed out, "He, uh, he told me."

"I knew it wouldn't work out. I was just...he was the bandaid over the crack in a dam. I didn't know what else to do," she said shaking her head as her eyes welled with tears. "We were so broken and I got scared. I should...shouldn't've let him move in, shouldn't've kept seeing him after you woke up."

"It's in the past, Lori. We'll get passed it, we're doin' good right now," he replied.

She took a hesitant step forward as she nodded. "Real good, Rick." Slowly she raised her hand to his cheek and he knitted his brow as she ran her fingers through the early stages of his beard. "Looks good on you. Should've let you grow it out...the hair, too," she continued as her hand moved around to gently tug on a corkscrew.

Every cell in his body was screaming wrong as she twirled the strand in her fingers, a heavy lead ball of dread forming in the pit of his stomach. Before he knew it, her other hand was sliding along the other side of his cheek until they both rested in his hair.

"I did a lot of things wrong, Rick. We both did. We probably should've tried some sort of trial separation in the beginning, found a counselor so we could fix things instead of sticking band-aids
"everywhere," she chuckled nervously. 

"Lori," he said, apprehensively narrowing his eyes at her. He didn't like where this conversation was going. 

"It's not too late—" 

"Stop!" he protested as he grabbed her wrists and tried to remove them from his hair. 

"Brenda gave me the name of the lady who helped her and Ron. We could go talk to her." 

"Lori, it's too late," Rick insisted, his fingers prying hers out of his hair. 

"No, it's not. We have twenty years between us," she replied as she slid their hands down to his neck. "I'm the mother of your children. We can't throw away that much history, Rick. We can work things out—" 

"Jus' stop, Lori!" he barked as he finally removed her hands from his body and took a step back. "You're makin' a fool of yourself." 

"You need to come home!" she demanded. "I know that I messed up, but I can fix it. We can fix it. I can make it up to you. I promise I will! Just give me another chance. That's all I ask, for the kids' sake." 

"We're over, Lori! We were over before I went in the damn coma, and no amount of counseling or guilt trips or negotiations can fix that. I moved out when you asked me to and I moved on. I'm sorry things didn't work out the way we hoped they would, but we can't be fixed." 

Lori crossed her arms and set her jaw. "We made vows, Rick, 'til death, and you want to throw that away? Come home, back to your family, and we can move on with our lives, we can fix this, and go back to being a family again. A real one." She sneered the last bit out, no doubt intended as a jab at him and Daryl. 

"There is no goin' back. I love our children, and my heart will always be with them, but my home is not with you anymore. There is a part of me that'll always love ya, but I haven't been in love with ya for a long time now, or you with me. Sometimes relationships die. Ours did and there's no gettin' it back. I can't jus' come runnin' 'cause you're afraid ta be alone. That ain't fair." 

"This is about him, isn't it? Are you really okay with tossing your family aside for some stranger you just met?" 

"That's not what this is. I'm gonna be there for the kids no matter what," he said sternly, trying hard not to raise his voice or escalate things further. 

"You don't owe him anything. I know you think you do, but you don't, so you can drop the act. Your plan worked, okay? You made your point, you made me jealous and made me realize what I was giving up when I let you go. I get it," she said, stepping closer as she reached for him again. 

"No, ya don't," he hissed as he took another step back. "I love him." 

"Do you really expect me to believe that you're in love with a man? After everything we've been through? How could you love him the way you love me?" she laughed incredulously. "After knowing him—what?—all of two months?" 

"I don't love 'im the way I loved you, and I don't expect ya ta understand how I do," Rick said.
"Try me! How do you 'love' him?" Lori asked using air quotes on the word love.

Rick couldn't help but smile when he thought of his lover and how much Daryl meant to him, how his soul called out for him when they were apart and how his heart burned bright with the love they shared. "He's my soulmate," he simply said. That pretty much summed it up.

Lori scoffed, "You don't believe in that sort of thing!"

"I know...that's how I know it's true. But it's the only way I know how to describe it, that he's the missin' piece of my soul I didn't even know ta look for, that I can feel him like he's a part of me. It doesn't make any goddamn sense, which makes absolutely perfect sense. And I sure as shit didn't expect 'im to be a man, but that really don't matter 'cause he's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life, inside and out.

"And it hurts, Lor, right here," he said gripping his chest above his heart, "Physically hurts ta even think about not livin' the rest of my life by his side. And I know it's crazy as fuck that we just met, but it was instantaneous. I knew the second I saw him, hell before I even saw him, that he was it, that he was the one, that I'd never need anythin' else jus' as long as I had him.

"And I swear to god that the only way I'm leavin' 'im is in a body bag, and probably not even then! So you can stop whatever it is you're tryin' ta do 'cause it's too late for us."

"It's not too late, Rick! That's what I'm telling you."

"Look, I'm sorry, truly I am, that it didn't work out with you and Shane 'cause ya deserve ta be happy too, but maybe ya need time ta be alone for awhile. Ya ain't never had that for jus' yourself before. Might do ya some good."

"No, what would do me good is for you to come home and be a proper father to your kids." Lori roared.

"How can ya say that? I am being a proper father to my kids!" he thundered back, "They want for nothing, and I am there for every baseball game and parent/teacher conference and spend as much time as you'll let me with them."

"It's not good for them to grow up in a broken home," she reasoned, tears starting to form and glisten in her weary brown eyes.

"You're confused, Lori. This, right here," he said, stretching out his arms, "This is the home that was broken. Us yellin' and fightin' all the time was what wasn't good for 'em. You cheatin' on me wasn't good for 'em. And now I'm fixin' it, tryin' ta be happy to show them that's how it's supposed ta be with the ones ya love, not anger and resentment.

"I'm tryin' here. I want ta get to the point where we can be friends again, maybe we never will, but I'm gonna try because that is what's good for my children. And that's why I'm goin' home 'cause I'm done fightin' with ya. I can't do it anymore," Rick said almost pleading.

"Going back to him?"

"Christ, Lori, ya can't even say his name! Yes, back home ta Daryl, ta my boyfriend," he said as he turned and reached for the door knob. He got the door open and was half way out when she grabbed his arm. He yanked it free and kept walking, ignoring her demands to wait and come back, but he just couldn't deal with her. Not anymore, not without his rock beside him tethering him to his sanity.
Daryl was waiting up for him and opened the door as soon as he pulled the truck into the parking spot. He had his arms folded over his chest, thumb between his teeth, his insecure stance, and Rick hurried up the sidewalk to throw his arms around him. They stood in the doorway for a second in a bone-crushing embrace before going inside.

"That bad?" Daryl asked as they stood at the base of the stairs for a moment holding tightly to each other. Daryl rubbed soothing circles on his back just like Rick did for him anytime he got upset.

"She came on ta me then demanded I come back to her when I rebuffed her," Rick admitted, face hidden in Daryl's neck, breathing in his comforting scent.

"What'd ya tell her?"

"Told her the truth, that you're my soulmate, that I love ya, and that I don't love her anymore," he said, his arms still clinging to Daryl like a lifeline. "I'm not goin' over there again without ya. Ain't talkin' ta her without ya by my side 'cause I can't do this without ya."

"Ya don't have ta," Daryl replied.

"She's so infuriatin', said I was a bad father 'cause I don't wanna work things out...but there ain't nothin' to work out. We jus' don't fit anymore, and I'm not gonna force somethin' that's not there just 'cause she's afraid ta be alone, 'cause she's jealous of us."

"She's jealous? Of us?" the younger man asked, a little perplexed as his brow tightened a smidgen.

"Course, 'cause I love ya. She sees someone 'playing' with her toy, and all of a sudden, she's wants it back. Well, I don't want her back, and she's jus' gonna have ta deal with me movin' on 'cause that's what I've done. I got you ta thank for that," he explained, finally relaxing his grip around Daryl's shoulders so he could straighten up and look him in the eye.

"Ya ain't a bad father," Daryl reassured him, once again taking his hand to lead him upstairs.

"I know, but it still stung," Rick let out a sigh before continuing when they got to their bedroom, "M done talkin' about that woman. Jus' wanna lay down beside ya and kiss ya all night long," he smiled, running a hand through Daryl's hair so he could pull him in for a series of heated kisses that set his heart aflutter.

"Can't argued with that," Daryl smirked as they started stripping each other for the night.

"Daryl," he said after they crawled into bed.

"Yeah?"

"I love you," Rick said with as much honest emotion and heartfelt truth as he could manage to stuff into the words.

Daryl grinned wide at him and replied with just as much conviction, "I love ya, too."

That was all the reassurance Rick need to know that everything would be alright. When Lori cooled off a little, they needed to talk about the Judith situation, but the next order of business was to get Michonne to push through the divorce papers. Maybe that would help to knock some sense into Lori.
Daryl's (First) Date

Chapter Summary

Rick and Daryl celebrate Friday the thirteenth.

**Daryl**

Daryl laid awake that night long after Rick dozed off, his right arm stretched up, hand behind his head, the other curled around Rick who had his cheek on his chest, leg thrown over his. He wasn't sure what to think about what Rick had said about his fight with Lori. She had given him the opportunity to go back home, to be a real family again, and the man turned it down.

For him.

He couldn't really blame him considering what little he knew of Lori. Rick said she was going to give him a chance and be civil, but apparently she changed her mind the second Walsh was out of the picture. He worried what that would mean for their time with the kids, if she'd try to punish Rick for not taking her back.

Maybe it wasn't his place, but he couldn't wait until their divorce was finalized. It'd be official then, and he could only hope that some of the fears he had about Rick changing his mind and going back to her would be chased away for good. He knew that Rick meant what he said about not talking to her without him by his side. That was easily the best news to come out of the whole thing.

He could admit that he was jealous of the soon-to-be ex-Mrs. Grimes. How could he not be? Her and Rick had a long history full of memories, some of which had to have been happy, and she clearly wanted him back. How could she not? But he trusted Rick, believed him when he told him that he loved him, felt it in the way he held to him like he was drowning when he got home.

Merle assured him that he had nothing to worry about when he was pacing the living room after Rick left that night. He was teasing him about all the girls that were making eyes at Rick at the bar that he didn't even notice because his own were stuck on him.

He had to cut the man off with the promise of a few rounds of Mortal Kombat on Carl's Playstation when he started talking about Andrea and Michonne. Merle acquiesced after saying one last thing about all their relatives rolling over in their graves if they knew he was living with his gay brother and his partner while befriending a pair of "lesbos."

Daryl couldn't quite get a read on Andrea. She seemed nice and he knew Amy had talked highly of her, but he couldn't help but think she was holding something back. He sure hoped she wasn't lying about breaking up with Phillip to get on their good side or worse. That sounding like something the weasel would try, but he liked to think Andrea wasn't that vile.

He might've been a little wary of the way she kept looking at Rick. At first, he assumed she was checking him out, but then he caught her looking at him with the same curious expression. Everyone else seemed to like her, so maybe he was just being paranoid or overprotective of Rick and his new group of friends. She was probably trying to figure them just as much as he was her.
Other than that, their weekend had been pretty uneventful, but he had a feeling the upcoming week was going to be pretty busy. He was planning on working half a day everyday. Even though Merle was doing really well, he still had his moments, and they thought it was best not push things too quickly. Merle had a checkup on Tuesday and Rick wanted to go look at trucks on Wednesday.

Daryl still couldn't believe the man was going to buy him a truck. They decided that he would make the payments and Rick was going to trade in the old clinker they had been using for deliveries and onsite work for the down payment. He had also planned on putting money away to help when they started on the house.

Rick's week was probably going to be busier because he mentioned calling a real estate agent about land plots and also Michonne about the divorce and custody agreement. They were going to give Lori a few days to calm down before bringing up the whole Judith situation. Although, at this point, the whole thing was mute. Lori was adamant that she was Rick's, and he'd decided to raise her as his own. Not much else to discuss. Except maybe child support.

When he did finally manage to get to sleep, it was restless. He must've had a nightmare at one point that he couldn't exactly remember because he woke up with Rick holding him tight and shushing him soothingly. The residual feelings of dread carried over initially until he realized where he was.

After a few minutes of Rick carving ruts into his hair with his fingers, he fell back to sleep. He knew it had to do with anxiety; that usually triggered his nightmares, and he was glad he didn't remember if it was about his daddy. However, he had a sneaking suspicion that it was about Rick somehow.

The next morning he clung to him like a shadow. He was afraid Rick was going to get frustrated with him after awhile, but the man must've known he needed that closeness because when Daryl tried to will himself to add some distance between them, Rick quickly closed it.

Around lunch time, Rick brought him home and the three ate together before he returned to the shop. The week went by pretty smoothly after that. They didn't find a truck they liked so they were going to keep looking and the realtor was scouring listings for them for land and rental houses since the apartment lease was almost up. Rick thought more space would be best if Merle was going to stick around for awhile.

Thursday night however, Daryl started to get nervous about Valentine's Day on Saturday and suffered another restless night. He'd never celebrated one before because he never had anyone to celebrate with. Rick hadn't mentioned it and he was afraid to bring it up. He wasn't exactly one for giving gifts or romance and really didn't know whether or not Rick liked that sort of thing.

"Shit, Rick! Wake up! We overslept," Daryl hollered when he woke up an hour after they were supposed to be at work the next morning.

"Mornin' Sexy," Rick grinned sleepily as he pulled him back down on the bed.

"We gotta get up," Daryl tried to protest, but that was pretty difficult when perfect lips started marking his throat with affectionate little kisses that were too fucking irresistible.

"We took the day off," he mumbled between lazy kisses. "I'm the boss, I can do that."

"Why?" Daryl somehow had the clarity to ask.

"Well, I didn't know if ya wanted to celebrate Valentine's Day or not, so I thought we could
celebrate Friday the thirteenth instead, jus' in case ya didn't want to, and 'cause I'm so fucking lucky I found ya that we should probably celebrate an unlucky day to set the world right," Rick sniggered. "That way, it'll just be ours. Got the whole day planned an' everythang."

Daryl's pounding heart beat began to slow at his explanation and then speed up again when he realized just how amazing this man really was. "What kinda plans?" he asked, raising a brow teasingly.

"Oh this an' that," Rick vaguely replied. "But first, Carol should be done cookin' breakfast right about now."

"Carol? So who's runnin' the shop? Jus' Glenn?"

"Nah, gave 'em both the day off, too. Didn't seem fair otherwise. But enough about them." Rick picked up his phone and sent a text. "Be right back with breakfast," he winked as he slipped out of bed and into a pair of pajama bottoms. Daryl thought it was a damn shame because he could stare at his naked ass all day.

After another delicious breakfast-a-la-Carol-in-bed that Rick again insisted wasn't as good as Daryl's, they took a quick shower together. Daryl had tried to get handsy but Rick told him there would be plenty of time for that later. He wasn't too versed on Valentine's Day, but he was pretty sure they were supposed to start with some kind of bang.

Rick had just said, "Baby, I promise ta blow your mind and the rest of ya later, but we're gonna be late for real if we don't hurry."

Daryl had no idea what they'd be late for, but with a heavy sigh, he agreed to keep his hands mostly to himself. It was almost impossible when the man was hard and wet and so very close to him. Turned out it was impossible because they ended up jacking each other off before toweling off and getting dressed.

They said their goodbye's to Carol and Merle, and Rick shot off a few texts on their way to the truck.

"Where we goin'?", Daryl asked once they pulled onto the highway.

"It's a surprise," Rick winked at him.

The rest of the drive was quiet. Ten minutes later, they pulled off the highway and drove a ways down a back road until they pulled off onto a dirt road. Daryl had no idea where they were, but soon Rick pulled the truck off to the side behind a blue sedan and smiled wide at him.

"Le's go," he said as he got out of the car. Daryl quickly followed and a woman got out of the car to greet them.

"Hi Rick! This must be your partner Daryl," the young brunette said holding out her fist for them to bump.

"Hey, Tara" Rick chuckled, wrapping one arm around Daryl as he bumped her fist with the other. "Yeah, this is my boyfriend. Baby, this is Tara, our realtor. She wanted ta show us this chunk a' paradise that jus' came on the market."

"Hey," Daryl replied. The hand not clinging to Rick went straight to his teeth. All he could think was, Holy shit! Rick was serious!
"It's not even listed yet and I'm sure it'll go pretty fast. It's about ten acres and backs up right into the heavily wooded area behind it. It's protected land so there's no risk that it'll be developed. Oh and there's a small creek that's about a five minute walk from here that runs through the property as well. I think it might be just what you were looking for," Tara explained, her smile doing a lot to dissolve the nerves bubbling up in Daryl's belly.

"It's looks beautiful," Rick said as they took in the land. "Whatcha think, sweetheart?"

"Can we go look at the creek?" Daryl asked.

"Absolutely," Tara smiled as she turned to lead the way. The three walked through a small field that lead to a thin line of trees. "Ya'll might have to clear a few of these if you want to put the house off the road a little ways. The dirt road is set to be paved in about two months."

"Yeah, I'd definitely wanna build in these trees," Rick said. "But the field would be perfect for a garden."

The trees got thicker the further they walked until finally Daryl heard the sound of running water. He was in love as soon as he saw the meandering stream. There were a few huge boulders lining the creek and it looked like it was pretty deep in a few spots. They might be able to do some decent fishing in it and maybe even swim when the water was high enough. He also spotted several rabbits on the walk and signs of bigger game.

"Ya like it?" Rick whispered in his ear.

Daryl could only give a curt nod. He was truly speechless. Rick was right, it was paradise. It was almost too much to take in.

"I'm gonna head back to the cars. Ya'll take all the time you need, okay?" Tara said as she started back.

"Gotta tell me what ya think, baby," Rick said to him as he curled his arms around his waist from behind.

"Rick, it's...perfect," he sighed out. Too perfect, too good for him.

"Ya don't like it?"

Daryl could hear the frown in Rick's voice and spun in his arms. "I do, it's jus'...."

"It's okay, Daryl. We can keep lookin' if ya don't like it...or if ya ain't ready. I know it's a big step for ya, for us both. Hell, we've only been a couple weeks. Ain't no reason ta rush anythin or move too fast, okay? Ya jus' gotta tell me."

"S jus' I ain't ever done nothin' like this before. And I wanna do it, I wanna build a house with ya, a future, but I jus'...."

"Ya still don't think ya deserve me, I know. I can see it, in your eyes sometimes. But Daryl, I promise ya do. Ya make me so very happy and ya make my heart full, more than it has ever been before, more than Carl or Judith could do alone, more than Lori did in almost twenty years combined. You're the piece I didn't realize I was missin'.

"Me an' you...we jus' fit. I don't know how or why, but we jus' do, and I love ya. Shit, even yer mangy brother's startin' ta feel like family ta me," he chuckled and Daryl had to join in. "It ain't about what we deserve, it's about how ya make me feel, like I can't breath without ya. Do ya get
that? I don't know how much clearer I can make it, but I'm gonna keep on tryin' until ya do. Don't care if it takes our whole lives either."

Rick brushed Daryl's hair out of his face and wiped away the ghost of a tear from the corner of his eye. All Daryl could do was kiss him desperately. He was never good at words, but he did manage to choke out a few onto Rick's neck as they stood there holding tightly to one another, just the two of them in the middle of the woods like it was meant to be. "'M scared, Rick," he mumbled.

"Me too," Rick admitted, squeezing him just a little bit tighter.

"Ya are?" Daryl asked slightly confused, pulling back to look into his sky blue eyes.

"Course I'm scared. It's a huge commitment, a big step, but I...I wanna take it with ya. And baby, I understand that it's an even bigger step for ya. I know that, and if ya wanna hold off and find a ladder so we take smaller ones ta get there, tha's fine. As long as we're together," Rick said, one hand dragging through Daryl's hair the other holding him close. "Ya jus' gotta tell me so we're on the same page."

Daryl couldn't imagine standing there with anyone else in that moment, and he was sure he'd never want anyone else standing beside him as he leapt into unknown territory but Rick. He wanted to follow his heart, but unfortunately, his head kept getting in the way.

"But i's perfect," Daryl said.

He could already see the kids on a Saturday morning holding fishing poles and digging for worms on the bank, Rick stretched out on one of the boulders as Daryl taught Judy how to fish because the outdoors was his terrain and Rick let him have it. Then they'd walk back up to the house and have lunch before working in the garden all afternoon, Daryl pulling weeds while Rick taught the kids about pea plants because that was his terrain and Daryl let him have it.

"It is pretty perfect, but we can find another perfect somewhere else. I'd be perfect as long as you're with me," Rick smiled so fucking sweetly that it melted his heart, the love this man had for him eclipsing the fear in his head.

"I want it. I want the house and the kids and us right here. I want it with ya. Can already see us here," Daryl said.

"Really?" Rick asked, a little skepticism underlying his tone.

Daryl only nodded.

"I can see it too," Rick grinned as they looked back over the creek. "And you're sure? 'Cause I don't just want us ta like it, I want us ta love it."

"Rick, I do love it, an' I love ya," he leaned in to kiss him tenderly.

Rick's smile was nearly blinding now. "Love ya more. Le's go get our future," he added, reaching out to take Daryl's hand.

They ambled to the road, Rick pointing out a good spot for the house and garden to go on their way. They talked about things that would need to be done to prep the site for building, but Rick said they could gets some tents and camp out anytime they wanted while the house was being built.

"What's the word?" Tara asked when they met back up with her by the cars. She had gotten some
papers out for them on the layout of the lot and information about taxes and boring things like that.

"We still need ta discuss the price, and I'd like ta bring someone in ta survey the land, but I think we'll take it!" Rick excited stated.

"Knew ya'll'd love it," Tara smiled smugly.

They put in an offer right on the spot and Tara said she'd be in touch with the owner's reply as soon as possible. After another quick look around, they got in the truck to head home for lunch. Rick held his hand the entire way home and they were both pretty excited when the got back.

Carol was fixing some fried bologna sandwiches when they walked in and neither could wait to tell her and Merle about the land that would hopefully be theirs soon. They did so over lunch and Merle was already asking them where the best place to put his trailer would be.

The four went to a movie after lunch. Then after that, Carol went to pick up Sophia and they all spent some time shopping at the mall. The boys looked at camping gear because Rick wanted them to take Carl camping as soon as the weather turned a little warmer while Carol and Sophia bought some school clothes for the spring.

They took Sophia to a friend's for a sleepover then Carol and Merle dropped him and Rick off at home before heading to a restaurant for dinner. Daryl couldn't tell if he was hallucinating or if the house smelled like smoke when they got inside, but he should've known something was up by the sugary sweet smile Rick gave him as he intertwined their fingers.

They went into the darkened kitchen and Daryl was shocked at what he saw. There were three candles lit on the table that was covered in a deep red tablecloth. There were two places set with cloches covering what smelled like burgers and a note on the freezer indicating that two shakes were inside waiting for them.

"How did ya? Wait, who did this?" Daryl muttered as Rick led him to one of the chairs and pulled it out for him all chivalrous-like so he could sit down.

"We have amazin' friends," Rick replied, kissing his forehead before getting the shakes out of the freezer. "You've never had a real date before so I wanted ta give ya one. Didn't wanna do it tomorrow because I didn't want ya ta think I did it just for Valentine's Day but because I love ya and wanted ta do something special for ya, for us."

"Rick, I don't...."

"Jus' want ya ta enjoy it. It's the same thing we had at the diner the first time we ate together," Rick said as he sat down. He reached across the table to take Daryl's hands in his. "I was already in love with ya at that point, but I didn't know it yet. Now I do and I wanna give ya the life that I know ya deserve. Wanna give ya everythin'."

Daryl hoped the tears welling in his eyes couldn't be seen in the faint light, but he knew Rick wouldn't care if they fell. "Ya didn't have ta, Rick," he said with a sniffle.

"I know, but I wanted ta do it for ya. Wanted ta give ya something no one else would ever be able to. Now, I'm not exactly sure how they're supposed ta go because my last first date was over two decades ago and I'm not sure how they work when you've been livin' with someone before ya have the date, but we'll figure it out."

Rick squeezed his hands then let go to lift both covers off the plates and set them aside. Daryl didn't know what kind of food you were supposed to eat on a first date, but burgers, fries, and
strawberry shakes just sounded so fucking perfect for them. They talked about the land plot they looked at, a little about the movie they watched, and then the kids before Rick got a text.

"Okay, I got one more surprise for ya," Rick smirked as he stood. "Now, this ain't for Valentine's Day either. I've been plannin' it for awhile, but it jus' happened ta be ready today."

He held out his hand for Daryl to take, and he did so reluctantly. "Ya ain't gotta spoil me, y'know. 'M already yours," Daryl said.

"You're mine ta spoil. And to be honest, Merle helped."

Rick blew out the candles and led him into the living room. "Close your eyes," he whispered as he switched their positions so he was behind Daryl. The hunter huffed but did what he said. Rick covered his eyes with his hands and pressed up against his back. "Jus' so ya don't peak," he chuckled, his warm breath sending a shiver down Daryl's spine as it fluttered over his neck.

Daryl heard the front door open and Rick carefully walked them outside—stopping briefly to shut the door behind them—and eased them down the sidewalk to the parking lot. "Ya ready?" Rick asked.

"Guess so," Daryl hesitantly said. He had no clue as to what they were doing outside or what Rick could've possible gotten him.

Rick moved his hands down to his hips and whispered, "Open your eyes, darlin'."

Daryl did, and for what felt like the hundredth time that day, he was struck speechless. Right in front of him was a shiny black motorcycle with a big red bow on the seat. He swayed on his feet and felt Rick's hands wrapping around him to steady him, a kiss on his neck nearly buckling his knees.

"Is...is that Merle's bike?" Daryl finally asked.

"Yeah, we fixed it up for ya good as new. Merle can't ride it anymore and we thought it'd be a waste to jus' junk it. So it's yours...jus' as long as ya promise me you'll always wear a helmet," Rick explained. "It's jus' black 'cause we didn't know if you'd wanna paint somethin' on it. We wanted ta leave that up ta you. What do ya think?"

"So when ya said I couldn't have it?"

"Was jus' throwin' ya off, but I will be nervous about ya ridin' it all the time. Still wanna get a truck, but ya deserve ta have a little fun every now an' then for puttin' up with all my baggage," Rick explained.

"I love it," Daryl replied as he stepped over to inspect it. "I...always wanted one. That's why Merle got it, ta brag and rub it in my face, the asshole," he snickered. "But I promise I'll be careful."

"Well, it's all yours, baby. Glenn said they put the keys under the bow," Rick said. He reached underneath and pulled them out. "Wanna take it for a spin?" he grinned, holding up the keys.

"Hell ya!" Daryl said, taking the keys and ripping off the bow so he could slide onto the seat in it's place.

"Helmets," Rick admonished as he opened the compartment they were stored in and pulled one out for each of them.
Daryl scoffed. He didn't need a helmet but if it helped to put his boyfriend at ease, then he'd wear one for him. He strapped it on and Rick gave him a kiss of appreciation before sliding on behind him. At least Rick looked cute in his.

"Ya ridden one before?" Daryl asked over his shoulder.

"When I was younger, but I wouldn't mind riddin' anywhere with ya jus' as long as I get to hold on tight," Rick teased as he snaked his arms around Daryl's waist.

"In that case, ya should probably hang on a little tighter. Wouldn't want ya fallin' off when we turn a corner," he replied before starting the bike, the engine roaring to life as it rumbled beneath them.

Now was probably not the time, but he couldn't help but think about how much he wanted to bend Rick over the thing and fuck him on it. He wasn't sure how that would go over. He assumed he'd be the one bottoming in their relationship since Rick had only been with girls before, but he could dream.

What he did know was that Rick was getting lucky as soon as they got home. And maybe the man read his mind because a hand found its way to the hard-on he was trying to quell as they pulled out of the parking spot. He rocked his hips back into Rick in a silent reply before they took off down the road.
Rick's Never Letting Go

Chapter Summary

Rick and Daryl have some sexy times.

Chapter Notes

Oops, forgot to mention the lovely MermaidSheenaz for helping me work through my block with this chapter and Rickyllover for giving me some lovely encouragement as well. You guys are awesome! <3

**Rick**

It'd been a long time since Rick had been on a motorcycle, but there was something romantic about being on one with Daryl. Or maybe that was just because it was Daryl. They only went down a few back roads but the thrill was still there, the wind whooshing by, his arms fitted snuggly around his lover's waist, the sky turning to pinks and oranges behind them.

They stopped at a few red lights along the way and Rick couldn't help by slip his hand down between Daryl's legs to cup his manhood through his jeans. Daryl would rock forward into his touch then back against him, and he had half a mind to tell him to pull over somewhere as the wanton pressure for more built inside him.

That feeling only intensified when they turned around and headed home. The closer they got to the apartment, the greater the anticipation of being home alone with Daryl became. Carol had agreed to put Merle up in her guest room for the night, and he reminded himself to give her a raise come Monday.

His legs were a little rubbery from the vibrations when he got off the bike after they pulled up to the apartment, but he could get used to that. They took off their helmets and Rick put them away while Daryl spent several more minutes admiring the machine.

"Can't believe she's mine," Daryl said, grinning from ear to ear as Rick settled beside him.

"All yours, baby," Rick smiled at him sideways, his hand squeezing Daryl's shoulder before skimming down his back and around to his hip where he gave another good squeeze, "An' so am I."

Daryl turned to face him, his smile morphing into a smoldering, heated look that could've melted a hole right through the ice caps. "Yeah...well, I can't believe that either," he whispered in Rick's ear before taking his hands and pulling him up the sidewalk.

Rick fumbled for the keys and was somehow able to unlock the door with Daryl's hands already working on his jeans and warm lips fluttering on his neck just above his collar. He turned around as he pushed the door open and pulled Daryl inside. They blindly felt for the door and slammed it shut as their mouths found each other in the darkened living room.
He pinned Daryl against the door with his body and slowly worked his way down his neck lathering the column of his throat with gentle kisses. Both of his hands were under the front of Daryl's tight t-shirt splayed on the muscles moving and stretching as his breathing shallowed, the pounding of his heart matching Rick's own as it thudded rapidly beneath his hands.

Their kisses were put on hold as they moved to strip each other's shirts off and discard them at the base of the stairs. Daryl pushed Rick's back against the wall and plunged his hand into the front of his jeans, the older man sucking in a staggered breath when Daryl took him in hand unexpectedly.

Daryl wrangled him free and brought him to full hardness as he kissed down his chest. He dropped to his knees before him and mouthed softly over Rick's balls before giving a good long lick up the underside of his shaft.

After placing several more kisses on the head, he enclosed his mouth around Rick and tongued his leaky slit. They'd both gotten much more comfortable giving each other blowjobs since the first time, and Rick had come to find that he actually enjoyed pleasing Daryl oral, but he knew there was no way he was as good as his boyfriend.

He willingly gave himself over to the blissful grace of his lover's lips as Daryl eagerly sucked him down his throat, tongue sliding and lapping along his length like Rick's cock was made just for him, like he enjoyed it too. But as much as Rick wanted to finish right there, he wasn't nearly ready. They had all the time in the world tonight and he wanted to take advantage of it.

"Baby, ya gotta stop now," Rick panted, giving a gentle tug to Daryl's hair. "Not here."

Daryl let him go with an audible pop and kissed the delicate tip of his penis a few more times before releasing his grip and kissing a curvy trail up his torso. "Where ya want me?" Daryl drawled, outlining Rick's lips with his tongue before molding them together once more.

"Bedroom," Rick breathed. Daryl nodded and let Rick begin to guide him up the stairs.

Rick tripped kicking one of his shoes off and fell down halfway up. Daryl tumbled down on top of him and kissed along his collarbone while they removed the rest of their shoes and socks. Daryl stood up and pulled Rick to his feet before finding his lips again in the dark as they continued upward.

"Love ya," Rick said, pulling Daryl down on him again when they reached the top step.

"Love ya more," Daryl replied, his fingers burrowing into the hem of Rick's jeans. He helped him wiggle out of them and his underwear and tossed them aside, Rick returning the favor until they were naked.

"Baby, I need ya," Rick rasped, his fingertips lightly ranking down Daryl's back when he settled between his legs.

"Need ya more," Daryl replied before sucking a love bite onto his neck, and Rick couldn't wait to show that off like the badge of honor it was. "When's Merle comin' back?"

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Good," Daryl whispered, pushing himself up. He once again pulled Rick up after and walked him backwards into their room, their mouths too consumed with kissing to get there with any kind of practicality.

Daryl furrowed his brow when Rick switched on the lamp. They didn't usually fool around with
the lights on. Rick knew Daryl was still a little self-conscious about his scars, but he was getting better; it'd just take time. And Rick knew the night would be special and wanted to remember everything about it.

"Jus' wanna see ya," Rick explained, "I can turn it off if ya—"

"No...no I wanna see ya too," Daryl replied, eyes cast down a little as he briefly bit at his thumb. He let out a deep breath when he removed it, his eyes raising to meet Rick's.

Rick knew there was a question in there, a request perhaps, rattling around in that Dixon brain, and he was willing to wait for it, for as long as it took for Daryl to work up the courage to get the words out. So he just stood there patiently smiling softly and reassuringly, his hands on Daryl's boney hips.

Eventually, Daryl pushed him down so he was sitting on the bed as he stood between his legs. "Was thinkin'...was kinda hopin' ya'd want me tonight," he finally said, chewing on his lip in place of his thumb, his hands both gripping Rick's shoulders almost to the point of painful.

"Always want ya, sweetheart," Rick said, his smile growing a little, hands running affectionately up and down Daryl's thighs.

"Meant like...takin' me."

Rick stared up at him blankly as he tried to figure out just what he'd meant by that.

Daryl let out a frustrated sigh, "I want ya ta have me."

"Oh...oohh," is all Rick could say when he finally understood what Daryl was asking for.

He knew they would get there eventually, and he definitely wanted Daryl to be the one to bring it up, but he honestly hadn't expected him to want to move things forward that quickly considering his history. Rick just wanted to do whatever he could to help bury and mend as much of Daryl's tainted past as he could.

"Only if ya want," Daryl quickly added.

" 'S'at what you want? 'Cause I can wait as long as ya need for that," Rick said.

" 'S what I want, want ya," he replied.

Rick was glad they had turned on the light as he looked up at Daryl from below because he wanted to watch every expression, every emotion that flickered across his lover's face. There was love there, pooling in the blackened pits of his pupils, so much trust and faith highlighted in the most stunning deep blue, and a million other things Rick knew he'd never be able to identify.

He gave a shallow nod and leaned in close to kiss the hard plains of Daryl's abs, laying siege to as much of him as he could reach, each press of lips to skin soft and savored, deliberately taking his time not to tease but to worship. And he would happily spend the rest of his days kneeling at his perfect feet in praise.

Maybe he was stalling, he didn't know, but he fist Daryl's cock and began to worship that too, with tender kisses and loving licks until the younger man had to pull away, his body shivering in the cold room, but hopefully from the fire that was raging between them and not the drafty air.

Daryl walked over to the other side of the bed, his side, and opened the nightstand. He pulled
something out and walked back over to Rick who was trying to remember a few of the things he'd googled at work about how exactly anal sex was supposed to go.

He stood in front of Rick as the quiet suddenly shifted into an awkward silence. Rick could make out a condom wrapper and what was probably a bottle of lube in Daryl's hand, but the man wasn't making a move to do anything other than stand there.

"Hey, we're...we're jus' gonna go real slow, alright? We got all night and it's gonna be amazin', me and you. So jus' come sit down with me for a minute," Rick said, taking his wrists and guiding him to sit on the bed next to him.

"Y'know I ain't ever done this sober before is all," Daryl said.

"Yeah, I know baby, so we'll figure it out as we go," he replied, his hand combing through Daryl's hair. "Whatcha got there," he teased trying to lighten the mood that had set in.

"Condom and lube," Daryl smirked, holding them up.

"That's a pretty great combination...What, uh, what's first?"

"Gotta prep myself," he said, his thumb once again between his teeth.

Rick ran his hand through Daryl's hair again to the back of his head so he could bring their mouths together for a sweet, sensual kiss. He rested his forehead on Daryl's and took a moment to just breathe him in, the heady scent of his lover a drug he'd never give up.

"I know you're nervous, baby. So am I, so we're jus' gonna go as slow as we need ta. Ain't nobody here but us, an' we're gonna figure it out together jus' like we've done everythin' else so far, okay?" Rick said, trying to ease both their nerves.

"Okay," Daryl nodded as he made a move to stand up.

"Where ya going?" Rick asked, a perplexing frown on his face.

"Bathroom," Daryl shrugged.

"Did ya want some help?" Rick asked, genuinely curious.

"Ain't, uh, ain't never....jus' always done it on my own," he explained, "before I went out...was safer that way."

"Well, ya ain't on your own anymore, we ain't out, and I wanna be around for everythin' as long as you're okay with that," Rick replied.

Daryl sat back down on the bed, "Ya sure?" he asked cautiously, raising a brow. Rick smiled as he nodded and Daryl surged forward to kiss him.

They slowly fell back down on the bed where they spent what could've been hours lost in a long, lazy kiss, nothing but skin gliding over skin as they leisurely rocked against one another other, hands charting now-familiar territory like it was the first time they'd ever touched. Daryl's fingers in Rick's hair had his scalp tingling with pleasure that flowed as slow as sap down the length of his body.

They ended up on their sides facing each other, and eventually, Daryl pulled back a little so he could pop open the cap on the bottle. He squeezed a dollop of lube on his fingers and proceeded to
reach around behind him.

Rick watched in awe as Daryl's lips parted slightly, eyes half-lidded and breath beating a staccato pattern on his face. He knew that was the moment Daryl had entered himself, and his cock started to ache with that knowledge in anticipation of being inside him.

He wasn't exactly sure what to do or what Daryl would want or need him to do, so he leaned over and kissed him. His hand started on Daryl's cheek and meandered its way down to his bicep where he stopped, captivated by the play of muscles under his fingers.

"What's it feel like?" Rick hesitantly asked.

"Feels...good," Daryl rasped, voice hitching on the last word. And Rick was fairly certain Daryl had brushed over his prostate, if his crash course in anatomy and gay sex were to be believed with the way his body shuddered.

"Can I...see?"

"Ya ain't gotta...jus' gettin', gettin' myself ready...stretchin'...," Daryl stammered.

"Hey?" Rick said softly, his hand moving to splay on Daryl's hip, his thumb soothingly stroking as much skin as he could reach. "Ya ain't gotta be ashamed with me, or self-conscious, okay?"

Daryl stilled for a moment before he gave a little hum of agreement. He removed his hand and moved to roll over onto his stomach then raised himself up on all fours. Rick sat up slightly behind him just as he was pushing his fingers back inside himself.

That was pretty much the hottest thing Rick had every seen, Daryl rocking slowly back onto his hand, his fingers disappearing in his tight hole all the way up to his knuckles. He decided right then that next time it'd be his fingers working him open, if Daryl was okay with that.

He wanted to touch and explore every part of him, but he wasn't sure what Daryl would be comfortable with. He was probably feeling pretty vulnerable as it was, so Rick settled for gently curling his fingers around one of his ankles. He just needed that connection, that skin to skin contact. Daryl tensed slightly at the contact but soon relaxed as Rick began to rub the skin under his fingers.

Far too soon, or maybe not nearly soon enough, Daryl pulled out, the stretched ring of muscle glistening and gapping in invitation. Rick was mesmerized by the sight of him ready and waiting. It was almost too much as his cock, pumped full of blood, twitched with an overwhelming desire to be inside him.

" 'M ready," Daryl whispered over his shoulder.

It was just enough to snap Rick's brain out of its lustful haze as the weight of the situation crashed into him like a freight train. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach, kinks and knots swirling around like a churning sea during a storm.

It wasn't the upcoming act that sent him into a tailspin but the way Daryl looked on his hands and knees, shoulders tense and pulled into him, back almost board straight, the sparse confidence he'd had moments ago now nonexistent as he waited for what Rick could only imagine was pain.

Because what if he did hurt him?

"Daryl?" he rasped, his voice hoarse around the lump forming in his throat.
"I can take it," Daryl whispered, and Rick knew without looking that he was back to biting into this lip.

"Not like this...not like that."

Daryl leaned back to sit on his haunches, his brows knitted tightly together, his eyes refusing to meet Rick's.

"Wanna...need ta see ya," Rick said, brushing a lone strand of Daryl's hair behind his ear. His hair wasn't very long and didn't stay put, but it was the gesture he was aiming for.

Daryl didn't say anything in reply, so they sat there in silence for a little while. When he realized that Daryl was probably starting to overthink things, Rick took one of Daryl's hands in his. He kissed his fingers then moved down to his wrist—his pulse racing under Rick's lips—and up his arm before positioning it on his shoulder.

"Come here," Rick said softly, reaching for him. The younger man let Rick pull him onto his lap, Daryl moving to straddle his thighs. "Love you," he whispered before leaning forward and pressing his lips to Daryl's. "We ain't gotta...we don't ever have ta do that or anythin' ya aren't comfortable with."

That was the absolute truth. He never wanted to do anything Daryl wasn't completely on board with. Even if they never went beyond blowjobs and handjobs, he'd be happy as long as he had Daryl to sleep beside every night, in his arms and in his heart.

"I want ya, I do. I jus'—"

Rick kissed him again. They were both thinking too much. The heated passion they'd built had slipped into a mechanical fear and that just wasn't very sexy, so he just kept kissing him, his lips, his neck, his beautiful shoulders, just pressed his lips to every inch of flesh he could.

It took a few minutes, but Daryl started to respond and kiss him back, his hands slowly moving over Rick's back and sides. Then Daryl began to roll his hips, their cocks reawakening and hardening between them. He pulled back and held up the condom that he must've been holding the whole time.

Rick's heart was hammering out of his chest, both from kissing and from the fact that this was probably going to happen now. "Ya wanna do the honors or do ya—"

"No, I'll do it," Daryl interjected. "Wanna do it." Rick gave him a shy smile as he watched Daryl rip open the condom wrapper with his teeth because that was sexy as hell. He pulled out the rubber and tossed the wrapper on the floor. "Don't think I've ever done this before ta someone else," he said as he rolled the condom down Rick's length.

"'S been a long time since I've had to put one on," Rick replied, cock straining against the latex. "'S different...We should probably get tested, huh? Who knows what Shane and Lori gave me," he chuckled.

"It'd be a good idea, yeah," Daryl snorted out a little laugh, and Rick was so happy that he'd relaxed enough to do so. "We're jus' gonna go slow, right?"

"Baby, you're in charge here. I'll do whatever ya need me ta do ta make this good for ya. No, more than that, amazin' 'cause you're amazin'. Ya jus' gotta let me know, alright?"

"Jus' hold me, okay?"
"Darlin'," Rick smiled adoringly, hugging him closer to him, "I ain't ever lettin' ya go."

Daryl kissed him hard and just about sucked all the breath from his lungs. He had one arm wrapped around Rick's shoulders, fingers clingy to him for dear life, as the other curled around Rick's shaft. He guided Rick into the most perfect heat he'd ever felt that he swore washed over his soul as Daryl slowly lowered himself onto his cock.

Rick tried to memorize that moment the best he could but there were so many delicious sensations and emotions coursing through his veins that he could hardly concentrate on anything but holding off his orgasm as Daryl's body conformed to his, as their souls fused together and they became one being.

He was glad he was wearing a condom because if he had anymore stimulation on his cock, he would've came like a damn teenager before they even got started.

"You okay?" Rick asked when he was fully seated inside him. Daryl eyes were squeezed shut, his lips parted, head slightly angled back. He looked so beautiful like that. All Rick could do was study every minute detail, soaking him in, watching every little twitch of muscle under his tan skin. "Baby, am I hurtin' ya? I promise it'll be fine if we stop."

Daryl shook his head, eyes still shut tight, "Don't hurt," he whispered. "Jus'...jus' need a minute," he said with a shaky voice. He bit his lip as it began to quiver and let out a ragged breath. "Love ya," he sobbed, tears starting to fall down his cheeks. He buried his face in the crook of Rick's neck as his shoulders began to shake.

Rick could feel a warm tear rolling down his back as he held him, fingers moving in soothing patterns over Daryl's back. He couldn't do anything but shed a few with him. He knew they weren't sad tears but ones full of love and unspoken emotion, because he knew Daryl was probably expecting something quite different than soft and gentle despite the fact that he had to know by now that Rick wouldn't hurt him.

He didn't know what to say, but perhaps there wasn't anything to be said. If there were words to describe how he felt in that moment, he didn't know them, or maybe they hadn't been invented yet. Because how could you describe something so beyond perfection, something so pure and otherworldly, something so beautiful that all you could do was weep when you looked at it?

" 'M sorry," Daryl sniffled, his arms still wrapped around him like a vice. He moved his forehead to Rick's, eyes still clamped tight, noses sliding along side the other's.

"Shhh," Rick cooed. He tilted his head and kissed Daryl's lips, delighted when he kissed him back, his hands sweeping over his thighs and up his back to cup the back of his neck so he could deepen the kiss. He gasped into Daryl's mouth when he clenched around him, his whole body going supernova every time either of them moved even the slightest bit.

"Want ya," Daryl rasped, their kisses turning more steamy the longer their lips were in contact.

"Want ya too," Rick panted.

Words lost all meaning as the world fell away around them when Daryl, almost experimentally, began to move his hips. Rick didn't dare move himself, afraid to do anything but hold him like he asked, arms tight around his torso, as Daryl dictated the pace.

It started slow, Daryl's body so tight around Rick's shaft that he almost forgot how to breathe, the warm and fuzzy feeling in his chest blooming into a molten fury of amorous need in a heart beat.
Daryl still had his arms thrown over Rick's shoulders but he pulled back slightly so they could look in each other's eyes.

Rick seemed to fall through them, toppling right out into his soul. Everything but lust and love and need had disappeared from them along with the bed and probably the whole planet beneath them. There was only Daryl. There would only ever be Daryl. And that was all he'd ever need.

His hands flitted down to his lover's waist when he starting-rocking against him a little faster. He couldn't help the moan that escaped his lips when Daryl raised his hips slightly and sunk back down onto his cock, but it was overshadowed by the one Daryl let out, his whole body shivering against Rick's.

"Fuck, Rick," he breathed, and Rick knew that was the most magnificent sound he'd ever heard in his life, so breathy and rich and erotic all at once.

"You're so perfect, baby," Rick replied before capturing Daryl's lips between his in an impassioned kiss.

Daryl moaned into his mouth as he steadily increased his rhythm before pulling away with a sharp intake of breath. His head tilted back to expose his neck, and Rick couldn't help but lace the rugged expanse with open mouthed kisses. He just couldn't get enough, he wanted to devour every inch of him, wanted to drink him in to the very last drop.

Rick could feel Daryl's hard cock volleying between them as the other man picked up speed, raising himself higher and higher before crashing back down on Rick's cock. And he knew he wasn't going to last much longer. Not when all his senses were in overdrive as they went wild for his lover.

"God, so close, baby," Rick was able to say. Daryl licked his lips and gave a little hum of understanding as he loosened his grip on Rick's neck. One hand fell down between them as he began to stroke himself, but Rick quickly moved his hand onto the thick member between them.

"No, I got ya," he said.

Daryl let go as his hand flew up to burrow into Rick's hair. He leaned forward and brought their mouths together again, Rick's hand working to match the increasingly erratic buck of his hips. Rick could no longer keep his own still hips surging up to meet Daryl's downward thrusts.

"Rick!" Daryl cried out when he came—his head thrown back once more—the wispy word wafting up to the heavens like a prayer as he painted their stomachs with white hot ribbons.

Every single nerve ending in Rick's cock lit up like the head of a match being struck when Daryl's inner walls constricted around him. He came right after with a shout into the crook of Daryl's neck as his body stiffened, completely wrecked with his rapturous release.

When he came back into himself, Daryl had his arms wound tightly around him, face buried in his neck. They were both breathing heavy, hypersensitive bodies trembling, but Daryl's shoulders were shaking again. Rick just held him close, shushing him and whispering sweet nothings into his hair as decades of painful memories leached out of him.

"Yer the b-bes' thing that's ever h-happen ta me," Daryl muttered against his pulse point.

"Tha's funny...was jus' thinking the same thang about ya, love," Rick replied, loosening his grip.

Daryl took a minute to compose himself then slowly lifted himself off Rick's now placid cock. He hopped off the bed and headed for Judith's baby wipes so they could clean themselves up. Rick
took off the soiled condom and tied it off before tossing it in the nearby trash can.

Daryl gingerly sat down beside him, a silent moment passing over them before Rick cleared his throat, dry from moans and heavy breathing. "You okay?" he asked, voice like gravel scraping over concrete.

"Yeah, 'm okay...a li'l sore," Daryl shrugged.

Rick frowned and ran a hand through Daryl's hair. "We don't have ta do it again."

"Nah, Rick, it's a good sore. It was...," he smiled shyly as he ducked his head, "It was amazin'."

"Yeah?" Rick asked, mirroring Daryl's shy smile. "And you're sure I didn't...hurt ya?"

"Ya ain't ever gonna hurt me," his said, looking over at Rick.

"No, I ain't," Rick replied, "Ya wanna lay down now?"

Daryl nodded and pulled back the sheets so they could climb under the covers. "S just been awhile is all. Y'know when ya work out and your sore after but ya know it's a good sore 'cause it means ya did something good? That's what it's like."

"So that means it was good," Rick smiled as he wrapped Daryl up in his arms, snuggling him close. His nose nuzzled into his damp hair, breathing him in, sweat and musk and life. He'd never felt so at peace, so pleasantly calm, so happy. He tried to think back to the last time he'd been truly happy, but he couldn't remember it.

It didn't really matter anyway. He was happy now and he'd remember that night till the day he died.

"I want ya to do it to me next time," Rick whispered softly in his lover's ear.

Daryl pulled back a little and turned his head towards Rick, "Ya don't have ta. I know ya only been with women, I don't mind being the bottom."

"I ain't with one now," Rick softly chuckled, "and I ain't ever gonna be with one as long as I got ya. We're partners here, equals, and I wanna try it. 'Cause god, baby, ya just looked so beautiful and felt so fuckin' incredible. Want ya ta be able ta feel that way, too."

One side of Daryl's lips curved up into a lopsided grin. "Ya felt incredible inside me," he quietly said, "...but what if I don't? I ain't never...what if I mess up and hurt ya?"

"In case ya forgot, I ain't never been with a man before you, and we managed ta get through everything jus' fine, better than fine. So I know it'll be jus' as amazin' the other way too," Rick assured him, squeezing him close. "But only if you're up for it."

"I think I could get up for it," Daryl smirked before pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. "And yer ass is pretty hot."

"It's all yours, darlin'. Everything I am and everything I have is yours."

"I love ya, Rick."

"Love ya too, baby," Rick said, cuddling him close. He knew then that he'd never make love to anyone else for as long as he lived. Maybe he knew before, but it only reaffirmed the fact that Daryl was it for him, everything he'd ever want or need wrapped up in his arms. And he meant it
with all his heart when he said he was never letting go.
**Daryl**

It was easy for Daryl to get lost in the moment as they drove down the back roads of their small town, Rick plastered to his back like the protective shell of a turtle, because that's essentially what he was; home, the only thing Daryl had ever found peace in, his shelter from a tormented past, the one he left further and further behind him with every passing day.

Their chaotic journey up the stairs when they returned home contained no thought whatsoever. It was primal, his fingers seeking out the hot skin under clothes and his mouth craving the taste of flesh, salty and sharp on his tongue. His only concern was his futile attempt to drink in his lover to tame the fire of want burning in his belly. Rick was both the spark that set it off and his only hope for relief.

But when Rick flipped the switch on the lamp, so went the switch in his brain that opened the floodgates on every bad experience he'd ever had. When he asked Rick—quite pitifully so since it took three damn tries—to fuck him, there was a part of him that was hoping Rick would say no, that he'd change his mind, maybe realize being with Daryl was a mistake, maybe save them both some trouble.

But he didn't.

Rick left it up to him, and Daryl's want, his love for him, outweighed the voices in his head calling him names, the voices of men like his father, of men who fucked him only to recoil in disgust when they'd gotten their rocks off. And he just hoped Rick's voice wouldn't be joining them after. Something like that may very well have killed him.

He pushed it down, buried those men, those voices, the best he could because Rick's fingers on him were nothing like he'd ever felt before. Rick's touch was safe and soft and as close to spiritual as he'd ever been, nothing like the way those so called men had touched him, with the sting of a snake bite, venomous and foul. Rick was everything they weren't, everything they could never be, and he thanked his lucky stars every damn day that he got to wake up in his arms.

Rick's mouth was just as gentle as he licked and laved his body with what could only be categorized as devotion, because worship was too good a word to waste on a Dixon. Rick was getting better too, taking in his cock and sucking him off, not all the way down but it really didn't matter because Daryl wouldn't complain so long as he was willing to do it. Hell, he wouldn't've complained if he wasn't.

He knew better than to fuck up a good thing. And Rick was as good as it got, so patient and so fucking kind. He always knew exactly what to say when Daryl started getting too close to the darkness, reeling him in when he wandered too far out into the turbulent sea of self-doubt and self-loathing.
Rick said they'd go slow, which was the only thing he wanted to hear in that moment. Slow was something he'd never done before, and for some perhaps illogical reason, that was just as scary a thought as the all those times he'd been in dirty motels with pricks he knew he'd never see again. Maybe even more so.

There was no emotion involved there, no connection, no love.

All his other encounters with men had been messy and fast, one big hazy blur that blended together, but the premise had always been the same: get in, get off, get out. But where would he run to if things with Rick followed that same depressing pattern? He was in love with Rick. He had so much more invested in this than just his body now.

He wanted things with Rick to be different. He honestly didn't think they would be, he knew it was going to be painful, but he wanted to believe Rick would never hurt him, not on purpose anyway, that they'd still be able to stand the sight of each other when it was over.

The fact that Rick hadn't been with a man before should've comforted him, but in a way it made it worse. Rick had no point of reference, true, but what would he do if everything ended in total disaster? Sure, kissing a man was one thing, blowjobs and grinding against each other in the shower, but fucking him in the ass was going to make the whole thing very very real, and what if Rick couldn't handle that?

But it was Rick, the most amazing man he'd ever met. So he was going to trust him, trust that they'd figure things out, trust Rick to be gentle and kind with his body liked he'd always been with the rest of him, trust that he wouldn't up and run after he came, and trust that he'd still want to be with him come sunrise.

When he started fucking himself with his fingers, he hadn't expected Rick to want to watch. He supposed some men would've liked it, but he'd always been the one to stretch himself open. He'd had one too many bad experiences with men too drunk to wait to leave something like that up to chance. Even as sober as they were, self-preservation had been so ingrained into his head that it was something he couldn't risk. Not the first time. Not even with Rick.

He felt pretty damn vulnerable about it as it was, exposed and on display, but Rick had always been good at making him feel comfortable about things like that, about being naked and stripped down as he showed off everyone one of his scars, and not just the ones on the surface. And all it took was a hand curled around his ankle. Maybe a gesture so small shouldn't've been such a big deal, but it meant everything to him.

Then the moment had arrived and he had to steel himself for what was next, for the moment of truth as he gave himself fully to Rick. It was going to hurt, but that was okay because it was Rick, and Rick was worth the pain. He'd been through a helluva lot worse and survived just fine. He fisted the sheets and gritted his teeth...but nothing happened.

But then something happened. Rick croaked out his name and it was so raw, so heavy with unidentifiable emotion that he almost burst into tears, biting his lip the only thing that kept the dam in place. Rick was going to tell him he changed his mind and that would be the end of it, the end of them, and the end of everything.

But that wasn't what happened.

Before he could berate himself for misreading everything yet again, he was on Rick's lap, straddling narrow hips while the softest lips that ever were graced his long-neglected skin still not used to such reverence, the Morse code of lovers spelling out 'I love you' in between Rick's vocal
murmurs of the same.

He was losing himself, piece by piece, armor he'd built up over decades being chipped away with every soothing caress. He was losing himself in Rick, in the way their bodies molding together like oversaturated sand around a foot, fine grains seeping into every crack and crevice of his being.

He was losing himself in the heat of the moment, his thoughts a jumbled mess as his hips moved of their own volition seeking rapture and release. He'd been a lost cause all his life, but Rick found him, saw something in him he couldn't, that no one every had, that no one ever would.

And he'd never felt so wanted, so loved. It was almost too fucking much for him to take. But he wouldn't run from this, from Rick, because there was nowhere else he could ever be but in that moment, no one else he could ever want but a man far too good for the likes of him who was somehow still there building him houses and building him up.

As their bodies became one, joined in the most intimate way imaginable, no force on earth could've stopped the swell of profound adoration that welled up inside him when he realized everyone he'd ever been with, everything he'd ever done had been so very wrong. That this, with Rick, was how it was supposed to be; soft and tender, pure and absolute.

This was what he'd needed all his life and never had.

This was all he'd ever need for the rest of it.

It was so much more than just sex, they were making love, and he didn't care how much of a bitch that made him sound, how many tears he'd shed on the only shoulders that had ever been strong enough to hold him up. Because he was Rick's now, all of him, body and soul, and maybe Rick was his, maybe Rick would always be his.

If there was pain, it didn't even register, drowned out by adrenaline. There was only a dull ache until his body conformed to Rick's. And he was grateful that his lover let him set the tempo, let him be in control as their slender bodies, slick with exertion, moved against the other as they built to a fervid climax.

He was so wound up with tension that he felt like every single one of his atoms burst in two as he fell apart, the intensity of his orgasm so all-consuming that he may've fucking passed out, or maybe he just left his body completely when he came, Rick's arms wrapped around him the only thing holding him together.

Then he cried some more because the experience had been so beautifully moving that it was the only thing he could do in the moment. It was too much and not enough and so much more than he'd ever deserve. He was happy, blissed out of his fucking mind, and the way Rick was breathing heavy with eyes glossy and glittering gave him the impression that he was too.

It was the best sex of his life, which might not've said too much considering, but it had also been one of the most emotionally exhausting experiences he'd ever been through. And that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. What it did was cement all the feelings he had for the man holding him tight and reaffirmed everything he thought he knew about their relationship.

Rick was in love with him. It was the first time he truly let himself believe that, that to Rick he wasn't just some lowlife screwup fag that he'd always thought he was. For the first time in his life he was loved. Okay, he knew Merle loved him, but that was different, they were blood, but Rick was Rick.
Later that night, when he was pushing into the sacred hollow that was Rick's virgin ass, fingers trailing down a knotted spine, sucking bruises on an elongate neck when he threw his head back in offering, Daryl was pretty sure he'd died and gone to heaven. He was resolute to being the bottom, but god how he wanted more of Rick withering to pieces around him when he clenched tight and exploded in between them.

Rick had even let him be the one to stretch him open, and that made him feel the slightest bit dickish for not allowing the man the same pleasure when the roles had been reversed. But he would next time, which happened to be a few hours later when the alarm they'd forgotten to switch off blared loud in their ears.

By the time they'd came again, they had an hour before they had to get up and retrieve the kids. Both were content to spend it lazily in bed. It was their first official Valentine's Day, but Daryl knew he'd always prefer the day before. The rest of the lovers could have February Fourteenths, but Rick and Daryl would always have the Thirteen.

Rick was cradled in one arm, leg slung over his as he traced shapes on Daryl's chest, a heart above his own, figure eights and stars and their names a time or two, fingers running over the ink of his tattoos, skating over goosebumps from the cold seeping into sweaty skin. He could get used to mornings like that: both naked, cocks spent, home alone.

Which meant that of course theirs would be ruined by a text from Lori. She informed Rick that Carl was attending a sleepover that had been extended another night. Carl had begged her to let him stay, and she agreed. So if Rick really wanted to pick him up, he'd have to be the one to ruin the kid's fun. How convenient.

When Rick had offered to come get Judith, the eight month old had miraculously come down with a bad cold and was too sick to travel. So Lori said. Daryl had a feeling she was still pissed about Rick rejecting her. Rick had tried to convince him that it wasn't his fault, but Daryl couldn't help but feel a little guilty that they wouldn't have the kids for the second weekend in a row.

They were both more than a little upset about that, but when Michonne heard about it at their Saturday night outing—which was fast becoming a tradition—she called Lori's lawyer right then at his home and set up a meeting for first thing Monday morning to discuss a custody agreement and getting the divorce papers pushed through.

Because they didn't have the kids, and maybe in an attempt to drown their sorrows away, Rick and Daryl got a little more drunk than usual at the bar. Merle was quite pleased because it turned out that Daryl was a rather handsy drunk when he actually had someone he wanted to fuck.

They ended up making out in their usual spot in their booth until Merle noticed and started hooting and hollering and drawing attention to them. They broke apart with sheepish grins, but somehow Rick convinced him to get out on the dance floor with him.

He only did it to put an end to Rick's horrible off key singing of George Straight's *I Just Want to Dance With You*, but he quickly lost himself in the feel of Rick's body contorting and undulating next to his. Daryl wasn't much of a dancer, but he could spend his whole life dancing with Rick. Plus, it was still Valentine's Day.

Dixon's had a pretty high tolerance for alcohol, but the fact that they were out in the open of a pretty crowded bar didn't register. It wasn't until he and Merle went to the bathroom that the reality of him and Rick having just outing themselves to the whole damn town hit him. Much like the punch he took to the eye from some asshole tossing out homophobic slurs like they were the only words he knew.
Sadly, they probably were.

At least Merle was smart enough to throw the retaliatory punch with his left hand and not to rely on instinct. By the time Daryl scrambled to his feet, Rick was pulling him back to their booth and Tyreese and Bob were throwing the guy and his drunk friends out.

"Come on, Daryl, let me call the cops and press charges on them ass wipes!" Michonne was pleading. "Y'know it'd be pro bono." She shot a glare at Merle who laughed at the 'bono' before continuing, "I'd make sure he's charged with a hate crime, too," she snarled low.

"Nah, it ain't worth it," Daryl said, wincing when Rick applied one of the ice packs Sasha brought over to them.

"Eye's gonna swell, baby," Rick frowned, dragging knuckles across his cheek.

"Ya shoulda seen the other guy," Merle grumbled, Carol tending to his sore left hand.

"Ya need to take better care of this one," Carol admonished.

"Sorry, sugarplum, but they's was talkin' all sorts a' shit 'bout my baby brother. I let him suffer too much a' that growin' up without doin' jack shit about it. Ain't gonna let that happen no more," he said, shaking his head in violent protest.

" 'S all my fault, darlin'," Rick croaked. "Shouldn't a' made ya dance with me." He bowed his head but Daryl saw his eyes starting to glisten with the first sign of impending tears.

"Ain't yer fault, wanted ta. All these assholes can go ta hell!" he scowled, a dismissive arm flailing around at the bar patrons. Everyone had gone back to minding their own business, though, getting their dates good and liquored up for drunk Valentine's Day sex.

He didn't envy that old way of life. Him and Rick had made love four times since midnight, and Merle hadn't cracked one joke about it, even though Daryl knew he had heard them that last time. Poor Mrs. Jones had banged on the wall and everything.

He just didn't give a fuck anymore who knew what they were. How could he when Rick Fucking Grimes was in love with him, when he was so fucking in love with Rick Grimes? If Rick didn't give a shit about homophobic assholes, then neither did he. As long as they left Rick alone, that was.

Daryl knew how to take a beating, but it was nice having Merle as backup. That homophobic dickhead had to live with the fact he got knocked down by a man with one hand before he got himself dragged outside. Imagine that, a couple of Dixon's get into a bar fight and don't get kicked out or thrown in jail. It was another Valentine miracle.

And just to prove a point about how so fucking okay he was with their whole stupid backwards ass town knowing they were in love, Daryl lifted Rick's chin up with gentle fingers and kissed him till every last bit of oxygen in their lungs had burnt away.

"Love ya," Daryl said onto whiskey-soaked lips.

"Love ya, too, baby. Le's go home and watch bad romcoms curled up on the couch," Rick replied.

"We're in," Maggie grinned.

And that's how their tiny apartment got invaded by their little gang on Valentine's Day. Thank god
they celebrated a day early.

Daryl woke up the next morning with a dull ache behind his eyes, Rick drooling on his shoulder, and Maggie's toes trying to burrow in between two of his ribs. Her head was at the other end of the couch in Glenn's lap, and he swore she snored the loudest of all of them. But he wasn't about to tell her that.

He looked over towards the window to try and gage the time, but the curtains were pretty thick. The sun was out, that much he could tell, rays of sunshine streaming down and casting a thin, white line under the windowsill. The room was lit up from the Netflix menu, and he had half a mind to rate *Sixteen Candles* one star just because everyone made fun of him for having a thing for Jake Ryan.

It was Jake Ryan, for god's sake!

Merle was still asleep in the recliner with Carol curled up at his side. He could just make out Tyreese and his date, Karen, snuggling in one of the new sleeping bags they bought, Bob and Sasha were wrapped up in the other. The coffee table was littered with empty beer bottles and a quarter full bottle of bourbon Bob brought over. Daryl was pretty sure him and Rick drank most of it.

One thing was for damn sure, he was never playing Never Have I Ever with those savages again. They played dirty! Of course, Merle would probably be more scarred then they were embarrassed by the things the crack team of Michonne and Andrea—whom Daryl didn't remember inviting, by the way—came up with.

Never have I ever: fucked a guy in the ass, sucked a cock, got fucked in the ass, gave a hand job, fucked on the couch, on the stairs, in the shower, in the kitchen. Damn, how did him and Rick not end up in an alcohol induced coma after all that interrogation?

Merle kept referring to them as the Litigating Lesbians. Where he learned that big of a word, Daryl wasn't sure, but Merle was bound to pick up a few things with as many times as he'd been jailed. The two women in question weren't on the love seat where they had been before he drifted off, but he did smell coffee.

After careful extraction from Rick's death grip, he padded towards the kitchen, tiptoeing around the minefield of sleeping couples. "Gonna need ta make a few gallons a' that," he said, motioning to the coffee percolating in the pot.

"Figured you'd be out for awhile," Michonne said, raising her mug with an evil quirk of her brow.

He scoffed and reached around her to get mugs for him and Rick. "Dixon's are immune ta hangovers. 'S our superpower," he bit out, the words so wet with sarcasm that they rolled right off his tongue.

"Rick up yet?" Andrea asked, no doubt noticing his preparation of two cups of coffee; one cream, one sugar; the other mostly just sugar with a splash of coffee, as Rick would say when he teased him.

"Nah," he shook his head, taking an experimental sip of the piping hot liquid, hissing when it burned his lips. "Will be in a minuted, though."

"And how do you know that?" the blonde asked with a curious smile.
"Jus' do," he shrugged, focusing his attention back on stirring Rick's coffee. His boyfriend didn't like it too hot, and Daryl didn't want him burning those perfect, plump lips of his anyway.

"Pretty sure they got a sixth sense for each other," Michonne added. "Or they can read each other's minds...kinda pisses me off with how cute they are too!" she quipped, Daryl kindly giving her the finger in reply.

Rick came teetering in a few minutes later, sleepy eyes and the rest of him honing in on Daryl like he was some kind of homing beacon, and he hoped he was. Rick buried his face in Daryl's neck and went slack against him. Daryl tried to hold back a grin since he felt two sets of knowing eyes boring right into him, but he was just too damn happy for that.

After a round of coffee, they all went to the diner and had breakfast before going their separate ways. It had been an interesting Valentine's Day to say the least. Daryl never had a date to celebrate with, let alone a group of friends who'd forgo private dates to sleep on the floor of his living room.

One thing was for sure: life with Rick was less than predictable.

And they'd need to make sure the house had a big ass living room if this was their future. With a big ass play room for all the little ankle biters sure to come.

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Rick had recovered from his hangover by Monday morning and insisted that Daryl go with him to meet with Lori and their lawyers. He was reluctant, to put it mildly. He didn't want to add anymore fuel to Lori's rage and he wasn't sure whether forcing her to see them together would be helpful or harmful to the whole process.

In the end, he let Rick drag him along because there was no way in hell he could've resisted that man's wickedly effective pout. It really wasn't fair how easily he succumbed to his lover's charms, but damn if the smile he got from Rick when he agreed didn't melt his heart. And heat up other areas of his anatomy.

Michonne met them at Lori's lawyer's office. They'd spent most of the day before going over things they'd be willing to compromise on and others they wouldn't. Visiting rights were to be set in stone, every weekend and alternating holidays. And Lori would have to agree to give him at least a weeks notice if she wished to change plans or if Carl had any sort of engagement that might interfere.

They left the child support up to Michonne. She had a formula or some accountant she used to calculate a fair amount. Rick also wanted half the money from the house since Lori had decided to sell it out of the blue. Daryl didn't like the sound of that. He had a feeling she was up to something.

Rick said he'd agree to it because it would allow a little more wiggle room in their house budget. The business was already picking up after Ty was let out of that ridiculous contract, but he wanted to make sure it was everything Daryl wanted. He kept telling the man that all he wanted was Rick.

Michonne led the way to the conference room. They made sure to dress business casual with Daryl borrowing one of the few ties Rick had. It was tight around his neck and he had never wore one before, but maybe Rick would let him use it as a blindfold later for his suffering.

They entered the conference room to find Lori in a navy pinstriped pantsuit sitting beside an older man with balding hair and thick rimmed glasses. Her hands were clasped on the table in front over her, hair flowing down her shoulders and framing her pale face, eyes narrowing in on Daryl as he walked in a step behind Rick.
"What's he doing here?" she sneered.

"He's Rick's partner and has a right to be present if Rick so chooses," Michonne said, eyes narrowing in on Lori as she tilted her head in challenge. "And he chooses."

Michonne had begged them to keep their mouths shut. Daryl was going to try his best because he didn't want to make things any more difficult on Rick than they already were, even though he had a feeling she said that in part because she wanted to play hotshot lawyer.

"Let's get started, shall we?" asked Lori's soft-spoken lawyer. Daryl had to hold back a smile. The poor man was about to get skewered. He kind of felt bad for Lori, but at the same time, he didn't. Rick had tried to do everything amicably.

Lori spent the majority of the morning glaring across the table at the three of them. At one point, Rick put his arm around Daryl and leaned in to read something over his shoulder. He swore steam was coming out of her ears when he glanced up. He'd never had to deal with a jealous ex before: wife, girlfriend, boyfriend. It was quite exhausting.

Just before lunch time, Rick must've sensed Daryl was starting to get anxious because he took his hand under the table and began to rub the sensitive skin on the inner side of his wrist with an attentive thumb. Tingles shot up Daryl's arm and a shiver ran down his spine. Concentrating on anything other than bending Rick over the table and fucking him right there was impossible after that.

Hell, he'd settle for slipping under the table and sucking him off for being the best boyfriend ever. The heated smirk Rick gave him after he squeeze Rick's thigh at the thought, had him reevaluating Michonne's theory on them being able to read each other's minds. Maybe that's how Rick always knew what he needed.

Thankfully, they were able to wrap things up as Daryl's stomach started to rumble. Rick had to sign a bunch of papers, but Michonne had gotten him everything he wanted. Especially after she threatened to take Lori to court for custody of the children when she herself threatened to move to Atlanta and take the kids with her.

Daryl wasn't surprised Lori decided not to sell the house after Michonne called her bluff, instead folding like a house of cards. Rick agreed to pay child support but not alimony since she was unfaithful, and he agreed to let her have the house that was already paid off with the stipulation she wouldn't move to Atlanta.

Lori began to bitch about how expensive daycare would be for Judy since she was going to have to get a job, but Rick said he'd pay for a babysitter. The Greene's had offered to watch her several times in the past. Beth was a senior and had classes until lunch, and Maggie was taking afternoon classes at the local community college. It would be perfect.

They really had the best friends on the planet.

By the time Rick finished signing the divorce papers, they were all beyond ready to go. Michonne was going to file them after lunch, and it'd take six weeks for them to be processed. They were going to count down and have a party afterwards. That was Merle's idea but Carol agreed wholeheartedly.

Daryl and Rick decided to get lunch for everyone at the shop on their way in, which now included Merle. He still wasn't able to do much, but he tried. And he brought in some 'color' as Carol said. As it turned out, the two of them were excellent for each other.
Carol was a tough woman. She had to be to survive an abusive marriage with Ed, but it made her stronger. She handled Merle surprisingly well, which was something he needed. Someone who called him out on all his bullshit, someone willing to give him a second chance at life in the same way Rick did for Daryl.

Yes, things were starting to look up for the Dixon brothers. Who knew their father getting his brains blown out by the cops when he refused to surrender would've changed their lives so drastically? He was sure there would be more bumps in the road, but they finally had a semblance of an actual family in Rick and Carol and all their friends.

And he decided right then and there, over chicken parmesan subs, that he would never let any of them go.
**Rick**

Rick felt ten times lighter after leaving the lawyer's office. His divorce from Lori wasn't quite final, but it was so close he could taste it. The end was near and he had a sense of giddiness about closing that chapter of his life. In a month and a half, he'd be done with it for good. He'd have his freedom from the train wreck their marriage had become and have the rest of his life back to give to Daryl free and clear.

That was the most important part. He wasn't sure if Daryl would say 'yes' if he did something crazy like propose, but the fact that they were moving forward together with planning the house was enough to satisfy him for the moment. It wasn't like they needed to rush into anything, and same-sex marriage wasn't even legal in Georgia the last time he check.

He was certain he was still coming off the high of their incredible weekend together. They were both a little sore in the most delightful ways and Rick couldn't help the wistful smile that shone on his face every time he thought about all the marks they left on each other, love bites and crescent moons and finger sized bruises.

The hickey Daryl gave him on his neck was now an ugly shade of green, but he made sure not to leave any visible marks on Daryl. The redneck had been self-conscious about that the first time it happened and the last thing Rick wanted was for his boyfriend to be uncomfortable. As long as he knew they were there, that was all that mattered.

They had quite a bit of work to do once they got to the shop thanks to their Friday off, but having Merle around came in handy. He couldn't really do that much, as he was still recovering, but an extra hand was an extra hand. They all kept an eye on him, though, no one wanted him over extending himself on day one.

Tara, their realtor, had a friend who was an architect that they hired to draw up plans for the house. The man was set to drop off the rough drafts at the shop that evening on his way by for them to look over. Daryl offered to stay and wait with Rick, but Merle was getting tired after working all day.

The plans for the house were just a rough outline based on a few phone conversations and emails on how many rooms they needed. They decided on four, one for them plus one each for Carl and Judith. That would give them another they could use as a guest room, and hopefully not just for Merle.

Rick was also entertaining the idea of putting in a basement apartment for him instead of a plot for a trailer or a guest house. But he wanted to make sure it was in the budget first before he surprised
"What time's he comin' by?" Daryl asked as he leaned in the doorway to Rick's office.

"Said about five-thirty. He had to pick someone up from work then they'd be over," Rick replied, standing from his chair and all but floating towards his lover on cloud nine.

"Sure ya don't want us ta wait for ya?"

"Nah, baby, it's fine. 'S jus' thirty minutes, and I know Merle's getting tired and grumpy since he didn't get his nap today," he chuckled, throwing his arms over Daryl's shoulders as he pursed his lips for a kiss. Daryl smirked and leaned in for a few pecks.

"Come on, now! This is a place a' business," Merle groaned from behind them, "Don't ya'll get enough a' that at home?"

"Ain't never gettin' enough a' him," Rick said, wiggling a lascivious brow.

"Now listen here, Carpenter Friendly, ya may be my boss now, but ain't that sexual harassment or sumpin'?"

"Oh stop being so PC, Merle. It ain't you," Carol quipped, kissing him on his cheek as he moved away with a scowl.

"'Side, 's called flirtin' if ya enjoy it," Daryl winked at him.

"Well, I ain't enjoyin' it," Merle grumbled, crossing his arms with a petulant pout.

"Ahh, lay off Merle before you get laid off," Glenn teased.

Merle's face paled a little at that, and Rick took pity on him. "Sorry, Merle," he said, pulling away from Daryl. "We'll try ta be more respectful."

"Yer the boss, do what ya want," Merle replied with an insincere smile.

"Tha's true but I want everyone to be comfortable around here. We're a family," Rick said. "Now, it's five till, so why don't ya'll start movin' out." No one argued with that, making quick work of cleaning up for the day. Him and Daryl shared another kiss and smiled all lovestruck as they broke apart. "See ya at home."

Rick loved saying that to his boyfriend, even though they lived in an apartment for the time being, but "home is where the heart is," so the saying went, and his was with Daryl. He could hardly wait to say it about their own house.

"Meatloaf'll prolly be ready by the time ya get home," Daryl said as he started for the door.

They eye fucked while Daryl slipped into his jacket. Rick was trying to decide if 'meatloaf' was supposed to be meant as a euphemism, although he did like Daryl's cooking. He shot him a cheeky smile as his four employees went out the door before going back to his desk to finish up some paperwork.

He was interrupted a little while later by a text from Maggie informing him that her and Beth would be happy to watch Judith if Lori got a job. He was hoping to talk to them himself, but Glenn had a pretty big mouth, so he wasn't that surprised the younger man told his girlfriend about their encounter with Lori earlier that day.
Rick decided to shut down his computer after that and exchanged a few messages with her then a couple with Daryl once he got home. Minutes later, he heard a vehicle pull up. He walked to the door not bothering with his jacket as he went outside.

The days were starting to get longer, but the sun was already down passed the buildings across the street when he exited, the sky an angry blood orange. Any earlier and he would've been blinded to the fist that came whizzing towards him.

"What the fuck?" he yelled as he stumbled back out of the way of the punch.

There was someone sitting in an idling truck in the parking lot, but the three guys standing in a semicircle around him were his main concern. He immediately went into cop mode as he assessed his targets.

The one on the left was a black haired man of average build that Rick would've guessed was late twenties. The guy dead center had curly dark hair and looked a bit mousy. Rick could've probably taken both of them on his own, but the guy at his three o'clock looked more formidable. He was the threat.

He was tall with dirty blond hair and a snarling grin that Rick knew meant trouble. However, it was the broken nose that jogged his memory and tipped him off. These were the same assholes from the bar Saturday night. The homophobic dickheads that were making trouble for Daryl.

He tilted his head and steeled his nerves, "Was gonna say I don't want no trouble, but ya'll are the assholes who messed with my boyfriend. So le's dance motherfuckers."

"Hear that Aiden? The fag wants to dance with us too," the curly haired one laughed.

It was Aiden who swung next. Rick dodged a right hook and landed his own blow to his ribs sending the attacker recoiling. His knuckles screamed in protest at the sudden collision but the adrenaline was already flowing full throttle through his veins. He had no time to think as the curly haired man charged, a shoulder ramming into his torso.

Pain radiated throughout his chest as air was expelled from his lungs. Despite that, he still felt confident he could hold his own if it was just the two younger ones, but the third was biding his time. Rick could sense his apprehension, probably because of his bandaged nose. That's where he was going to aim when the guy finally got the courage to come at him.

"Git 'em, Nicholas!" Aiden shouted as he clutched his ribs, pulling Rick from the one-manned strategy meeting in his head. Rick was able to peel Nicholas off of him and hurl him to the ground where he scrambled away.

"Come on, Pete! What are you waiting for?" Nicholas hollered at the third man who was still content to observe with his menacing eyes and a twisted, snarling smile.

"Just letting you two have some fun," Pete taunted.

All Rick could do was play defense as the other two took turns charging him as they threw punch after punch. They landed a few blows as did Rick, who had fallen back on his police training, but he knew he was screwed when Pete started circling like an apex predator. The coward was just letting the younger ones wear him out a little bit before he swooped in to play the hero.

Rick was able to lunge for the apparent ringleader but missed his nose, instead clipping him in the jaw. He knew that was his one chance to get out of everything relatively unscathed, and he blew it. He hit Aiden with a left jab and was poised to spin around for a second attempt at Pete, but
Nicholas grabbed his shirt, ripping the sleeve and throwing off his aim.

Pete clocked him in the eye while Aiden took out his knees. And that was it, he went down. All he could do after that was protect his head as best as he could while he curled up into a ball. Blood was gushing from his nose and he could feel his eye throbbing as it started to swell.

The three men towered above him and began to kick him in the stomach and ribs, stomping on his thighs, one even kicked him in the head a time or two which sent him reeling, dizzying pain exploded in waves of heat with each new strike, his vision whited out and nausea swept over him with every kick to the gut. All the while, they were spitting out homophobic slurs and derogatory dribble, but he couldn't've cared less about that.

"Spencer, bring the bat," Pete instructed.

That was the second time Rick truly feared for his life, the first being when he was shot on the job. He didn't stand a chance against three men and a fucking baseball bat. When he was a cop, at least he knew he had some sort of backup, and as much as he hated Shane, he would've loved his company in that moment.

"No, man. You had your fun now let's go!" Spencer called back from the truck.

"Bring the damn bat, ya pussy!" Pete snarled.

The three attackers eased up as Pete and Spencer argued. Rick watched the blurry blob that was Pete stomp over to the truck, but before he could return with the bat, a car pulled up beside it. He tried to blink his eyes clear, but he was having trouble focusing.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" someone yelled. "We're calling the cops!"

Rick watched the other two blobs scurry back to the truck and heard its wheels peel out as someone kneeled beside him. "Are you okay?" came a soothing familiar voice. "An ambulance is on its way. Can you tell me your name?"

Rick spit and coughed up some blood as he tried to roll over to push himself up onto his hands and knees, but everything protested against him, stabbing pain shooting through his right wrist and both knees.

"No, just stay down. Are you Rick? Rick Grimes?"

"Y-yeah," he managed to stutter as he rolled back onto his side.

"You're safe now, Rick. I'm Aaron, and my partner Eric is talking to the police as we speak. So just take it easy and everything will be alright," Aaron said, running a gentle hand over his bruised back. "Who can I call? Daryl, right? I didn't get his number."

"Y-yeah, Daryl...p-phone's on m-my desk."

Rick could hear Eric talking on the phone above him and the faint sound of sirens growing near. By the time Aaron retrieved his phone from inside, the EMT's had gathered around him. The police were asking him questions but he was starting to fade in and out of consciousness.

"I had to leave a message for Daryl. Anyone else I can call?" Aaron asked while they moved him to a gurney.

Rick was just able to spit out Lori and Carol's names before they loaded him into the ambulance
Rick didn't remember much about the ride to the hospital; he had oscillated in and out of consciousness. He hadn't seen Daryl since he arrived, but he might've heard Lori's voice at one point. She was still legally his wife, and he hoped she wouldn't try to do anything stupid like keeping him from seeing Daryl. Hopefully someone called Michonne.

He remembered a little more from the emergency room, being poked and prodded, told to lay still in the CT machine and when they shot some x-rays, but things started to clear up once he was wheeled into a private room and the initial effects of the painkillers he was on began to fade.

Pretty much everything ached, his ribs and face the most. There was a pulsing pain in his right eye, which he couldn't open, and something was wrapped tight around his right wrist. He knew he had to look like shit, so maybe it was best if Lori kept Daryl away for a few days. The man would just worry over him.

"Grimes?" said a voice from the end of the bed.

"Chief Riley? What are ya doin' here?" Rick replied in shock to see his old boss standing before him. He tried to sit up, but moving tugged on everything in all the wrong ways. He ended up hissing in pain as he tumbled back into the bricks they called pillows.

"Hey now, jus' take it easy. Jus' because you're retired, son, don't mean we still don't take care a' our own," the older man replied, a kind grin on an otherwise hardened face.

His hair was all white, although it was hard to tell since he had been very blond before, and his ocean blue eyes held a substantial amount of concern as he walked his six foot frame around the bed to what was now Rick's good side.

"I'll be overseein' this case personally. We've classified it as a hate crime considerin' the circumstances, and I ain't gonna stand fer that shit in my town," Chief Riley growled, his face darkening as he spoke.

"It weren't no hate crime, they's jus' mad they got kicked outta the bar Saturday for causin' a disturbance," Rick downplayed. He didn't want to think of it as a hate crime. It was just four assholes with hurt pride looking for retribution.

"Well, that's up for the DA ta decide, but I'm gonna need ta hear yer account a' what happened. We're gettin' the video footage from yer shop and I got people running plates and tryin' ta make id's, but I still need yer statement."

Rick told him everything he could remember from their names to who swung first to how they attacked and anything else they said that came to mind. He also recounted the altercation in the bar and gave names of witnesses. Chief Riley reassured him that they'd catch the assailants and stressed the point that they would try to make the arrests as quickly as possible.

"Alright, Rick. Ya jus' rest up now, we'll take care a' things on our end. Ya got some visitors outside waitin' ta see ya. Who ya want me sendin' in first?" the Chief asked, making his way towards the door.

"Daryl," he rasped. The older man gave a nod at that and left the room.

Daryl came in right after, eyes red-rimmed and puffy. Rick knew he'd been crying and it broke his
heart to pieces. His hair was damp and he had a different set of clothes on than he had at the shop. Rick surmised that he must’ve been in the shower when Aaron called him.

"Rick?" he sobbed, rushing towards the bed in long strides. He took a moment to look him over, and Rick felt self-conscious under his gaze. The last thing he wanted was Daryl feeling guilty about anything even though he knew that was inevitable. That's just who Daryl was, far too kind than people gave him credit for.

"I'm okay, baby," Rick said, reaching out his good hand. Daryl got the message and walked around to the left side of the bed to lace their fingers together, his thumb rubbing tenderly on the webbing of Rick's hand.

"'M sorry, Rick, I shoulda stayed," Daryl said, bloodshot eyes fluttering over Rick's broken and bandaged body.

"This ain't on you or anybody else but those assholes from the bar. 'Sides, Chief's on it, he won't let it slide," Rick tried to chuckled but it came out as a pathetic cough.

"Ya need a nurse?" he asked near panic.

"Nah, 'm alright. Jus' need ya right here, okay?"

Daryl nodded with an unconvincing smile. "Merle wants ta get a lynch mob t'gether. Told 'im he can't even hold a pitchfork," Daryl said with a forced chuckle, and Rick appreciated that he was trying to make light of the situation. "'S my fault ain't it?"

"What? No, sweetheart, it ain't!"

"Knew I shouldn't've danced with ya at the damn bar. Now yer all cut up and yer arm's busted and yer ribs are bruised and yer eye's swollen shut and ya can't even breathe right. Rick, I'm s—"

"Don't ya dare say it, Daryl! This ain't on either of us. I love ya, okay? And if I gotta take a beaten everyday for it, then I'll do it with my head held high 'cause you are worth it and this...," he said, awkwardly motioning between them with the hand Daryl was clinging to, "...this is worth everythang."

"Ya ain't gotta do it everyday," Daryl huffed, "Prefer if ya never do it again."

"Anythin' ya say, baby," Rick purred. "I did get a few good hits in, though. Tried ta get that Pete guy in the nose, but I missed. 'M jus' thankful Aaron came ta my rescue."

"Y'know who he had ta pick up?"

"Think he said Eric or somethin', was kinda out of it."

"Yeah, his boyfriend Eric," Daryl smirked. "Looks like we ain't the only homos in town."

"Don't make me laugh, baby," Rick said with a grin, the action pulling on his split lips.

Just then, Lori came bursting through the door with Judith on her hip yelling at someone over her shoulder. "He's still my husband!"

"He didn't ask for you," he heard Michonne's voice carrying in from the hallway.

"Oh god, Rick!" Lori gasped when she took in his appearance.
"Ain't as bad as it looks," Rick said. "Doc said no internal damage so that's good. No neurological trauma."

"No one'll tell me what happened," she said, her free hand hovering over his arm looking for a place to land. She gave up and clasped both around Judith who was squirming as she tried to get to Rick.

"Jus' some guys...I don't want Carl seein' me like this," he sighed. "Don't need him worryin'. He ain't with ya, is he?"

"Waiting room with Beth, I think her name was. And he's seen you looking worse...after you were shot," Lori reminded him. She started bouncing Judith when she began to fuss. "Bet you dragged him into this," she hissed at Daryl.

Daryl went to pull his hand away, but Rick squeezed it tight. "No, he did not. He ain't responsible for the actions of small minded idiots who can't control their liquor or their rage. And the last thing I need is another fight right now, Lori," he lectured. He most certainly did not need her sour mood bringing him down any further.

Lori at least had the decency to look somewhat ashamed as she juggled Judith in her arms.

"Here, let me have her," Daryl said, pulling his hand free from Rick and holding both arms out for Judith, the little one mirroring him. Lori scoffed and gave them both disbelieving looks.

"He's good with her," Michonne spoke up from behind her, "Good with mine too." Rick wasn't sure if she'd been standing there the whole time or not. She was in his blind spot, but Lori sighed and held Judith out for Daryl to take.

Rick couldn't help but smile as Daryl cooed and bounced her around the room, the sight tugging at his heartstrings. Lori wasn't a bad mother, but Judy had calmed as soon as she was in those arms of his. Rick couldn't blame her, they were amazing arms. He knew she just missed the two of them after not having seen them for a few weeks.

Rick had a revolving door of visitors coming and going for the rest of the evening. Carol had been the last one to arrive after going back to the shop to lock up and get the surveillance videos for the police. Daryl had disappeared after she came in, but he said he'd just needed some fresh air when he came back with a few snacks. He stayed by his side after that where he belonged, where Rick needed him.

Everyone else was shooed away when visiting hours were over so he could rest. Daryl stayed the night but refused to sleep in the tiny bed with him for fear of aggravating his injuries, much to his disappointment. Rick had begged and even resorted to breaking out the puppy dog eyes, but Daryl couldn't be swayed.

Dr. Jenner had insisted on being put in charge of Rick's care and ordered him to be held another night for observation before he was released from the hospital. Daryl could hardly get all the flowers and balloons into the cab of the truck to take home when they allowed Rick to leave, and they weren't all from friends.

Daryl explained to him on the drive home that they played a clip of the attack on the news—which Rick found embarrassing—but since then, the well wishes had been pouring in. Maggie and Beth volunteered to help organize everything and wanted to make arrangements for most of the donations and flowers to be sent to charity and to other patients at the hospital.
They truly had the best friends in the world.

"I think that sounds amazin'," Rick agreed as they pulled up to the house. Merle was there to greet them as he hobbled inside. He could walk, but he was still sore as hell and one of his knees was stiff and achy where Aiden had knocked him down.

"We thought so. But Rick...." Daryl said as he eased him down onto the couch. "We got so many requests for work orders that 'm not sure we're gonna be able to take 'em all. Merle can't do much yet, and with your wrist bein' sprained, we're down another man, and me an' Glenn can only do so much."

"We need ta hire someone else, huh?"

"Think it might be best...maybe just temporarily 'til everythin' blows over," Daryl agreed, taking off Rick's shoes.

"Hmmm, there was this kid, Noah, I think his name was, he approached me for some kinda apprenticeship last summer, but he might still be interested. Also could hire a few people from the hardware store for day labor," Rick replied.

"Tha's what we was thinkin'," Merle nodded from the coffee table he was perched on. "But this next part ya ain't gonna like."

"What part?" Rick hesitated, looking between the two guilty looking Dixon's.

"Me an' Daryl's needed at the shop. He wanted ta stay and help ya recover, but we jus' got too much stuff, so's I was thinkin', and Daryl agreed, that we get Lori ta come sit with ya in the mornings," Merle explained.

"Are ya fuckin' kiddin' me? Ya know how she feels about ya'll and ya want her in our home?" asked a befuddled Rick.

"I ain't leavin' ya here alone," Daryl said, shaking his head. "Not for another few days at least an' she ain't workin, plus you'll get some time with Judy."

"You're okay with this? After the way she's treated ya?"

"We're gonna have ta learn ta get along. She ain't goin' nowhere and neither are we," Daryl replied, looking to Merle who gave him a nod of solidarity. "And it's jus' for a few hours, 'til she's gotta go get Carl. Then maybe we can have dinner together one night, the six of us."

All Rick could do was blink at him for a moment. Daryl was...well, Rick already knew he was amazing, and regardless of how he felt about Lori he hadn't ever said anything mean or unreasonable about her that Rick could recall. But he did have a point, they were going to have to find a way to coexist, to coparent the kids.

Rick's phone rang just as there was a knock on the door. Daryl got up to answer it while he fumbled in his pocked for his cell. "Hello?" he answered without looking at the number. "Oh hey, Chief. What's goin' on?"

"I jus' wanted ya to be the first ta know we arrested yer assailants, all four of 'em. We got confessions outta three already, but we're still working on the fourth. DA's looking ta make an example out of 'em. We ain't gonna stand for intolerance 'round here," Chief Riley said, his voice becoming more stern as he went along.
"'M glad everthin' worked out."

"How ya doin', son?"

"Oh still sore, but 'm startin' ta feel better. They jus' released me this mornin'," Rick replied.

"Tha's good ta hear. Once yer feelin' up ta it, Bonnie and I would like for ya'll ta come over for dinner. You and that Dixon a'yers," he laughed. "Ya must be doin' somethin' right over there 'cause we ain't had no trouble with that Merle fella fer awhile now."

"Been doin' my best ta keep 'em on the straigh an' narrow," Rick teased, winking at Merle who shot back with a glare. "I'll let ya know about dinner, sir. Tha's mighty kinda of ya'll."

"None a' that sir bullshit, but ya'll take care."

"Will do, talk to ya soon," Rick said before ending the call. "So they arrested the guys."

"That's great news," Lori sighed in relief, the three men agreeing with her. "I'm just gonna go put Judy's bottles in the fridge." She was reluctant to hand Judith over to Merle since Daryl was helping Rick take his jacket off, but she did.

"Ya'll gonna be okay today?" Daryl asked, cozying up next to Rick on the couch but careful not to touch him too much.

"Yeah, baby. It's fine. What's a few days?" Rick shrugged. He smiled wide when Daryl kissed him on the cheek, the only part of his face not bruised or swollen. "Love ya," he said, weaving their fingers together and giving a gentle squeeze.

"Love ya, too," he replied, squeezing back even gentler.

"Who's a good girly for her Uncle Merly? Who's a good girly?" Merle cooed as Judith gurgled happily in his lap.

Rick couldn't help but smile at that too. He looked over to Daryl who was also grinning wide as he watched their exchange. But most surprising was Lori who stood in the doorway, arms crossed, shoulder leaning against the threshold, with the ghost of a smile on her thin lips.

"Alright, you two, off to work," Lori broke the silence, taking Judith from Merle. "Rick needs his rest."

They all rolled their eyes, but after another kiss on the cheek from Daryl, the two Dixon's scurried out the door. Lori took Daryl's spot with Judith in her lap, her tiny hands wrapping around two of Rick's fingers as she moved to stick them into her mouth.

"We're gonna have a good day, Rick," she said with a small smile. "I don't understand all this, him, but I'm gonna try, to understand, to be supportive, for the kids, for you, for all of us. Can't promise I ain't gonna bitch about it anymore, but when I was in the waiting room with all those people who care about you and love you, I don't know, I guess I just realized that I was casting you as the villain in all this...but you aren't, and neither is Daryl."

"We can make this work," Rick said, ignoring the pain in his neck when he turned to look at her.

"You can make this work," Lori nodded. "I'm gonna start looking for a job on Monday. Maggie and Beth seem like they'd be good babysitters for her," she said bouncing Judith on her knee.
"The Greene's are good people...and with business pickin' up, Carol might be able to find somethin' for ya to do around the shop in the meantime," he suggested.

"Carol hates me," Lori laughed.

"Well, ta be fair, I've been casting ya as the villian too," he smirked.

"Let's just see how things go."

Rick had to scratch his head at finding himself sitting on a couch with his soon-to-be ex-wife and a daughter who wasn't his by blood but by choice, his lover off to work, and his body busted up, but he honestly had nothing to complain about. In fact, he couldn't help but feel that things were on the right track for all of them.

Even bruised and battered, he sat there with a content smile as Judith blubbered on happily and Lori reached for the remote, because with all the twists and turns his life had taken over the past year, the past several months, Fate seemed to know exactly what she was doing.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter plus the epilogue...that just sounds crazy to me. Next chapter will have Daryl's reaction to everything and will shed a little more light on Lori's turnaround. If it felt too abrupt, hopefully it won't after next chapter. But I think the lawyer's office was rock bottom for her. And how cute is Uncle Merly?! <3

I know there wasn't a whole lot of Rickyl here, and there might not be next chapter, but the epilogue will have some smexy times. So there's that. :D
Daryl's Faith in Fate

Chapter Summary

Daryl rushes to the hospital.

Chapter Notes

Okay you guys!! Last chapter of this one. There is an epilogue to come. Just got to add in some hot smut as a reward for all your amazing support!! I really can't believe I'm about to wrap this up.

As always, a big thanks to Mermaidsheenaz for beta'ing this chapter. She is amazing! <3

**Daryl**

Meatloaf was one of Daryl's favorite things to cook. You poured everything into a bowl, squished it together with your hands, then let it cook for an hour or so. Easy peasy, and it was good. Add some mashed potatoes and corn, and viola! But most importantly, the hour usually gave him and Rick a little time together to unwind after work.

After putting the pan into a preheated oven, Daryl went upstairs to jump in the shower. Rick had texted and said he'd be home soon, and if he dragged it out a little longer than usual, maybe Rick would be able to join him when he got in. The shop was only eight minutes away, and he really stank after working hard to catch up on everything from their day off, so a longer shower was warranted.

He stripped off his clothes and tossed them to the floor before taking a moment to admire the marks Rick had left on him in the mirror. He could just make out the nail indentations on his hips, purplish bruises speckling his chest and shoulders, and tiny dark dots adoring his ass where Rick's fingers had held him so fucking tight.

They weren't like all the other marks men had left on him before. These meant something. They were symbolic, given with love, and weren't meant to claim or conquer or hurt or maim. They were just another testament to their passion for each other. And that made them beautiful.

He looked like a damn mosaic of lust and debauchery, and he loved it, loved the marks he left on Rick in return.

The hot water felt nice on his salty skin when he made it into the shower. He took his time lathering and washing away the dirt from the day, but there was only so long he could stall without taking care of the swelling cock between his legs. He really wanted to wait for Rick, though.

"Uh, Daryl?" Merle called through the door, voice muffled from the running water. "Ya need ta get outta the shower now."
"Christ, Merle! Whatever ya need can wait," he snapped back. He didn't mean to, but he was starting to get worked up.

"Please, baby brother? Ya need ta get outta there now!"

Okay, the 'please' had him worried. He didn't know Merle even knew the word. "What's goin' on?" he hollered, reaching for the knob to turn off the water. There was silence for a moment as he wrapped a towel around his waist. "Merle?"

"I'm not exactly sure, jus' know that we need to go," Merle replied, gently pushing the door open.

Daryl didn't like the look on his brother's face when he eyed him with a keen glare, an unease feeling seeping into his bones. "Why?"

"Now, everythin's gonna be okay," he said, holding his hand up in a placating manor. And that wasn't a good sign.

"Merle!!"

"Rick...somethin' happened to 'im, don't know what, but he's at the hospital," Merle explained, but Daryl blocked out most of what he said, which left the words 'Rick' and 'hospital,' as he pushed by him on his way to the dresser.

He picked up his phone and took notice of the eleven missed calls and texts. Putting it on speaker, he started his voicemail as he pulled on a clean pair of pants and a t-shirt.

The first message said it was from Rick's phone but the voice did not belong to his lover. "Hi, this is Aaron, and I'm here with Rick...there's been an incident. I'm sure he's going to be just fine, but he'll need to go to the hospital...."

Daryl's heart seized at the sound of sirens in the background as he picked up his phone. "What the hell kind of 'incident,' asshole?" he thundered, flying down the stairs. Next was a message from Carol which was about as informational. He growled as he grabbed the keys off the side table and his jacket from the rack.

Merle was hot on his heels as he barged out the door, not caring to lock up. The only reason Merle made it into the truck before he pulled away—carrying his boots that he'd forgotten—was because the message from Michonne sent a terrifying chill up his spine that nearly paralyzed him.

When she had said something about "the guys from the bar," he knew what had happened.

He tried his best to keep it together, but it was too much. Merle shutting the door was like a punch to the gut and he hit the sterling wheel with all his might before he banged his head on the thing and started to cry. How could he've let this happen? Why didn't he stay with Rick like he wanted to?

This was all on him. He never should've agreed to dance with Rick at the bar that night, then those fuckers wouldn't've attacked him, wouldn't've known they were fucking fags. What if he was disabled and couldn't work anymore? What about the shop? What if he fucking died from internal bleeding or something? What if he was already dead and no one would tell him?

The thought was too daunting. He threw his door open just in time to vomit up whatever remained of his lunch onto the pavement. Who knew how long he retched and sobbed from the truck before he felt Merle's hand rubbing his back, soothing words washing over him as he hyperventilated.
"He's gonna be fine, baby brother. He was a cop, he knows how ta defend 'imself, 'member? 'N he's got us. We'll take care a' him jis' like all our friends'll too, okay? So why don'cha scooch on over and let ol' Merle drive?"

Merle wasn't supposed to be driving yet, but Daryl wasn't exactly in the best frame of mind to argue. The ride was a blur through his tears, the unknowns being the worst part of it as worst case scenarios flooded his brain like a leaky roof. Did those assholes go looking for Rick or were they looking for him and Merle? If it was his fault Rick was in the hospital, he might never forgive himself.

They pulled in as the last bit of twilight lost its battle with the sky plunging them into darkness minus the harsh artificial lights of the street lamps. He didn't want to go inside. If he sat in the truck long enough, then maybe none of it would be real. Rick wouldn't be hurt, or worse, and everything would be fine. They'd drive home and eat—

"Shit, the meatloaf!" Daryl cried out. "We gotta go back."

"Why don'cha ya go inside, an' I'll handle it?" Merle offered.

"No! I gotta do it, ya can't pick it up," he argued.

"Daryl, ya gotta go in there. I'll jus' go turn the oven off," the older Dixon said, trying to coax Daryl out of the truck.

"Take me home, Merle!"

"He's gonna be fine, alright. Jus' go inside an'—"

"If ya ain't gonna take me, then get the hell out. I'll drive myself," Daryl snarled.

"Okay, okay. We'll go turn off the damn meatloaf, then we're comin' right back. And you's gonna walk in there and be with yer man, understood?" Merle said with a stern tone. Daryl gave him a shaky nod, and off they went.

They got a few calls on the round trip, probably people wanting to know what was taking them so long, but Daryl ignored them all. He just needed a little more time to compose himself or some shitty excuse like that.

Merle wrestled Daryl's phone away and answered it when they pulled into the hospital parking lot for the second time. "Hello?....Yeah, we just left the oven on, had to turn back around real quick. We're outside, though....Think I might need a little help with that....Oh, somethin' like that."

A few minutes after Merle hung up the phone, Michonne came bolting out of the sliding doors of the emergency room and made a beeline for the truck. She yanked the door open and leveled Daryl with a death glare. All he could do was close his eyes as more tears squeezed their way from between his eyelids.

"He's gonna be just fine," she said, wrapping her arms around Daryl and pulling him into a gentle hug. He hadn't expected that. He figured he deserved a slap or two. Or better yet to get jumped like Rick did. He wasn't even prepared enough to flinch at the contact, melting into her embrace instead.

"Just got an update and there aren't any signs of internal damage. They're wheeling him up to get some x-rays on his wrist right now," Michonne explained, her calming tone doing more to put him at ease than her words. "Why don't we all go inside. Everyone's waiting to give you big hugs. I
know you don't like 'em, but that's what you do in times like these."

Daryl gave a few sniffles then pulled away, wiping his face dry with his sleeves. Rick was always the strong one, someone they could all lean on and depend on, but Daryl had to be the strong one this time, for Rick and for everyone else. He could do that. They were partners now, no need for Rick to have to do all the heavy lifting.

Him and Merle were all but mobbed when they walked in the door. Everyone was there from the whole Greene tribe to Tyreese and Sasha. They all shook his hand and gave him big hugs like Michonne had said. He shed some more tears as he cried on a few shoulders, and that was okay because tears weren't a sign of weakness. That's what Rick would always tell him when he'd wake up screaming from a nightmare.

And this was a pretty fucking scary one.

He surveyed the waiting room when he had a chance and noticed Carl slumped in a chair next to his mother off in a corner by themselves. Lori had a hardened look on her face as Judith sat on her lap. She was entertaining her with some toy that lit up while Carl pouted.

Carl looked up and they made eye contact, a look of misery evident on his face, before the kid looked back over at Sophia, Beth, and Duane, Morgan's son, with a longing gaze. The poor boy need a support system right now, not a damn timeout.

"Carl?" Daryl said a little louder than intended. The room seemed to quiet around him and he had to wonder what the hell had happened before he arrived that had everyone now on pins and needles. "C'mere."

The kid stood up, but Lori grabbed his arm. He yanked it away and ran to Daryl, throwing his arms around him for a bone crushing hug as he started to sob against Daryl's chest. Lori had rushed over behind him, but Daryl didn't really give a damn about her right now, the poor kid needed a fucking release.

"Everythin' is gonna be alright," Daryl soothed into the boy's dark hair, at a loss for what else to say. Rick was so much better at giving comfort than he was, but he was trying at least, arms drawing Carl in closer, grounding them both. "Yer ol' man's gonna be jus' fine. Ya jus' cry it all out."

"Y-yeah," Carl mutter into his shirt. They held on tight for a few more minutes before Carl's grip loosened.

Lori had gone back to her seat with Judith but was watching them like a Momma bear watching over her cub. Daryl couldn't fault her for that. These people were mostly strangers to her while they were just about family to him, better than most of his own anyway.

Daryl reached for his wallet and pulled out some ones. "Why don't ya get Beth ta take all ya'll kids ta get a snack? Then ya can sit with 'em and catch up 'cause I know they missed ya."

Things settled down after that as people talked amongst themselves. Daryl sat down between Merle and Michonne who were in a deep discussion with Andrea about which was better: peanut M&M's or regular M&M's. Daryl was for the former, Merle the latter, but what did he know?

"Hey Dare? Ya know these two?" Glenn called to him from near the door.

Daryl looked over to find a redhead and a wavy haired brunette, both with sheepish smiles. He stood up and walked over to them, but before he could ask who they were, Aaron had outstretched
his hand and introduced himself and his boyfriend Eric.

It wasn't an ideal way to meet new friends, but he couldn't stop thanking them for coming to Rick's rescue after they recounted their tale. Him and Rick owed them so much.

He introduced the two newcomers to Abraham who was going to act as their contractor on the house, and they descended into talk about the build. Daryl was thankful for the distraction.

The worst part of the evening came after Rick was taken to a private room. Chief Riley had introduced himself to Daryl before he went in to speak to Rick about what happened. A Dixon shaking hands with the Chief of Police was a rare event indeed. Merle insisted on getting a picture.

But then it was his turn, and he could hardly breathe once he stepped foot in the room. Rick's face was bruised and swollen, one eye completely so, his wrist was busted and Daryl knew all too well the pain of battered ribs. He would've rather taken the beating himself instead of Rick because looking at his lover all bandaged up broke his heart to bits.

They didn't get a lot of time alone before Lori forced her way inside, and as much as he wanted to tell her to fuck off, she was holding Judith. The little one kept holding out her stubby arms to him and Rick, and after she started to fuss about it, he just couldn't take it anymore.

"Let me have her," Daryl said, letting go of Rick's hand to reach for her. Lori turned up her nose at him from across the bed and held Judith tighter to her, but after Michonne spoke up on his behalf from the corner she was camped in, a reluctant Lori handed her over.

"Hey baby girl, ya got bigger since last time, didn't ya?" he cooed as he bounced her around the room, her tiny hands patting his face, baby fingers twisting in his hair as she gave him big gummy smiles. Carol came and took her after awhile so her and the other women could all dote over her.

Lori had followed them out, probably afraid they'd sell her on the blackmarket or something.

When Carl came in, he fled the room. Rick hadn't wanted Carl to see him in that state, but the boy was adamant about seeing his father. Rick winced when Carl threw himself on the bed a little less careful than he maybe should have. Then the kid cried his little heart out as Rick and Michonne both tried to comfort him, but Daryl just had to go.

He had to get out of there. It was too much, he needed a break, a breather, an escape route. The whole thing was his fault. If Rick hadn't met him, he wouldn't've turned into a fucking fag like him and those homophobic assholes wouldn't've targeted him. Now, he was bloodied and bruised, and all for what? Because they got drunk and danced together for one damn song? That was exactly the kind of thing he'd been fearing.

After slipping out of the room, he took off for the stairwell. When he reached the bottom floor, he burst through the door, dead set on getting in his truck and maybe going home and packing up his shit to head to Mexico. Rick wouldn't follow him there, would he?

Just as he was about to round the corner leading to the parking lot, a familiar voice caught his attention and he was stopped dead in his tracks. It was Lori arguing with someone on the phone. He knew he shouldn't've invaded her privacy, but as soon as she said Shane's name, his ears perked up of their own accord.

"Shane, please! Just for an hour?....Goddammit, she's your daughter, the least you can do is watch her for an hour while I sit with the man raising her while he's in the damn hospital!....It was a fucking hate crime, Shane! And don't you dare call him that again! He's more of a man than you
are....And so is Daryl!....What? So you're okay with a 'fag' raising your own flesh and blood, but babysitting her for an hour while he's bleeding from the head inconveniences you?....You're a real piece of work, you know that?....No, fuck you!"

Daryl heard soft whimpers after that and a low thud. He peered around the corner with a bit of caution to find Lori in a heap on the floor, back against a wall and her arms hugging her knees to her chest. Her dark hair draped over her like a blanket and her shoulders shuddered as they heaved with her quiet sobs.

He approached with all the stealth of his inner hunter and sat down beside her. He'd never dealt with a crying woman before. He rather preferred angry ones, if he were being honest, but he felt compelled to do something. Her head snapped to the side, eyes peering out at him through a chestnut curtain when he startled her with the bump of his knee on her elbow.

"How much did you hear?" she sniffed, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Enough," he replied, raising a thumb to gnaw on the cuticle.

"Are you gonna tell him?" she sputtered, sitting up straight as she tried to gather her composure.

"Nah, but you should," Daryl said, giving her a reproving sideways glare.

"He's just so good with her. I know we shouldn't've lied to him, but I knew Shane, knew he never wanted kids so it seemed like the right thing to do, give her a chance to be raised by someone who actually gave a damn," Lori explained. "And Rick does, I know he does. He knew she wasn't his from the beginning and he never treated her any differently for it."

Daryl gave a curt nod when she glanced over at him.

"Rick's a good man, always has been. Maybe I just forgot that somewhere along the way, got too swept up in my own misery, I don't know. I do know that I don't deserve him, not now, not anymore. Maybe I never did...."

"Neither do I," Daryl muttered.

She scoffed and looked away, out the sliding doors into the darkened parking lot. It was quiet for a long moment before she turned back. "Maybe you don't, but everyone else seems to think you do. I walked in that room and they looked at me like I was a demon sent from Hell to finish him off. You came in and they all smiled and sighed in relieve."

"Yeah well, they are my friends," he shrugged.

She snorted at that, "Guess it didn't exactly help that I yelled at Carl when we got here. I was just scared, even though that's no excuse. But with you? It was like night and day, like they knew something I didn't, like you were the only one who could heal him...So maybe it is me that's the problem here...."

Daryl wasn't exactly sure what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. He figured she just needed someone to talk to, to vent. Why that was him, he wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because he was there, because he sat down and let her.

She let out a long-suffering sigh before continuing, "Point is, Judith does deserve him. She deserves to have a good father. She deserves Rick," Lori said, her voice full of conviction. "I may not've picked the best sperm donor for her, but I tried to pick the best father. For her and Carl."
"Think Shane'll try ta take her away?"

"I don't know...He won't even acknowledge that she's his. He keeps telling me I was lying to him and that I must've cheated on him like I did Rick, and that's when I threw him out. I just got tired of fighting him over it," she said, a weary look on her face. "He doesn't care about her, doesn't care about anyone but himself."

"Yeah well, that guy's a dick and don't deserve her anyhow," Daryl said. "And I'll ask our lawyer friends about Shane. Make sure he can't fuck anything up."

"You'd be willing to help me?" she asked, turning her head to study him, skepticism clear in her voice. "After...after everything?"

"Ain't doin' it for you. 'M doin' it for Judy 'cause she deserves a good father," he said, looking right back at her. "We ain't gotta be friends, you an' me...but we ain't gotta be enemies either."

Before she could reply, he jumped to his feet and rushed back around the corner. Who was he kidding? He could never leave that man. Not now, not ever. Rick was the best there ever was and if he had to kick the asses of every bigot in town to protect him, then he would. And if he had to play nice with the ex for the kids' sake, well, he'd do that too.

Because he finally fucking understood why Rick kept telling him 'you can't fight fate.' He could've been halfway to Mexico if it hadn't dropped a roadblock in the form of Lori right in front of his path. There was just no escaping that man; they were simply meant to be.

*****

It wasn't until the next day that Daryl got a chance to pull Andrea off to the side to talk about the Judith situation. Carol had brought Rick some actual food instead of the cardboard they were feeding him in the hospital, and that gave him a chance to step out of the room for a minute or two.

He was hesitant to ask Michonne's advice because he thought she might tell Rick about the whole mess before Lori got the chance to come clean. That left Andrea. Even though they hadn't known her all that long, her and Michonne had gotten pretty close and she seemed to be a great lawyer.

"Hey Andrea? Can I ask you a legal question?" Daryl started once he managed to get her alone.

"Sure, what's up?" she asked, stirring cream into her coffee in front of the complimentary coffee machine.

He chewed on his lip a moment while he tried to figure out how to explain everything. "So, uh, it's about Judith...."

"I thought Michonne got the custody agreement in place?"

"Yeah, she did, but it's about her father," he specified. Andrea blinked at him a few times and he continued, "Her biological father's this real douche bag who don't want anythin' ta do with her and don't deserve her anyhow. But I was jus' wonderin' if he changed his mind if he could take her away from him. And if so, what can we do so he can't?" he asked in a rush of words.

"Is Rick on the birth certificate?" Andrea asked as she blew over the top of her cup.

"Yeah, and he pays child support for her," he replied while he began pouring his own coffee.

"Well, if that's the case, it'd be hard for the biological father to challenge paternity rights even with
a DNA test if he's not active in her life and Rick has assumed all responsibility for her since birth. That doesn't mean he can't try. I'm not an expert on family law, though."

"So there's nothing to worry about?"

"If the guy knows she's his and doesn't do anything about it, and Rick knows she's not his but loves and takes care of her anyway, it'd be hard to find a judge willing to side with the bio father."

"Sperm donor," Daryl corrected. "He ain't her father. Rick's her father, and he's the best one she could ever ask for. He loves her no matter what."

"Sounds like you do too," she said before taking a sip of her steaming coffee.

"Course I do. She's perfect. How could anyone walk away from her? Or any child like that? My dad was the worst sonuvabitch on the planet and maybe I woulda been better off if he had walked away from me, but even he didn't abandon me or Merle. Ya don't turn your back on family. No matter what."

They both stood by the coffee machine for a moment deep in their own thoughts before Andrea spoke again. "You want any children, Daryl?"

He couldn't help the fond smile that spread across his lips, "Didn't till I met Rick, till he showed me how fathers were supposed to be. But yeah...yeah, I do, with Rick. Because I might not be any good at it, but I know he is. If he'd be willin' ta have any with me."

"I think you'll do just fine," she smirked, patting him on the cheek as she started back to Rick's room. "Michonne said you're amazing with Judith, but I'd double check with her about the legal aspect just to be safe, though."

One of these days he was going to figure out what the hell she was hiding behind that mask of mystery of hers. Was it the bisexual thing? He kind of figured that her and Michonne had something going on at their Valentine's Day slumber party, even though they hadn't made it official yet.

Before he could make it back to the room, Carol met him in the hallway. "Did ya see the clip on the news?" she asked, equal parts tired and amused.

"What clip?" he countered.

"They showed a clip on the news of Rick taking on the assholes who jumped him. They're hoping someone will identify them and call the tip line they set up. And after lunch when it aired, we started getting slammed with calls for orders," she explained.

"Work orders?"

"Yeah, and we got several flower deliveries with get well wishes. I wasn't sure if I should tell Rick or not. He might not like that he was on the news, but they didn't show the actual attack, just the part right before."

"Okay, I'll tell 'im about it tomorrow. What about the orders?"

"I don't think you and Glenn'll be able to handle them all, Daryl. We might need to hire some extra help till it all blows over. The phones were ringing off the hook by the time we closed shop. Might need someone else in the office too."
"We'll figure it out," he smirked to himself. Now Rick even had him talking like him.

*****

Daryl was relieved when visiting hours were over that night. He wasn't used to so much socializing thanks to all Rick's visitors, friends both new and old including several of his cop buddies. He really wanted to spend a little alone time with Rick, not counting the nurses and beeping machines.

"Why don'cha come sit with me, darlin'?" Rick purred once Daryl had dimmed the lights. There was some show about moose on the Discovery channel that Rick was enraptured by, but he had waited for a commercial.

"Rick, I already told ya, I ain't sleepin' in that tiny bed," he protested. Rick's body was practically one giant swollen purple bruise and he was terrified of causing him anymore discomfort.

"Jus' want ya by me," he whined.

"'M holdin' yer hand," Daryl said like that should've been enough. He knew it wasn't, he wanted to scoop Rick up and never let him go, but not until he was in less pain.

"Want more of ya," Rick pouted. That was until the moose show came back on and he dropped the subject for ten minutes or so before starting up on a different one. "Ya know this ain't your fault, baby."

Daryl couldn't help but start chomping on his thumbnail at that. "Ain't it? I turned ya gay."

Rick had a good chuckle at that despite the fact that Daryl could tell it aggravated his tender ribs. "Nah, ya didn't turn me gay, jus' fell in love with ya. Don't care as much what's on the outside, but I jus' lucked out that you're also sexy as sin with that ass a' yours," he said with a salacious grin.

"Shuddup," Daryl blushed. "Ya can flatter me all ya want, still ain't sleepin' with ya tonight. We'll be home tomorrow."

"Y'know, baby, there is a part a' me that ain't bruised," he smirked, his eyebrows dancing with excitement.

"Rick Grimes, we ain't havin' sex in yer damn hospital bed," he admonished.

"C'mon, baby, jus' handjobs or somethin'. It ain't your fault I'm in here, but it is your fault that I'm gettin' all hot an' bothered," Rick replied, biting his split lip then grimacing at the pain it caused him. "Shit, jus' get over here!" he said, abandoning his attempt at seduction.

Two awkward angled, overly tender, hospital bed handjobs later and Rick had fallen asleep. Daryl pulled the covers over him and kissed his temple before slinking over to the horribly uncomfortable chair/bed hybrid and falling asleep himself.

There were worst places to be stranded than on the island of Rick Grimes, even with all the hurricanes they'd had to weather since they met, all the ones they had gotten passed. Daryl didn't know what fate had in store for them down the road, but what he did know was that whatever it was, they'd face it together, as a team and as partners with incredible friends and more love than he'd ever deserve.
**Six Weeks Later**

**Daryl**

Daryl woke up to fluttering lips peppering his neck with kisses. "You're a free man today, Mr. Grimes," he drawled as teeth nipped at the shell of his ear, a hand snaking down his chest.

"Free ta be all yours," Rick added with a smile. He ran a hand through Daryl's shaggy hair and pulled him in for a kiss that was cut short thanks to morning breath. They'd been at the bar until after midnight celebrating the divorce and neither bothered to brush when they got home.

"Le's go take a shower," Daryl said pushing himself up, "We got an hour before we gotta be there. An' ya taste like a condemned distillery."

"You're one ta talk," Rick teased, happy to oblige. The construction team was set to break ground on the house today and they both wanted to be there when they started.

Brushing their teeth was priority number one followed by a quick wash so they'd have a little bit of time to fool around. Rick was jonesing for some amazing shower sex, but Daryl kept insisting that they didn't have much time, he had something planned for later. They ended up rubbing their soap-slick bodies together until they were lathering each other up with something else entirely.

Merle had breakfast waiting when they got downstairs. He'd been adapting well with one hand and even had a prosthetic he wore on occasion. He wouldn't have any trouble living on his own at that point, but Daryl liked having him close. He helped around the house too so Rick hadn't complained.
They got him some of those noise canceling headphones because him and Rick had been known to get rather vocal in bed. Rick especially, Daryl loved seeing how loud he could make his lover scream.

"Mornin' lovebirds. Ya'll have a nice shower?" Merle asked with a lewd roll of his hips.

"Don't ask questions ya don't want the answers to," Daryl smirked as he sat down at the table. Merle shivered as he started stuffing his face with eggs. "Why don't we take the bike today? Merle can drive the truck to work," he suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Rick said, smothering his eggs with ketchup before shoveling them in his mouth.

After breakfast, Rick and Daryl headed out. They had plenty of time before the crew was set to arrive, but they were both so excited to see everything get started. They visited with Abraham's crew and watched them scoop out the first several buckets of dirt with the excavator before they left them to it.

Everyone was already busy working on different things when they got to the shop. Carol was fielding calls which hadn't let up as much as they thought they would as time went by. T-Dog the cat was chilling out on her desk like usual.

They were brimming with business, and they had only gotten busier after news broke that Phillip Blake had been behind Rick's attack. He'd hired the goons to cause trouble and run Rick out of town, but it backfired and he was the one that was sent packing all the way to Meriwether County Correctional Facility with a long list of crimes to his name.

Lori was doing some paperwork in her office that was used previously for storage. She had settled in quite well after things had been aired out between them all. Even Carol had warmed up to her. She only worked until it was time to pick up Carl and Sophia from school. Then Beth came in to relieve her and flirt with Noah.

They said good morning to Judith who was in the little play area they had made for her in Lori's office. That way they didn't have to worry about getting a babysitter for her. Everyone loved her and pitched in to keep her happy. Or spoiled. She was their little mascot.

They had to add onto the shop because of the influx of business and hired a few more employees as well. Sasha came on as their official painter and finisher. She was amazing with a brush and had an expert eye for detail. There was also Oscar and Axel who started as day laborers, but Rick had offered them official positions after they proved themselves. They were both hard workers and got along with everyone.

Rick made his morning rounds to make sure everything was running smoothly before heading to his office to go over their newest batch of work orders. Daryl busied himself with finishing up a custom coffee table for Dr. Jenner, who he suspected might've had a thing for Lori.

Before he knew it, it was time for him and Rick's mid morning make out session. They didn't call it that, but everyone else did. It wasn't their fault. And to be fair, they usually started off with business talk, but then somehow it always led to kissing. However, that day's kissing led to someplace new.

Maybe it was because Andrea kept going on and on about babies lately. Rick thought she was gearing up to ask one of them for sperm on account of her biological clock, but Daryl thought she was looking to adopt because she'd been asking Michonne a lot about adoptions in Georgia.
"Ya want babies with me, right?" Rick asked, pulling back from where he had Daryl pinned to his desk. They still hadn't fucked on it, but it was on the list.

"Thought I already had a baby with ya?" Daryl smirked, loosening the hold he had on Rick's hips. "Ain't she in the other room?"

"Well, she is ours, but I meant one that jus' belongs ta the two of us. We can adopt or maybe Andrea will trade us an egg," he snickered. "Don't have ta be blood for us ta love it. We know that already."

Daryl kissed him in lieu of an answer. Of course he wanted babies with Rick. What kind of question was that? He just couldn't believe the man wanted one with him. As comfortable as he had gotten with Judith over the months, he still wasn't confident that he'd be a decent father. Not when he'd had the worst one in the world as an example. Not when it was his child.

What if he inherited his father's temper? What if he turned out to be just as shitty of a father as William Dixon? Okay, maybe he wouldn't be as bad, but there was still that nagging voice in the back of his head somewhere that sounded just like his father that was hellbent on convincing him otherwise.

Rick was smirking when they pulled away, "So is that a 'This is movin' too fast, so le's change the subject' kiss or a 'Screw rational thought, le's find some babies ta adopt' kiss?"

"It was a 'I mus' be dreamin' 'cause yer too damn good ta be true' kiss mixed with 'How the hell haven't I screwed it up yet?' with a side a' 'If I had the money, I'd buy ya a ring today,' " Daryl chuckled before he'd realized what he'd said. He felt his face pale as Rick stared at him with wide eyes and an expression he couldn't read.

Shit! So much for not screwing it up!

"Did ya...did you just propose ta me?" Rick stammered.

"Nah, Rick, I was just, I mean I thought we were...y'know, the future and shit," he muttered back, looking away as he started to bite at his thumb. He wasn't the kind of man you married. He still figured Rick would get tired of him eventually and move on or find someone better.

"Did ya want me ta do it, then?" Rick asked, picking at the frayed edges of Daryl's cut off shirt.

"Right now? Shit, we've only known each other four months, Rick! Tha's jus'...fuckin' crazy! Why would ya, why...tha's...why would ya wanna marry me? There's better guys out there if ya want a husband—"

"Baby?"

"—prolly better women than Lori if ya want another wife instead, better than me, that could give ya more babies even, 'cause we know I can't—"

"Dare?"

"—'Sides, 'm jus' the rebound guy or whatever. 'S only been a damn day—"

"Daryl!??"

"—I know yer jus' prolly, I don't know, high maybe. What'd Merle put in those eggs?" he mumbled as he started to sweat, his cheeks scorching, and his throat tightening up.
"Sweetheart, would ya fuckin' listen ta me for a second!" Rick raised his voice. Daryl's surprised eyes shot back to his. "Sorry, I didn't mean ta yell," he almost whispered, carding a hand through Daryl's hair. "And I didn't mean right now. You'd say 'no' if I asked ya right now, right?"

No, he really fucking wouldn't!

"Daryl, if I asked ya right now to marry me, you'd say 'no', right?" he asked again, his voice firm this time like he had liquid steel in his veins, like he was trying to convince himself more than ask the question.

"Rick, I...what?" He was tongue-tied and so fucking confused. Was Rick really asking him that? Now? After only dating a few months? Who does that? There had to have been something in those eggs because he must've been hallucinating, tripping out, or dead. *Did I die in my sleep?*

"Daryl Dixon, will ya marry me?"

And with that, he momentarily forgot how to speak. All he could do was blink at him blankly, his brain frozen, and most likely the rest of him too because he couldn't feel his toes, and his heart may've stopped completely.

"Le's try somethin' else," Rick said, cupping Daryl's face in his hands. He leaned in for a tender, chaste kiss before pulling back and staring into Daryl's entranced eyes, his own bright and loving and so fucking blue that Daryl knew he could never breathe another breath without them. "Do ya wanna spend the rest of your life with me?"

"Rick?" he exhaled more than spoke.

"You are everythin' I ever wanted so if ya think I'm ever lettin' ya go, then you're the thing that's crazy 'cause I won't. Ever. But all I'm askin' is if I need ta try harder ta make ya feel the same way about me."

Daryl was sure it was impossible for the man to do anything else beyond what he had already done for him. He was certain he was in love with him before they met, and if it was up to him, they'd be married by noon, but he loved Rick too much to let him make a mistake like that, to waste his time on a goddamned Dixon—

"I swear ta god, honey, if ya don't stop thinkin' and tell me what your heart is sayin', I'm gonna have Merle knock some sense into ya 'cause he's already given me his blessin'! Now, I'm gonna ask ya one more time...."

*Merle?*

"Daryl Dixon, I am so fuckin' in love with you that I think I might just die without ya by my side. If I have to prove that to ya everyday until I do, then I gladly will. You are so incredibly beautiful and sexy and kind and amazin' and ya don't always believe that, but I wanna show ya that it's true, that ya are worth more than I could ever deserve, and that I promise I'll love ya with my dyin' breath. Now, will ya please give me the one thing I've been missing my whole life: the rest of yours? Because I wanna marry you!"

"I wanna marry ya but—"

"...but this is way too fast?" Rick finished for himself as he took a step back.

"Well, it'd be nice if I could finish my damn sentences first 'cause that wasn't what I was gonna say," Daryl scoffed as he pulled Rick back to him by his collar.
"If ya say ya ain't good enough for me, then I'm really gonna get Merle ta kick your ass," Rick both teased and threatened.

"Weren't gonna say that either...jus'...what if ya wake up one day, in a week or a month, a year, and realize ya made a mistake? That I don't make ya happy like ya thought?"

Rick draped his arms over his shoulders and leaned in until their foreheads rested together, until they were breathing the same air. "What if you wake up one day and realize ya made a mistake bein' with me?" Rick asked in return.

"Ain't never gonna happen," Daryl stated. That was the god's honest truth.

"How do ya know?"

"Jus' do," Daryl said. He did. There was no doubt about that.

"Well, so do I," Rick agreed. "Don'cha get it? I feel the same way about you that ya do me. I ain't ever lied to ya and I ain't gonna start now."

"But it ain't even legal here, Rick," he pointed out, but that was really the only argument he had left.

"Tara said it might be soon," Rick replied, and then that smiled started. The one he got when he had a brilliant idea like building houses and expanding buildings. The kind that started in his eyes like the explosion of a supernova before radiating outward to the rest of him to infect everyone around him and pull them into his supergravity. "So...will ya marry me then? When it's legal, I mean?"

"One condition," Daryl glared at him, "We don't tell nobody till 's legal, 'cause those nosy bastards'll have it all planned out in a day otherwise."

"That's your only condition? Thought ya'd say we had ta get married outside, maybe by our creek or somethin'," Rick said.

"Okay, two conditions," he smirked before melting into another round of fevered, gropgy kisses.

**Rick**

Rick was surprised they managed to keep their impromptu engagement under wraps for a whole thirty minutes. And perhaps even more surprising was that it was Merle who figured it out first.

He had been worried about everyone's reaction, Merle and Lori specifically, but he remembered the conversation he'd had with Merle about being his brother-in-law. He hoped that still applied. Lori might be a harder sell, but she was growing more and more supportive of them since Rick's stint in the hospital. He wasn't exactly sure what changed, but he was thankful for it.

"How's my baby girl?" Rick cooed to Judith when he had went into Lori's office to entertain her for awhile. Lori had went with Glenn to pick up sandwiches for everyone and Merle had been the first one to volunteer to keep an eye on Judith before they left.

"Looks like ya'll's mornin' 'business' meetin' went well," he teased using air quotes when Rick walked in.
"Business as usual," he replied, trying and failing to hold back his infectious smile. He should've known Merle would see right through his mask of thinly veiled casualness, they had been living together for a few months now, and the man was a lot sharper than he'd have most people believe.

"Come on now, ya can't fool ol' Merle. What'd ya'll do? Have ya a li'l afternoon delight?" he cackled.

"No!" Rick insisted, covering Judy's innocent little ears. "I am somewhat of a professional, Merle," he scoffed.

"Well, what? Ya'll decide yer gonna give Andrea some sperm?" he laughed. Rick shook his head as he rolled his eyes. "Are ya plannin' on takin' Darlina on a romantic getaway now that yer officially a single man? Somewhat single? Wait, wait, don't tell me...," he smirked, "...ya'll got engaged!"

Rick was sure he meant that as a joke, but when he could only stare at him like a deer in the headlights, Merle realized he'd been right on the money. Quite literally. He rushed to the door and hollered, "Sugarpuss, they's engage! Now, pay up!"

"Pay up?" Rick was able to blurt out through his shock.

"Ya know we's got polls on everythin', Rick. Don't tell me yer surprised," Merle said. "Course I didn't think I'd win on day one, but day two was already taken."

"What'd I tell ya, Rick?" Daryl lectured from where he was leaning up against Carol's desk, one hand stroking T-Dog, the other wrapped across his broad chest, and a scowl on his handsome face. But Rick could see through the cracks in his armor just as well as Merle could his.

"I didn't say a damn word," Rick defended himself, his voice going high pitched and everything. "He just guessed."

Lori wasn't exactly pleased to hear the news when she returned with lunch, but Rick hoped it was the shock of how quickly things were moving between him and Daryl more than her disapproving of their engagement. He could tell she was uncomfortable when others would bring up the subject even though she didn't say anything disparaging to him about it.

Daryl had been right, though, everyone spent the rest of the day planning their future wedding. Rick was sure it would blow over. They were just excited about it. Daryl was a pretty good sport about it, though, and Rick made it up to him after work when he took him to his favorite steak place for a nice romantic dinner.

"What do ya say we go by the house before goin' home?" Daryl asked as they were leaving the restaurant.

"It's almost dark, baby, and there probably ain't much ta see," Rick said as he hauled himself onto the back of Daryl's bike, slithering his arms around his lithe torso.

"We still got a little daylight left, but it don't matter anyway. Ain't really the view 'm interested in," he replied over his shoulder. Before Rick could ask for an explanation, they were heading on down the road to their build site.

The days were getting longer—the sun just setting on the horizon—and spring was in full swing. Daryl had his leather vest on that Rick had gotten him for their three month anniversary over a sleeveless button-up. Rick joked about him showing off his biceps more as the weather heated up. He couldn't say he was disappointed that Daryl had taken his words to heart.
It didn't take long before they pulled up to the cleared lot. The construction crew had already wrapped for the day and the heavy machinery sat idle by the huge hole in the ground where the basement was going to be. They had spent a lot of time with Aaron and Eric over the past few weeks discussing architectural features that would go with the theme they decided on: rustic modern.

They had even ventured a dip in the creek out back, but the water temperature was still a little on the chilly side to enjoy it properly. In a few weeks, it might be perfect to take the kids in. Daryl had already gotten Judith a little lifejacket and Carl floaties even though Rick assured him he could swim.

"What's so great about the view, Dixon?" Rick teased as they walked the perimeter of their land, the sky turning a beautiful shade of pinks and oranges.

"You for one," Daryl said, flashing Rick a sideways smirk. Rick couldn't help but smile back, moving closer into Daryl's side as they ambled along hand in hand. "An' the fact that this is our future," he said, gesturing around the area.

"It is a pretty fantastic view, isn't it?" Rick replied, stopping long enough to give Daryl a few pecks on the lips.

"Mhmm, but I had another one in mind," Daryl smirked, quickening the pace and pulling Rick back towards the motorcycle.

"Oh yeah, and what would that be?"

"The sight of ya bent over my bike," Daryl drawled.

And at that Rick's cock went from mildly amused to fucking block part on the Fourth of July. Every time they got on the hunk of horsepower, he'd hoped they'd pull over somewhere and get off so they could get off. Maybe that was why Daryl restricted their fun in the shower that morning, the wonderful bastard had the whole thing planned.

Before he could ask if Daryl had thought to bring lube, his fiancé, because he could call him that now, pulled a small bottle out of the breast pocket of his vest. He held it up with the biggest shit-eating grin and all Rick could do was grab him by the vest and crash their lips together.

"Love ya," Rick breathed into the kiss.

"Love ya more," Daryl replied. Rick didn't argue but he doubted that was possible.

Rick went for Daryl's belt, unfastening his pants afterward so he could root around for his dick, the member thick and engorged with arousal as he stroked him to full hardness before he even got him free of his boxers.

Daryl had started going to work on Rick's jeans and had them slipped passed his bony hips in the blink of an eye, his cock twitching in the cool evening air. "Spin," Daryl said, voice husky and gruff, and Rick just knew this was going to be over far quicker than either would like because Daryl's eyes were pitch black and shimmering, both of them bursting at the seams with lust.

His heart was beating wildly and was close to jumping right out of his chest which was already heaving from the impassioned kiss they had shared. He didn't hesitate to spin when Daryl told him to, his body moving before his mind caught up, but his ass was all but aching to be stretched and filled with Daryl's beautiful cock that fit in him so fucking perfectly that the only explanation for it was that they were made for each other.
Daryl placed a palm between Rick's shoulder blades and lowered him down until his elbows and forearms were bracing him on the bike. All he could do was take deep calming breaths because the last thing he wanted to do was go off before Daryl had even had a chance to enter him.

The hand was drawn down his spine and met with another as Daryl began to knead the flesh of his ass. Then he was being spread open, and instead of the familiar feeling of a cool, lubed up finger teasing his hole, there was a warm, rough heavenly sensation that his brain was slow to relay was Daryl's tongue.

"Jesus Fucking Christ, Daryl!" he screeched.

"Ya don't like it?" Daryl asked, pulling back and leaving Rick's saliva coated ass exposed to the open air.

"No, baby! Don't stop!"

He might've heard Daryl snicker, but everything in him went white hot when that spectacular tongue began to flicker and dance across his pucker once more. He'd never felt anything like it before as every cell in his body was primed to vibrate right out of his skin.

"Why haven't we done this before? 'S the best thang ever!" Rick said. He had meant it as a rhetorical question if anything, but the answer he got back surprised him.

"Aaron mentioned it. Said it was for special occasions," Daryl replied.

Rick was about to say how much he loved their new gay friends and that they'd need to buy them something really special, but Daryl dove back between his cheeks to lap at his hole and he was too tongue-tied to get the words out.

His cock was starting to throb painfully so with every new pass and whorl of that tantalizing tongue, but Daryl was one step ahead of him. Rick moaned, the anticipation starting to get to him, when he heard the pop from the top of the lube when he opened it.

He was rocking back onto Daryl's finger before he'd even pushed all the way in, the digit gliding through his inner walls with ease and brushing against nerves he never knew he had until Daryl came along and brought them to life. Now it was like he couldn't get enough stimulation or friction or Daryl.

As if on cue, Daryl added another finger, and another, while the pressure mounted inside and out, the stretching and scissoring motion of his fingers making his head roll back in ecstasy, lips parting as he whimpered when Daryl grazed his prostate. Then the fingers were gone and he was left empty, his body all but crying out for more.

More was exactly what he got when Daryl lined up behind and filled him to the brim with his cock with one steady forward motion, their bodies fitting together like a key to a lock. That was always the best part, that initial coming together, the calm before the storm while they waited for the other to adjust, for the hurricane to build offshore.

Then it hit. And goddamn!

Daryl rammed right into that spot inside him that sent sparks shooting out of his ears. That's what it felt like anyway. He wondered what he looked like bent over that bike, but he had to banish the thought out of his mind because the next strike hit with even more force and he had to grip the base of his cock to keep from coming right there.
"Fuck, baby! Ya gotta slow down, I'm already fuckin' close," Rick said. He really wanted to drag it out for a little while longer at least. He wasn't a damn teenage, but sometimes Daryl made him feel like he was.

Daryl bent over him and molding himself to Rick's back, kissing his neck as he went from hard thrusts to a shallow roll of his hips. "Yer so fuckin' hot like this," he whispered into Rick's ear before sucking the fleshy shell into his mouth.

After a few minutes of the soft rhythmic moment, Daryl lifted himself back up and started to pump deep into him, hips slamming into Rick's with powerful surges as he built up speed. One of his hands was digging into his hip, pulling him back onto his dick as he plowed forward, and the other did the same to his shoulder. God, those were going to be some amazing bruises.

All Rick could do was hang on for the ride as Daryl fucked into him mercilessly, his cock and balls bouncing around like mad between his legs. He reached down and tugged on his shaft when Daryl started making those little grunts that told him he was getting close to coming undone.

And then the, "Fuck, Rick!" came and he felt Daryl unleash his load inside his ass. He was glad they got tested and stopped using condoms because that was almost as good as the initial entry, the feeling of his lover spilling out within him.

That was all he needed to fall apart himself, trying his best through the fog of sex induced delirium to aim for the ground and not the bike.

Daryl collapsed on top of him again, his hot breath on the back of his neck as they came back into themselves. Rick turned his head to the side and Daryl captured his lips in a mess of lopsided kisses. But he didn't care because they were perfect and Daryl was his fiancé. They were on their land, planning their future, looking at what would soon be their home, and Rick had never been happier.

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When they pulled up to the apartment twenty minutes later, Michonne's car was parked next to Rick's truck. He pulled out his phone after he slipped off the bike to discover he had several missed calls. He didn't bother checking his messages, they'd find out what was so important soon enough. What could Fate possible have in store for them now?

They opened the door and three sets of eyes whipped towards them. "What's goin' on?" Rick asked, raising a quizzical brow at the strange vibe in the room. There weren't any tears, so he took that as a good sign.

"Uh, Daryl," Merle said as he stood up from the couch and made his way over to them, the women following closely behind. "Got somethin' I need ta tell ya, baby brother."

"Wha's up?" Daryl asked, his voice cautious as he eyed his brother. He blindly reach for Rick's hand and interlaced their fingers. Rick squeezed just enough to let him know he was there with him no matter what.

"Don't have all night, Merle," an anxious Andrea cut in, her arms crossed over her chest as she tapped her toe on the carpet. "We really gotta get moving."

"Chill blondie, this can't be rushed." Merle took a deep breath and put his hand on Daryl's shoulder. He looked him square in the eye as he said, "Daryl yer, uh...well, ya prolly ain't gonna believe this but...yer gonna be a father."
And if ever a man had looked like a deer caught in the headlights, it was Daryl Dixon.

Chapter End Notes

I had fully intended for this to have a sequel, but unfortunately, I don't see that happening anytime soon. Sometimes stories don't have definitive endings, sometimes they are left up to interpretation, and sometimes muses just go and die on you without warning.

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